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A 'Telegram Revolution': the impact of digital authoritarianism on political mobilization in  
Belarus since the 2020 protests

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## **Abstract**

Amid the surge of anti-regime protests in 2020 in Belarus, Telegram played an important role in protest mobilization and coordination, and drew widespread (academic) attention. However, existing literature focused merely on the active mobilization phase, leaving a void in understanding the platform's evolution beyond 2020, particularly in the face of escalating authoritarian practices. The main aim of this research is to understand how this increased authoritarianism has impacted political mobilization efforts on Telegram in Belarus between August 2020 and September 2023.

Based on semi-structured interviews with five administrators of Telegram channels, this thesis investigates how this increased repression has impacted activists and users' online behavior on Telegram, and opportunities for political mobilization. Employing an inductive qualitative content analysis, this study reveals that over time, the regime's legislative reforms, increased surveillance, repression and misinformation transformed Telegram's role from a space for political mobilization and protest coordination, to predominantly a source to reach uncensored information. The participatory culture that previously characterized Telegram, and its status as a 'free space', have disappeared, challenging the optimistic perspectives prevalent in earlier literature.

Even though the effects of the protests linger, the shrinking public space has led to depoliticization, diminishing prospects for political mobilization on Telegram in Belarus. Nevertheless, the online space remains comparatively more free than the offline space, remaining as the only possible trajectory for potential mobilization in the country.

**Keywords:** Telegram, Belarus, digital authoritarianism, political mobilization, digital repression, collective action, protest, social media, online resilience

## Streszczenie

W obliczu fali protestów antyreżimowych w 2020 r. na Białorusi Telegram odegrał ważną rolę w mobilizacji i koordynacji protestów oraz przyciągnął powszechną uwagę, również ze strony naukowej. Istniejąca literatura skupiała się jednak jedynie na fazie aktywnej mobilizacji, pozostawiając lukę w zrozumieniu ewolucji platformy po 2020 r., szczególnie w obliczu eskalacji praktyk autorytarnych. Głównym celem tego badania jest zrozumienie, jak ten zwiększony autorytaryzm wpłynął na wysiłki mobilizacji politycznej w Telegramie na Białorusi w okresie od sierpnia 2020 r. do września 2023 r.

W oparciu o częściowo ustrukturyzowane wywiady z pięcioma administratorami kanałów Telegramu w niniejszej pracy zbadano, w jaki sposób nasilone represje wpłynęły na aktywistów i zachowania użytkowników w Internecie na Telegramie oraz czy zmieniło to platformę. Wykorzystując indukcyjną jakościową analizę treści, niniejsze badanie pokazuje, że z biegiem czasu reformy legislacyjne reżimu, wzmożony nadzór, represje i dezinformacja zmieniły rolę Telegramu z przestrzeni mobilizacji politycznej i koordynacji protestów w głównie źródło dostępu do nieocenzurowanych informacji. Kultura partycypacji, która wcześniej charakteryzowała Telegram, oraz jego status „wolnej przestrzeni” zniknęły, kwestionując optymistyczne perspektywy dominujące we wcześniejszej literaturze.

Choć skutki protestów utrzymują się, kurczenie się przestrzeni publicznej doprowadziło do odpolitycznienia, zmniejszając perspektywy przyszłej mobilizacji politycznej na Białorusi. Niemniej jednak przestrzeń online pozostaje stosunkowo bardziej wolna niż przestrzeń offline, pozostając jedyną możliwą trajektorią potencjalnej mobilizacji w kraju.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Telegram, Białoruś, autorytaryzm cyfrowy, mobilizacja polityczna, represje cyfrowe, akcja zbiorowa, protest, media społecznościowe, odporność w Internecie

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## List of abbreviations

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States <i>regional intergovernmental organization of 9 former Soviet republics</i>
ICT	Information and communication technology
IP address	Internet Protocol address <i>the unique identifying number assigned to every device connected to the internet</i>
SORM	System for Operative Investigative Activities ( <i>Russian: Система оперативно-разыскных мероприятий</i> )

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, anti-regime protests have been observed all over the world, across diverse political landscapes. The Arab Spring and the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests all have in common that social media played a critical role (Howard et al., 2011; White, 2016). In 2020 this pattern re-occurred in Belarus when at its height an estimated 250,000 Belarusians took the streets against the regime on a scale unseen since the 1990s (Kazharski, 2021). Like in other anti-regime protests, Belarusians used social media, and more specifically, the messaging platform Telegram. Protesters perceived Telegram as an ally in their struggle through the platform's actions and practices (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). Moreover, Telegram served as a tool to coordinate the mass demonstrations in 2020 (Slobozhan et al., 2023) and to disseminate information to larger audiences (Kuznetsova, 2023).

The protests arose in the aftermath of the Belarusian presidential election held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2020 and took many observers of the country by surprise (Onuch & Sasse, 2022). When the regime declared Lukashenka the winner with over 80% of the vote, opposition figures immediately alleged widespread electoral fraud. After a series of relatively smaller protests, primarily within urban centres, the regime responded by detaining individuals and with the use of violence (Robertson, 2022). Fuelled by the outrage over the rigged election and the scale of state repression, the protests rapidly expanded both in terms of participants and geographic reach, spanning from urban areas to rural localities. In the first week after the presidential election, the protests were taking place in more than 100 cities and towns across Belarus, something that was unique in Belarus (Mateo, 2022). At its height, the protests drew an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 participants in Minsk, while smaller local protests took place every Sunday and drew people from all social classes (Onuch & Sasse, 2022). The emergence of a national mass mobilization, persistently engaged over an extended period, was an unprecedented development. This event was a pivotal moment in the process of politicization of Belarusian citizens (Onuch & Sasse, 2022). Mass mobilization and sustained protests continued until late October 2020, with smaller-scale protests extending till December, but by 2021 only neighbourhood actions remained. However, the situation took a significant turn when Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly expressed his support for Lukashenka, and when journalists from the state television went on strike, they got replaced by a Russian team to maintain the government's narrative (Onuch & Sasse, 2022).

Following the suppression of the 2020 uprising but also Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Belarusian authorities implemented a series of restrictive measures, including the banning of all independent media outlets, thousands of political dissidents have been imprisoned, and tens of thousands of political refugees and hundreds of public organizations have fled the country. In spite of massive public demand for democratic reform, Belarus has grown increasingly authoritarian (Glod & Judah, 2023)

While a significant body of literature exists on the 2020 Belarusian protests, most notably Mateo (2022) and Slobozhan et al. (2023) including the role of Telegram (Kuznetsova, 2023; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022), there is a notable gap in studies analysing Telegram's trajectory post-mass mobilization. In 2020 the protests were framed as a 'Telegram revolution' and in many post-Soviet countries in the region the internet is seen as a 'liberator' as opposed to traditional media (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). Much of the existing literature had hopeful expectations of digital communication as a facilitator of greater mobilization and protest, but three years after the protests, Lukashenka remains in power and the country has experienced 'authoritarian downgrading' (Moore-Gilbert & Abdul-Nabi, 2021). There is no research that delves into the effects of this intensified authoritarianism on online mobilization, activism, and specifically, on the role played by Telegram since then. This thesis aims to fill this gap.

As much as social media can serve as an opportunity for protesters and activists, and pose a challenge to authoritarian regimes, digital tools and social media can also be used by autocrats to stabilize or even strengthen their position (Keremoğlu & Weidmann, 2020). While some view information and communication technologies (ICTs) optimistically as liberalizing tools, it is crucial to acknowledge their dual role, in which it can be a liberating tool and simultaneously a tool for repression (Dragu & Lupu, 2021; Michaelsen, 2018). This study delves into this duality, contributing to the literature on the use of Telegram in Belarus. Specifically, it explores how online activity on the platform has evolved after the suppression of the mass protests. More broadly, this study enhances our understanding of social media in contentious politics in authoritarian contexts, shedding light on the use of social media in a post-mass mobilization phase and in an atmosphere of increased repression. This study, rather than taking a cyber-optimist or cyber-pessimist stance, this thesis proposes a pragmatic view towards social media and its role in political mobilization.

The timespan of this thesis is three years, starting in August 2020 when the elections were held and protests erupted, up to September 2023, during which we can observe the continuation of severe repression. By adopting this expanded timespan, the study aims to

analyse how the online space has evolved in the wake of increased authoritarianism post-2020.

The central research question is how political mobilization on Telegram has been influenced by digital authoritarianism in Belarus from August 2020 until September 2023. It seeks to understand how digital authoritarian practices, such as censorship and surveillance, have influenced political mobilization efforts on Telegram during this period. Telegram as a social media platform is chosen because it had a central role in the Belarusian protests in 2020 and is the second most popular messenger in Belarus. The research starts with the hypothesis that increased repression following the 2020 protests, also impacted the online sphere, resulting in negative changes in the use of the Telegram platform for both activists and users.

Three sub-questions were formulated to provide indicative answers to the central research question:

- Which digital authoritarian practices have been used in Belarus' Telegram sphere and on its users?
- How have these digital authoritarian practices impacted the Telegram sphere in Belarus?
- In what ways has resilience been demonstrated in response to the challenges posed by digital authoritarianism?

The study relies on semi-structured interviews with five moderators of independent news channels and Belarusian human rights organizations. These organizations operate in exile from EU member states and have been labelled 'extremist' by the Belarus authorities. A qualitative content analysis, conducted through NVivo, was employed to identify key themes by coding transcribed interviews. The analysis followed an inductive approach, partially aligning with evolved grounded theory, drawing findings from the data. Given the qualitative nature of the investigation, the answers are not definitive, and further research would help confirm the findings of this research.

## **1.1 Thesis outline**

This thesis seeks to shed lights on the impact of digital authoritarianism on political mobilization on Telegram. To achieve this, the literature review initially delves into the

conceptualization of digital authoritarianism. In order to place this thesis within the contemporary debate, cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism are discussed with differing views on the impact of digital media on political landscapes. Afterwards, digital authoritarianism and its associated practices, including surveillance, (self-)censorship, and the dissemination of misinformation are discussed. The literature review continues to discuss how actors such as private companies and activists can be resilient towards the use of digital authoritarianism. Moreover, the literature on digital authoritarianism in the context of Eastern Europe and Belarus is discussed. Subsequently, a conceptualisation and exploration of the literature on political mobilization is undertaken, as the earlier discussed digital authoritarian practices influence political mobilization. In particular, political mobilization is discussed in the context of social media, and how this has changed traditional mobilization structures and the landscape of political protests. Moreover, it addresses the role of social media for the dissemination of independent news in authoritarian contexts. Afterwards attention is devoted to the literature on political mobilization on social media specifically in the post-Soviet countries. Moreover, the literature review delves into the uniqueness of Telegram to provide more context. The literature review finalizes with a brief conclusion.

The next chapter is the methodology, and is structured into five sections. These segments address the study's objectives and research questions, explain the chosen method and participant recruitment process, outlines the study's limitation, and explores the ethical considerations. This chapter serves as the foundation for the analysis.

The analysis chapter initially sets out the main findings of this study before offering an in-depth analysis. This analysis is divided into three main sections. The first part (1) discusses the digital authoritarian practices used by the authorities in Belarus' Telegram sphere and this has changed the platform. The second part (2) looks into how the use of these digital authoritarian practices has impacted different actors and the political mobilization on Telegram. The third part (3) uncovers the resilience in response to the challenges posed by digital authoritarianism. Lastly, the thesis ends with its conclusion of the main findings and avenues for future research are proposed.

## 2. Literature review

Movements such as the Arab Spring, but also the Belarus protests in 2020-2021 have shown that social media has redefined the dynamics of political participation. Earlier research on the Belarus protests in 2020 showed that the social media platform Telegram played a role in organizing, disseminating information, and shaping collective action (Kuznetsova, 2023; Slobozhan et al., 2023). While social media can empower citizens, it can also become a double-edged sword as regimes deploy digital authoritarian strategies to control, for surveillance, and suppress dissent (Keremoğlu & Weidmann, 2020). Despite the important role of social media in political mobilization within repressive regimes, there is a limited understanding of the post-protest landscape and the effects of heightened repression on activists' online activities.

This literature review attempts to address the interplay between digital authoritarianism and political mobilization. By addressing the existing literature and identifying the gaps in our understanding, it aims to provide an understanding on the relationship between social media, repression and mobilization in authoritarian contexts.

### 2.1. Digital authoritarianism

In order to analyse how digital authoritarianism has impacted political mobilization efforts in Belarus, we need to understand how digital authoritarianism operates in Belarus. In this section therefore, the spectrum of digital authoritarian practices is established, ranging from complete internet-shutdowns to more sophisticated tools. Simultaneously, this part delves into the role of different actors, including private companies whose influence shape digital authoritarianism. This is fundamental for understanding digital authoritarianism, and its implications for political mobilization. Moreover, the broader and changing scholarly debate between social media as a 'liberator' or as a tool used for repression is explored in order to understand the contemporary discourse in which this thesis is situated.

#### 2.1.1. *Conceptualisation of digital authoritarianism*

In Belarus, as in most autocracies, measures are employed to firmly restrict the freedom of speech and tightly control domestic mass media, aiming to prevent citizens from accessing information that could challenge the regime (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). However, the rise of the internet and social media, has disrupted this control, exposing citizens to alternative information sources (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). Consequently, authoritarian governments find it increasingly challenging to regulate the political information citizens consume. New

communication technologies, especially the internet, has been pivotal in driving protests within closed, autocratic environments (Weidmann & Rød, 2019), as was the case in Belarus in the 2020 protests. As technology continues to advance and is increasingly employed by protesters for mobilization, authoritarian regimes have embraced digital tools to control citizens and stifle dissent, and enhancing the reach and effectiveness of repression (*Digital Authoritarianism in Africa Is Evolving*, 2022).

Digital authoritarianism is a relatively recent term, inverting the idea that the internet is an engine to human liberation (Shahbaz, 2018). The most commonly used definition for digital authoritarianism is ‘the adept use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes for surveillance, repress and manipulate both domestic and foreign populations’ (Polyokova & Meserole, 2019). This technology is used for political ends and encompasses practices such as censorship, surveillance and the manipulation of public opinion – mechanisms that have been the subject of extensive scholarly examination. The definition as presented by Polyokova & Meserole (2019) is used in this thesis as it delves into the operational aspects of digital authoritarianism and is the one most frequently used in academic discourse. The emphasis of this study is on Internet governance, which encompasses the policies, regulations, and practices employed by a regime to influence the online behaviour and experience.

### *2.1.2. Between cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism*

This section discusses the changing scholarly debate on the impact of digital media on political landscapes, aiming to place this thesis within the contemporary debate. The widespread adoption of the Internet initially sparked optimism, anticipating its potential to drive democratic transformations. Early arguments, grounded in technological features, have been largely discarded by scholars. Yet, a fresh new wave of cautious optimism surrounding digital media has emerged, fuelled by the expansion of social media platforms, and the emergence of research highlighting the role of social media in mobilization and coordination of protests (Xueqing Li et al., 2016).

There are two prevailing perspectives regarding the influence of the Internet on political change. On the one hand there are the cyber-optimists who believe that the Internet is inherently liberating and possesses features that promote the global spread of democracy, whereas the cyber-pessimists argue it serves to strengthen authoritarianism and political repression. While it was once deemed impossible for governments to exert control over

cyberspace, they now have an array of both technical and non-technical tools at their disposal to influence and restrict the online flow of information (Deibert et al., 2010). This has led cyber-optimism to receive criticism for overlooking the role of states in shaping the digital space, especially in authoritarian regimes they adapt and respond to these technological developments (Morozov, 2011b). Moreover, Morozov argues that under authoritarianism most people use the internet and social media to escape their difficult lives rather than to instigate social change.

The fact that regimes play a central role in whether social media can be an impactful tool for democratization is also underlined by Feldstein (2021b), who raises awareness to the potential threat of digital technologies. He argues that authoritarian states establish and expand internet infrastructure, shape laws and regulations that provide the framework to harness internet, enact digitally repressive policies, and flood online spaces to create confusion.

Nevertheless, Feldstein (2021b) addresses that states are not the only actors playing a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of digital repression and control, a perspective neglected by Morozov (2011b). Feldstein (2021b) identified three crucial actors: authoritarian regimes, private sector entities, and civil society and citizens. Decisions made by private companies can be as important as those taken by governments as cyberspace is primarily owned and operated by private companies and these organizations can either resist or cooperate with state-led efforts to control digital spaces (Deibert et al., 2010; Feldstein, 2021b). This has implications for data privacy, content moderation, and cooperation with governments – all having significant implications for digital authoritarianism (Feldstein, 2021a). In this study the main private actor is Telegram, a platform strongly aligned with principles of privacy and freedom of expression (Feldstein, 2021b). The third actor are civil society groups and activists who possess many innovative tools, ideas and strategies to counter digital authoritarianism. Through their adaptive strategies they can challenge the state's monopoly on information, which in turn can lead to protest mobilization (Feldstein, 2021b). Even if online activism does not immediately lead to regime change, he argues that technology can still have transformative impact on societies (Feldstein, 2021b).

Rather than taking a cyber-optimist or cyber-pessimist stance, this thesis proposes a pragmatic view towards social media and its role in democratization and for political mobilization. All of the three actors outlined by Feldstein (2021b) play a crucial role as the impact of social media depends on contextual factors, including the political system, society, and decisions made by private companies. The rigid division between cyber-optimists and

cyber-pessimists may oversimplify this, as social media can have both positive and negative effects depending on the context. Moreover, contrary to Morozov's assertion that social media is primarily used for apolitical purposes in authoritarian regimes, global protests have demonstrated the potential of social media for mobilization and coordination in pro-democracy movements for example during the Arab Spring and the Belarus protests in 2020.

### *2.1.3. The digital authoritarian toolbox*

In order to understand how digital authoritarianism is impacting political mobilization, we first have to establish what type of practices are understood and encompass digital authoritarianism, and which practices are most commonly used in Belarus. Multiple authors have offered classifications of strategies used by autocrats to counter online opposition (Weber, 2019; Sanovich et al., 2018; Morozov, 2011b; Deibert et al., 2010). Sanovich et al.'s (2018) classification provides a comprehensive framework for understanding repressive digital politics and categorizes between three forms of such digital politics. These include (1) offline action, characterized by policy changes, intimidation, and persecution. (2) Technical restrictions manifested in various forms of censorship ranging from content filtering to complete internet outages and (3) online engagement strategies involving the creation of content to manipulate public opinion (Sanovich et al., 2018).

Sanovich et al.'s (2018) framework draws a distinction between 'offline' and 'online' practices, whereas the two have become interconnected in recent years. Weber's (2019) framework recognizes this, emphasizing that to fully comprehend the nuances of surveillance and intimidation, it is crucial to understand the profound impact of technology not only in the online realm but also in the offline world (Weber, 2019). Furthermore, Weber incorporates surveillance into his model, recognizing it as an essential element for controlling and repressing dissidents (Weber, 2019). Since Weber's model is the most encompassing, it is the framework used in this thesis. The four mechanisms that his model encompasses are surveillance, self-censorship, censorship and propaganda & disinformation (Weber, 2019).

### *Surveillance*

Surveillance plays a crucial role in the framework of digital authoritarianism as it facilitates propaganda, disinformation, censorship and self-censorship (Weber, 2019). In the digital age, surveillance is essential in understanding which websites need to be blocked, or which online conversations need 'political guidance', and helps the authorities to prepare

additional tactics of repression (Weber, 2019). Remarkably, the manifestations of surveillance do not require active conduct to be effective (Weber, 2019) as the constant threat of security agents collecting information creates an environment of self-censorship and conformity (Richards 2013).

Contrary to the assumption that surveillance is confined within national borders, a study on Iran revealed that authorities exert pressure on activists even when they are outside the country (Michaelsen, 2017). The digitalization of surveillance extends its reach beyond state boundaries, targeting activists in exile. Consequently, activists in exile have to put additional efforts and resources to safeguard their readers and contacts (Michaelsen, 2017). This underscores the evolving challenges posed by surveillance in the digital age, transcending geographical limitations and necessitating a more comprehensive approach to protecting dissenting voices.

### Self-censorship

Journalists and media outlets, but also individuals can resort to self-censorship often due to fear or pressure (Youm, 2015). However, there can be more factors that lead to self-censorship ‘such as attempting to avoid an argument, concerns about offending someone or hurting their feelings, potential retribution such as losing one’s job or risk of physical assault, or concerns about appearing to be deviant’ (Hayes, 2005, p. 300). Self-censorship limits the ability of people to get information on things that could be important for the public to know. The greater the array of surveillance tools available to a government, the more opportunities it possesses to exercise self-censorship on its population (Weber, 2019). Reducing self-censorship extends beyond relaxing policy restrictions or empowering journalists as it encompasses various actors, including editors, sources, and the imagined audiences (Moon, 2023).

### Censorship

While governments employ various forms of censorship, all censorship technologies ‘impose taxes on information by requiring users to incur costs for accessing or spreading information. In this way, they incentivize users to consume and spread information that the government would like them to consume because this information is less costly’ (Roberts, 2020). These costs can manifest through fear and friction (Roberts, 2018). Fear-based censorship imposes cost by threatening users with punishments like imprisonment, fines, or threats for sharing or accessing restricted information (Roberts, 2020). Friction-based

ensorship on the other hand, requires users to invest more time and effort in accessing specific information, achieved through measures like blocking websites, altering search engines results, or slowing down or shutting down the internet (Roberts, 2020). Although friction can be circumvented, it demands extra efforts and willingness.

Even easily circumvented censorship, is enormously effective as only a subset of the population, primarily journalists and activists, are willing to invest the additional time and resources to bypass it (Roberts, 2018). However, Roberts argues that the majority of people, having little interest in politics, can be easily subdued through friction. Fear-based mechanisms, involving reprisals for creating or accessing restricted information, pose less risk to ordinary people and are primarily enacted on motivated elites such as journalists and activists who are more likely to engage in collective action (Roberts, 2018).

Large-scale internet shutdowns, a censorship tool often used as last resorts in response to mobilized masses, is costly in a digitalized society. This is called the dictator's dilemma, 'the trade-offs a Dictators faces in balancing between the economic benefits from Internet access with the threat to regime stability from Internet-enabled communication' (Howard, 2011; Saleh, 2012). When a state lacks advanced censorship tools, it is more prone to resort to network shutdowns, whereas more sophisticated governments employ more subtle tools such as downranking content (Weber, 2019). However, dictators can improve and customize their censorship which then makes the dictator's dilemma irrelevant, as demonstrated by China, where totalitarianism and technological innovation coexist (Morozov, 2011a).

### Propaganda and Disinformation

Propaganda can be defined as 'publicly disseminated information that serves to influence others in belief and/or action', and disinformation as 'false information that is knowingly disseminated with malicious intent' (Auerbach & Castronovo, 2013). Roberts, describes these methods as 'flooding' when occurring in the online space, presenting massive amounts of information in order to increase the costs of accessing information (Roberts, 2020). Flooding can contain both propaganda, and disinformation to make it harder to separate trustworthy information from false, or biased one.

Earlier research has shown that the costs of access to information impact people's consumption of information and their belief about politics, and thereby proving the effectiveness of digital authoritarian practices (Roberts, 2020). Barriers to access information can lead individuals to become unaware that they demand specific information (Pan & Roberts, 2020). In fact, authoritarian states with highly restricted social media, often times

show high levels of trust in the government and their institutions (Müller, 2013). This is the case in China where media is highly censored, but people are nevertheless trusting in their government (MacKinnon, 2011). However, in some instances people are aware of digital authoritarian tools being used, and at some moments can become willing and able to circumvent some of these digital authoritarian practices (Roberts, 2020).

#### *2.1.4. Digital authoritarian resilience*

The effectiveness of the previously discussed practices of digital authoritarianism, can be impacted through resilience shown by activists, users or (social media) platforms, related to the three actors established by Feldstein (2021b). Resilience against censorship, propaganda and disinformation is most effective when it is visible to the users that such practices are employed and therefore it is crucial to ‘detect, expose and publicize censorship activities’ (Roberts, 2020). As a result, the regimes lacking the technical capacity for subtlety are more easily uncovered and less effective. However, literature also shows the opposite effect, in which awareness can lead to fear, resulting in self-censorship (Roberts, 2020).

More than simply the awareness of the use of digital authoritarianism, people also need to be willing to circumvent it and bear the associated costs related to it. The willingness of individuals to take these additional risks or invest extra time varies across time periods and user profiles (Roberts, 2020).

Most of the social media platforms are in Western hands (Pan & Roberts, 2020), rather than domestically owned, making it harder for authoritarians to exert control over these platforms. Russia’s battle with the messaging app Telegram illustrates how social media platforms can show resilience and limit the authorities’ reach. In 2018 the founder of the Telegram refused to allow government access to the platform’s encrypted data, as is required by Russian law. As a response, Telegram was blocked but remained largely accessible whereas 18 million IP addresses including banking, transportation and news sites were blocked (Polyokova & Meserole, 2019). In such cases visible forms of censorship like internet blackouts, might be the only option left for authoritarian governments (Roberts, 2020).

#### *2.1.5. Digital authoritarianism in Eastern Europe and Central Asia*

For the last two decades, the Chinese have been at the forefront of developing digital tools for domestic censorship and surveillance, with their pioneering efforts dating back to

the launch of the ‘Great Firewall’. This has resulted in significant scholarship and a clearly defined practice of Chinese digital authoritarianism. However, there is less comparable material regarding Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Morgus, 2019). However, in recent years multiple academics have started to explore the difference between the Chinese and Russian models, which can give us more insight to digital authoritarianism that is potentially used in Belarus. Especially since Russia’s digital authoritarianism is more alluring to countries that share similarities to Russia’s legal framework and share historical and cultural elements (Morgus, 2019; Weber, 2019). Therefore not surprisingly, the Russian system of digital authoritarianism has been successful in spreading to most of the former Soviet republics through implementation of its technologies or elements of its legal regime for Internet governance (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012), including Belarus.

In Russia, governance over the digital space is shared among many autonomous entities that bear some responsibility, causing the internet governance to be fragmented, and without clearly established rules (Howells & Henry, 2021). This decentralization of the system leads to notable inconsistencies, including variations in policy implementation and disparities between regional judicial bodies in Russia (Howells & Henry, 2021). Moreover, the digital domain in Russia remained relatively free for a long time, and a more aggressive Internet governance model was only established from 2011 onwards (Polyokova & Meserole, 2019). As a result, Russia’s Internet governance model is more reactive and ad-hoc compared to the Chinese model (Polyokova & Meserole, 2019).

Russia’s Internet governance being a more reactive, ad-hoc and decentralized model, has consequences for its ‘digital authoritarian toolbox’. Polyokova and Meserole (2019) established that the Russian system shows an absence of pervasive censorship and instead has a strong focus on information manipulation and progovernment propaganda. Moreover, the Russian model is more reliant on severely restrictive speech and expression laws which lead to intimidation and self-censorship (Polyokova & Meserole, 2019). Over time, the Russian government has progressively revised its legal framework to criminalize extreme online speech and required Internet Service Providers (ISP) and other service providers to adhere to laws that enable law enforcement to intercept and store all internet traffic in Russia (Morgus, 2019). The Chinese system on the other hand is designed to filter massive amounts of content. For this reason, China is portrayed as a ‘high-tech model’ of domestic control and the industry leader in developing these tools, whereas Russia is seen as a ‘low-tech’ (Polyokova & Meserole, 2019).

Besides, the Russian ‘digital authoritarian toolbox’ differing from the Chinese, Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) established a disconnection between widespread authoritarianism a relatively free cyberspace in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a regional intergovernmental organization in Eurasia established after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They argued that authoritarianism here has impacted all aspects of social and political life, whereas cyberspace remains accessible and relatively unburdened by censorship. The ‘Chinese-style’ and first-generation internet control - the deliberate and static blocking of Internet content and services by state sanction- is hardly present in CIS (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010). Instead, the digital authoritarianism across CIS involves predominantly legal and normative pressures and regulations designed to create an environment of self-censorship (second-generation) and through counter information campaigns (third-generation) (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010). Thereby arguing that CIS are unique in the fact that they mostly used tools that ‘effect cognitive change rather than to deny access to online information or services’ (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010, p. 28).

#### *Digital authoritarianism in Belarus*

Even though the level of online control over Belarusian citizens may not have reached the extent and sophistication observed in ‘textbook’ digital dictatorships such as China with its ‘Great Firewall’ or Russia with its ‘troll factories’, the increasing trend towards restricting internet freedoms in Belarus is a cause for concern (Ziniakova, 2022). While the global level of online freedom has been in decline for the 11<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, the most significant deterioration in 2021 was observed in Belarus, along with Myanmar and Uganda (*Belarus: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report*, 2021).

Following the nationwide protests, the human rights situation in Belarus has deteriorated both offline and online. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, these rights are not upheld in practice (*Belarus: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report*, 2021). Independent journalism, (online) civic activism, and even discussions and debates among users have led to criminal charges in recent years (*Belarus: Crackdown on Independent Journalism*, 2021). The main practices of digital authoritarianism employed in Belarus have included: internet shutdowns, censorship and persecution for online speech, state-sponsored online propaganda and surveillance (Ziniakova, 2022). On the day of the presidential election on August 9<sup>th</sup> in 2020, the government imposed a nationwide internet shutdown that lasted for 61 hours. Subsequent shutdowns occurred during the protests that were held every weekend (‘Internet shutdown in

Belarus', 2020) Moreover, several political and civil society websites were blocked or content was forced to be removed. Being unable to block Telegram, the authorities started to label certain Telegram channels as 'extremist', meaning reposts or sharing of content of these channels can lead to prosecution (*Belarus Misuses Anti-Extremism Legislation, 2023*) Many other actions were taken, including Kremlin-sponsored propaganda and the use of bots by progovernment online sources (*Belarus: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report, 2021*).

Deibert et al. (2010) proposed a framework for understanding the evolving strategies and techniques of internet control. It includes three generations, with the first-generation being primarily focused on internet filtering. The second-generation established a legislative and normative framework, increasingly involving activities that relies on cooperation with the private sector, including surveillance technology companies. The third-generation presents a shift towards more pro-active means to intrude the online environments, shifting away from merely restricting access to actively countering potential threats through strategic counterinformation campaigns (Deibert et al., 2010).

There is limited and outdated research on digital authoritarianism in Belarus specifically. Deibert et al. (2010) devotes one of his book chapters to Belarus, which found that the Belarusian government, similar to Russia, uses second and third-generation controls in order to manage the information space (Deibert et al., 2010). It employs Russian surveillance systems like SORM and Semantic Archive (*Belarus: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report, 2021*). SORM, developed by the Russian KGB, is mandated for use by all Belarusian internet and mobile service providers, showing the similarities of the two systems.

Deibert established that in 2010 former Soviet-countries almost completely by-passed the use of first-generation controls, unlike China's cyber-control heavily relying on 'the Great Firewall' internet filtering. Since Deibert et al. (2010) research, more than a decade has passed and in the meantime we have witnessed growing cooperation between Russia and China on Internet control and Censorship. This collaboration likely has influenced the 'authoritarian toolbox' in Belarus, contributing to authoritarian learning.

Moreover, Deibert et al. (2010) described CIS countries are hesitant to use first-generation controls to avoid being labelled an 'international human rights pariah', which could result in the loss of development aid and trade. However, this perspective may no longer hold for Belarus in the aftermath of sanctions imposed since the 2020 protests and the invasion of Ukraine (Carboni, 2021). Consequently, one of the sub-questions addressed in this thesis seeks to reassess the digital authoritarian tools used in Belarus, before delving into an analysis of how digital authoritarianism has impacted political mobilization in the country.

## 2.2. Political mobilization

Now that we have discussed the ways in which authoritarian governments use the online space to their advantage, we will delve into the ways how it is used to the benefit of activists and citizens living in an autocracy, as the interplay between politics and digital technology is not a one-way street in which repressive states always have the advantage (Feldstein, 2021b). In fact, these technologies offer opportunities for citizens, civil society groups and political activists. These opportunities that social media can offer, are explored before can be established how political mobilization on Telegram in Belarus has been impacted by digital authoritarianism.

### 2.2.1. *Conceptualisation of political mobilization*

Political mobilization, as defined by Tilly (1978), is ‘the process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life’. The goal of political mobilization is for political parties, politicians, social movements, activists, or other political actors to increase people’s engagement in political activities, in order to convince others of their own position or influence political change (Haßler et al., 2023). It is a fundamental element for movements striving to influence political, social, or economic change (Herasimenka, 2019).

Prominent scholars such as Tarrow, McAdam and Tilly have laid the foundation for the traditional literature on political mobilization Tarrow’s (2011) framework established that protests arise when individuals perceive threats and opportunities, when the presence of potential allies becomes evident and when the weaknesses of opponents are revealed. He argues that the extent to which political opportunities are open or closed play a vital role in shaping the emergence, development and outcomes of social movements. Tilly (2010), on the other hand introduced the concept of ‘repertoires of contention’, referring to the tools and actions available to a movement, including riots, strikes, demonstrations and boycotts. He argues that these repertoires change radically from one political regime to the next and evolve over time as political opportunities change. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly have all highlighted that the dynamics of contentious politics, or repertoires are influenced by cultural, historical, and contextual factors.

However, social media has transformed traditional mobilization structures and reshaped the landscape of political protests. Therefore, in the current academic literature there is the notion that, alongside ‘traditional’ repertoires, a new ‘digital’ repertoire of contention has

emerged. While McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's framework offer valuable perspectives for comprehending mobilization and collective action, they overlook aspects crucial for understanding political mobilization in the digital age. As this study analyses the effects of digital authoritarianism on political mobilization on Telegram, this literature review discusses political mobilization in the context of social media.

Moreover, in this study, the concept of political mobilization is approached with a broader interpretation of the 'political', a perspective necessitated by the authoritarian context in Belarus. In this context, actions such as consuming, aggregating, and distributing specific information take on political significance due to the high risks. Halupka (2016) advocates for expanding our perspective beyond a narrow, traditional definition of the 'political', revealing a substantial number of individuals engaged in this expanded version of politics. Introducing the concept of 'information activist', he describes individuals who consume, aggregate, and distribute information, playing a vital role in informing others, potentially encouraging political participation (Halupka, 2016). While information activism doesn't always involve direct, visible confrontations with power structures, it can be considered a form of activism, albeit a less conventional one, which can increase political mobilization. This study therefore, actively seeks examples of information activism, as this is significant in the context of Belarus. Thereby, this study addresses a gap in the Belarus-focused literature, shedding light on the rather overlooked role of information activism in shaping political processes and contributing to social change. This research underscores the importance of understanding and acknowledging the impact of information activism in the Belarusian political landscape.

### *2.2.2. From analogue to digital political mobilization: the advantages*

Before the Arab Spring, the potential of new media in political mobilization was poorly understood by authoritarian regimes and scholars (Moore-Gilbert & Abdul-Nabi, 2021), but following the wave of pro-democracy demonstrations, scholars have extensively explored how digital tools can enhance mobilization and communication (Smidi & Shahin, 2017). In the meantime, as we have established that social media has changed traditional mobilization structures and transformed the landscape of political protests. Within this discourse there are two main perspectives: the reinforcements hypothesis and the innovation hypothesis (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010).

The reinforcement hypothesis suggests that the Internet and social media, primarily enhance traditional forms of collective action by strengthening existing social ties and

improving the efficiency of established movements (Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014). In contrast, the innovation hypothesis argues that social media has the potential to disrupt traditional politics through new forms of collective action, such as online vote checking, accessing alternative media to hacktivism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010).

‘Connective action’, introduced by Bennett and Segerberg (2013), aligns with the innovation hypothesis and argues that social media has introduced new patterns of protests, in which individuals and groups are loosely connected, decentralized and self-organized movements without the necessity of established structure or leadership; elements that are conventionally associated with social movement organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Studies on the Arab Spring generally found that social media facilitated protests by informing and connecting citizens, and mobilizing demonstrations in largely government-controlled media (Smidi & Shahin, 2017). Moreover, Gerbaudo (2015) showed that protest mobilization during the Arab Spring was horizontal, decentralized, fluid, self-sustaining, and instantaneous, thereby confirming the innovation hypothesis. This thesis recognizes the transformative potential of social media in fostering new patterns of collective action and thereby aligns with the innovation hypothesis.

Moreover, social media enables horizontal communication which is particularly noteworthy in authoritarian contexts as it makes coordination, communication and the sharing of opinions easier and safer (Gruzd & Tsyganova, 2015; Lysenko & Desouza, 2012; Shirky, 2011). Such horizontal networks are effective in mobilizing protests, but also in ‘creating alternative forms of social, political, and economic organization’ (Juris, 2009).

However, now it is established that social media can benefit political mobilization, it is important to note that social media alone does not cause protests. Instead, it thrives when there are pre-existing societal issues and when individuals perceive issues as intolerable. In that case, social media enhances the likelihood that these grievances and a triggering event will culminate in protests by providing greater access to information (Ruijgrok, 2016).

### *2.2.3. Social media as an alternative information source*

In Belarus, the authorities have a monopoly over traditional media. Therefore, social media extends its role beyond the mobilization of protests and horizontal communication. Social media enables in the spread of information, offering alternative information than the state controlled public discourse (Diamond & Plattner, 2012). This increased access to

information, as outlined by Ruijgrok (2016), 31/01/2024 15:46:00 establishes four interconnected causal pathways through which heightened information access has a direct impact on protest dynamics in authoritarian states. These pathways include (1) diminishing communication barriers for opposition movements, (2) triggering shifts in public attitudes, (3) reducing informational uncertainty for prospective protesters, and (4) mobilizing individuals through the dissemination of compelling videos and images. Contrary to assertions that internet usage has no transformative effect on society or on protest dynamics in authoritarian regimes, this study challenges such perspectives.

Moreover, social media contributes to the dissemination of information from highly dedicated groups to a broader audience of less engaged participants that share similar views (Tucker et al., 2017). This leads to ‘shared awareness’, in which people are not only informed about the situation at hand, but also understand that others are too (Shirky, 2011). Especially in authoritarian contexts such as Belarus, this can help to overcome the collective action problem and in turn mobilize a large movement of previously unconnected individuals within a short time (Tucker et al., 2017).

The strength of social media is not merely the scale of information-sharing itself, but also the active interaction and engagement of citizens. The rise of ‘citizen journalism’ on social media, in which ‘ordinary individuals act as journalists during some part of creating content for journalism coverage’ (Luo & Harrison, 2019), contributes to an alternative reporting which challenges state power in authoritarian regimes and democratizing countries (Bohdanova, 2014; Gruzd & Tsyganova, 2015). Moreover, ‘citizen journalism’ allows for a participatory culture that encourages an interactive media environment in which people create or record their own coverage of the news and thereby going beyond merely being passive consumers (Wall & Zahed, 2015). Moreover, sharing and debating views on social media, also strengthens this participatory culture in which communication becomes more than just an organizational requirement; it also becomes a means of self-expression (Sinpeng, 2020). This causes the political to become personal, which may lead to greater participation (Arafa & Armstrong, 2015; Shirky, 2011).

Having acknowledged social media’s importance for the spread of alternative information, and its consequential impact on enhancing opportunities for mobilization and protest in authoritarian contexts (Diamond & Plattner, 2012; Ruijgrok, 2016; Shirky, 2009), it is crucial to identify ‘citizen journalism’ and ‘information activism’ when studying political mobilization. Therefore, in this study, examples of this will be sought to see if in the case of Belarus citizen journalism, and a participatory culture are present on Telegram.

#### *2.2.4. Disadvantages of political mobilization in the digital age*

While the advantages of social media in mobilization have been widely acknowledged, so have its weaknesses. Scholars like Onuch et al. (2021) and De Angelis & Badran (2021), argue that social media is effective in the mobilization phase, but lacks the necessary depth to create sustained, meaningful action with lasting effects. It poses that mobilization via social media is based on ‘weak-ties’ – superficial connections lacking in commitment and shared values- and lacks strong, face-to-face, and personal connections. The critique emphasizes that because of this speed, there is limited focus to critical factors as culture, leadership, and organizational capacity (De Angelis & Badran, 2021). What is overlooked here, and addressed by Anderson (2021), is the potential synergy between traditional offline actors and online mobilization in which social media is not a replacement of traditional networks but a complementary tool. A study by Mateo (2022) on the Belarus protests found that already before the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, local social networks were using community chats on Telegram as a tool for discussion and coordination. It proves that opposition to Lukashenka was already well established and was not based on ‘weak-ties’, which goes against the critique expressed by Onuch et al. (2021) and De Angelis & Badran (2021).

In the context of the Arab Spring protests, critique has been expressed suggesting economic, political and historical factors to be more crucial, and that the protests would have occurred, with or without social media (Smidi & Shahin, 2017). These sceptical arguments on the limited political influence and transformative potential of social media however have received pushback, as it diminishes social media into an instrument rather than a carrier of new forms of activism (Axford, 2011).

Moreover, it is crucial to note that not all social media platforms are equally suitable for political mobilization, especially in authoritarian contexts. Research by Boulianne & Lee (2022) suggests that new social media platforms offer advantages for collective action due to their newness, which initially reduces the risk of digital surveillance and state repression. This newness creates a relatively safe space outside of state monitoring for coordinating protests or mobilization. However, this advantage is only temporary, as states can swiftly adapt and employ new tactics to suppress protest activities. In the case of Belarus, the use of the ‘new’ social media platform Telegram for mobilization, raises questions about its continued suitability and safety, given that its initial advantage as a ‘new’ space may have diminished over time.

In addition to the ‘newness’ of platforms, their policies can encourage users to reveal their real names when registering for the platform. These visibility affordances of digital media can facilitate government surveillance in authoritarian states, allowing them to monitor platforms and identify users expressing dissenting political views (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). This is particularly relevant and interesting in the case of Belarus, as Telegram presents itself as a ‘secure app’, resilient to censorship and refuses cooperation with state authorities.

As the main critique of social media’s role in political mobilization is about its lasting effects due to ‘weak-ties’ and limited leadership and culture, it is crucial to look beyond the ‘topicality of the moment’ to understand how social media and society evolved in these countries in the years after the protests. In the literature on the Arab Spring protests there is a lack of such longitudinal studies. An exception is Moore-Gilbert & Abdul Nabi’s (2021) case-study on Bahrain, which shifted from competitive authoritarianism to full-authoritarianism since the Arab Spring, called authoritarian downgrading. Their findings indicate that after the Arab Spring, activities such as surveillance, censorship and misinformation impacted activists’ use of new media, and their ability to mobilize against authoritarian governments online (Moore-Gilbert & Abdul-Nabi, 2021). This shows that protests frequently exert substantial influence on the character of the wider political system and typically have a major role in shaping a transition towards democracy or away from democracy (Robertson, 2010).

A similar gap on longitudinal studies is evident in the literature on the Belarus protests of 2020, and in particular to what has happened to the online space since. It is evident that during the Arab spring social media served as an important tool for mobilization, similar to Belarus in 2020. However, the lasting effects and the consequences for online mobilization once regime stabilization has taken place, remains largely unresearched. Belarus is a particularly interesting case as the protests were widely framed as a ‘Telegram revolution’, but were followed with increased repression. This study fills this gap, and analyses how the protests have shaped the online space of Telegram, an important actor in the 2020 protests.

However, it is important to stress that digital technologies can serve as vital infrastructure and tools for protests, but an app on its own, cannot independently compel citizens to take to the street or facilitate the downfall of a regime (Herasimenka et al., 2020). There are underlying motivations to engage in contentious politics, and protesters, platforms and authorities of a state have agency to influence mobilization and protest movements.

### *2.2.5. Political mobilization in the digital age in Post-Soviet countries*

Throughout the Post-Soviet region, information and communication technologies have played a crucial role in various activist movements and larger-scale protests. In many of the countries in the region, the internet is seen as a ‘liberator’, as compared to traditional media, which is frequently controlled by ruling elites (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). This tendency is reinforced in many post-Soviet nations due to the majority of top social media networks being operated by Western companies such as Google and Meta that for many implicate better privacy setting and user rights (Vasilyeva, 2012).

Research has indicated that Russian social media platforms like VK and OK had comparatively lower amounts of political content and played a less prominent role in the dissemination of political information than Facebook (Herasimenka, 2019). Consequently, a platform’s reputation plays a pivotal role in shaping the type of content that circulates and the level of trust associated with it (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022).

Moreover, often times mass mobilizations are portrayed as spontaneous and leaderless occurrences that experience a surge in activity, followed by a decline and eventually die out (Herasimenka, 2019). A study on protests in Belarus and Russia showed that they had clear organizational structures, in contrast to public perception (Herasimenka, 2019). The two anti-authoritarian movements were not ‘organizing without organizations’ as the connective action theory by Bennett et al. (2014) could suggest. The concept of ‘spontaneity’ is problematic as it overlooks the agency of the movement and the participants (Flesher Fominaya, 2015). However, the absence of identifiable organizational structures aids digital dissidents in avoiding pressure of authorities. Consequently, activists sometimes attempt to depict their organizations as more decentralized and spontaneous than they actually are, or at least do not correct such misconceptions (Herasimenka, 2019). Additionally, the study by Herasimenka shows that successful activists consistently adjust their organizational structures and methods for disseminating information, in response to the repressive conditions they face (Herasimenka, 2019). This proves that social media ‘remain a battlefield for political influence between pro-democracy activists and regimes’ and challenges the notion that authoritarian regimes have almost completely taken over or co-opted the internet (Onuch & Sasse, 2022).

Unfortunately, very limited scholarly attention has been devoted to protests in the post-Soviet region once the mass participation waned. Herasimenka’s (2019) study gives hope for the potential of social media in repressive conditions, as activists would adjust their organizational structures and methods. This study fills this gap, and analyses the

transformation on Telegram in Belarus due to the protests, and the increased repression that followed. Hereby, it also devotes attention to the resilience and adaptive strategies undertaken by activists, users and private entities.

### **2.3. The uniqueness of Telegram**

Notable research has been done on the messaging app Telegram as its role has been described in multiple protest movements around the world, i.e. Russia and Hong Kong, framing it as ‘Telegram revolutions’ and Telegram itself as a ‘secure app’ resilient to censorship and does not cooperate with state authorities (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). Telegram provides end-to-end encrypted messaging features, making it a favoured choice among journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens who want to safeguard themselves from government surveillance. It proves to be challenging for governments to selectively block Telegram. In Belarus authorities were able to restrict access to platforms like Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, but were unable to take Telegram offline (Feldstein, 2021b). However, the platform’s unique capabilities, combined with relatively lenient content moderation, also makes Telegram an attractive platform for extremist groups (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). Telegram’s popularity – 43% usage among Belarusians - started during the Covid pandemic, when the government was not transparent on the mortality figures and which precautions to take for the coronavirus (Auseyushkin, 2021). Telegram became the main source to find reliable information on the coronavirus, and later became a platform for the campaigns of alternative candidates in the 2020 pre-elections. However, it was in the days after the elections and the subsequent internet outage that Telegram audiences grew enormously.

Telegram does not only distinguish itself from other social media through its privacy concerns, but it also offers three distinct mediums: channels, groups and local chats (Slobozhan et al., 2023). (1) Channels offer one-way communication, where administrators share posts with their subscribers. (2) Groups are a two-way communication where messages are exchanged with other users, and (3) local groups add the feature of users sharing a specific geographical location.

Each of the mediums were used for different purposes during the 2020 protests: demonstrations were predominantly observed in local chats whereas channels and groups were mainly providing news and touched on more generic topics (Slobozhan et al., 2023) The channels were found to be more structured and potentially coordinated (top-down) and the

chats more spontaneous and less structured (horizontal). The study also showed that Telegram remained relevant to discuss important political matters after the active protest phase ended (Slobozhan et al., 2023). In this study, all three mediums are analysed since they all serve different purposes and therefore potentially have been influenced differently by digital authoritarianism.

Moreover, a study by Wijermars & Lokot (2022) revealed that Telegram was perceived an ally in the struggle against widespread repressions and digital censorship, and its actions and practices resonated with Belarusian citizens. Furthermore, it's worth noting that the reputation of specific channels and group (administrators) within the platform also played a significant role in determining individuals' choices and decisions regarding the use of Telegram (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022).

#### **2.4. Conclusions: main trends in the literature**

Social media can serve as a means to disseminate information, coordinate action and a place where people can share emotions and develop a common sense of solidarity or shared victimhood (Castells, 2015; Shirky, 2011). However, the extraordinary power of social media as a political tool lies in its ability to overcome the collective action problem, thereby posing a potential threat to the stability of authoritarian regimes (Howard, 2011). Studies have shown that in authoritarian countries with high internet access, social media and digital platforms are serving as spaces to freely express political opinions, and to mobilize for civil and political resistance (Shirky, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) In fact, it is even argued that technology serves as the only available tool in authoritarian regimes with high Internet penetration, to mobilize (Rudnik, 2023). Belarus has an internet penetration rate of 82%, which is among one of the highest in Central and Eastern Europe (*Mobile Internet Reach in CEE Region 2022*). The monopoly of state sponsored media in the traditional media sphere in Belarus and the undemocratic political context, have encouraged people to use digital platforms to read or express alternative opinions for many years.

Although social media plays a crucial role in challenging authoritarian regimes by positively influencing the mobilization of protests, the ultimate political and institutional outcomes of such protests remain uncertain, casting doubt on the democratizing potential of digital media in the long-term (Mateo, 2022). In particular, as authoritarian regimes are increasingly attempting to control and influence these digital spaces due to their mobilizing

potential (Ruijgrok, 2016). In fact, very little is known about how such digital authoritarian practices influence the use of social media platforms.

Belarus serves as a particularly interesting case in this matter due to its mass protests in 2020, that were framed as a ‘Telegram revolution’ and led to authoritarian downgrading and increased repression. The reason for analysing how digital authoritarianism influenced political mobilization on Telegram, is on the one hand due to how Telegram was framed as an actor in the protests, and because it is the second most used messenger in Belarus. Additionally, research has shown that protesters in Belarus perceived the platform as an ally in their struggle (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022) which makes Telegram an even more interesting case for this analysis.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Aims and research questions

This research aims to investigate how political mobilization on Telegram has been influenced by digital authoritarianism in Belarus from August 2020 until September 2023. It seeks to understand how digital authoritarian practices, such as censorship and surveillance, have influenced political mobilization during this period.

As Telegram is the second most popular messenger in Belarus, used by 43% of its population and the 2020-2021 protests were framed as a ‘Telegram Revolution’, the impact of digital authoritarianism on political mobilization on Telegram is studied (Auseyushkin, 2021; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). Earlier research revealed that Telegram served as a tool to coordinate the mass demonstrations in 2020 in Belarus (Slobozhan et al., 2023). Moreover, Telegram’s actions and practices lead individuals in Belarus to form affective connections to the platform and to perceive Telegram as an ally in their struggle (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022).

Following the suppression of the 2020 uprising, the Belarusian authorities implemented a series of restrictive measures, including the banning of all independent media outlets, the exile of tens of thousands of political refugees and hundreds of public organizations, and the imprisonment of thousands of political dissidents. In spite of massive public demand for democratic reform, the Belarusian authorities have opted for precisely the opposite path and the population finds itself in growing isolation, facing severe repression and aggressive propaganda (Slunkin, 2023). A report by the Freedom House of 2022 showed the worst results in the history of Belarus, highlighting the declining state of freedom and democracy in the country (*Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, 2022). In this context, Belarus provides an intriguing case for the study of the impact of digital authoritarianism on political mobilization. This research project will cover the period from August 2020, marking the onset of the mass mobilization and ‘Telegram revolution’, up to September 2023, during which we can observe the continuation of severe repression.

This study attempts to assess in how far Telegram activity in Belarus has been affected by digital authoritarian practices and if and how this has changed the political mobilization occurring on Telegram among Belarusian users. To research this, it was decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with administrators of Telegram channels. Channels on Telegram serve as a means of top-down communication, allowing authors (admins or moderators) to convey information to their audience. Consequently, channels are frequently utilized as online news feeds (Slobozhan et al., 2023).

The interviews are conducted with moderators of independent news channels and Belarusian human rights organizations that operate in exile from EU member states, and that have been labelled ‘extremist’ by the Belarus authorities. These organizations shape and create the content posted on their Telegram channel which makes them a relevant group for this study. Moreover, their awareness of the overall evolving landscape of the Belarus’ Telegram sphere is of important value to this study. Rather than focusing on the specific content posted in Telegram channels, this study delves into the perspectives of Telegram administrators. Through their perspectives the impact of digital authoritarianism on political mobilization efforts on Telegram is analysed. Administrators were chosen for this study rather than users as they shape the content of channels and have more information and statistics to their disposal about their audiences. Moreover, the decision not to interview users alongside administrators was taken for safety purposes.

Earlier research, has limitedly moved beyond the Western contexts of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, which area mostly Western/English language social media spaces (Kuznetsova, 2023). Other social media, that are less common in the West, yet popular in other countries, such as Telegram, receive less attention despite their role in the organization and coordination of large movements (Kuznetsova, 2023). Before the 2020 protests, few studies were concerned with the political use of social media platforms in Belarus. Since the protests a diverse range of articles on Telegram in Belarus have been written (Kuznetsova, 2023; Mateo, 2022; Slobozhan et al., 2023; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). However, this attention was short-lived, and there are no studies that analyse what happened on Telegram after the mass mobilization was suppressed. This study thereby contributes to the literature on Telegram in Belarus, and especially how it has been operating after the suppression of the mass protests. More broadly the study contributes to the use of social media in contentious politics in authoritarian contexts, specifically drawing attention to the use of social media in a post-mass mobilization phase and in an atmosphere of increased repression. Thereby, this study contributes to the literature of contentious politics and social media studies in authoritarian and repressive contexts. It devotes attention to the abilities of governments to watch, censor, manipulate and control online content (Gunitsky, 2015) and goes beyond the focus of studies on how protesters, activists and oppositions figures use these platforms to their benefit (Anderson, 2021; Lokot, 2021; Mateo, 2022). Instead, it investigates the impact of government interference on their activities.

In line with the aims of this research, it seeks indicative answers to the following questions:

**Research Question:** What has been the impact of digital authoritarianism on political mobilization in Belarus from August 2020 until September 2023 in Belarus?

**Sub questions:**

- Which digital authoritarian practices have been used in Belarus' Telegram sphere and on its users?
- How have these digital authoritarian practices impacted the Telegram sphere in Belarus?
- In what ways has resilience been demonstrated in response to the challenges posed by digital authoritarianism?

### **3.2. Case study**

This thesis presents a hypothesis-generating single case study examining the impact of digital authoritarianism in Belarus, specifically focusing on how these practices have influenced the activities of activists on Telegram. This approach offers a nuanced and in-depth understanding, surpassing the scope of large-n studies or comparative research (Landman & Carvalho, 2016). The study aims to contribute to theory construction, allowing the development of general theoretical propositions for further testing through alternative methods (Levy, 2008).

The rationale for this case study lies in the absence of prior research on the aftermath of the 2020 mass mobilization in Belarus, where Telegram was a central platform for activism and political mobilization. Post-mass mobilization, digital authoritarian practices escalated, yet their impact on activist behaviour on social media, particularly Telegram, remains unexplored even though it is likely to have witnessed a shift in dynamics due to heightened digital authoritarianism. This research seeks to fill this gap, examining the evolving dynamics of digital authoritarianism on Telegram in the unique context of Belarus' post-mass mobilization. The focused exploration of the Belarusian case contributes depth to the broader discourse on the interplay between digital authoritarianism and political mobilization.

### **3.3. Method**

The chosen method for this thesis is semi-structured interviews. This is a qualitative and suits the aim of the research as it gives insights into the activists' strategies and

challenges (Hammarberg et al., 2016), allowing for an in-depth exploration of the perspectives and experiences of Telegram channel administrators. As such data is not quantifiable, the qualitative method is chosen. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 5 participants in November 2023 based on an interview guide in line with the literature review (see appendix 1). The number of participants is low in comparison to earlier research projects on the protests in Belarus focusing on participant surveys (Onuch et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this number can be justified as in-depth interviews were executed with experts in the field.

The semi-structured interview method is recognized for fostering reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta, 2013). This reciprocal dynamic creates an open environment, allowing for a richer exchange of information. It provides participants with the flexibility to share their experiences and insights, while simultaneously being guided by the interview guide. This allows the interviewees to address issues that are relevant, but overlooked or the interviewer is unaware of. Moreover, based on the participant's responses, follow-up questions could be improvised, ensuring a nuanced exploration of relevant topics (Polit & Beck, 2010). The sequence and selection of questions were shaped by the organic flow of the conversations, preventing redundancy by avoiding the repetition of certain questions when they were already addressed.

### Recruitment & participants

In-depth interviews were conducted with 5 individuals directly involved in Belarusian non-governmental organizations or independent media active on Telegram. All of the participants have a nuanced understanding of the digital landscape in Belarus, and one of the organizations had a dedicated Telegram expert with whom an interview was conducted. All interviewees were in Belarus during the 2020 protests, but have since relocated to the European Union, as have the organizations they represent. The selection process aimed for diversity, encompassing organizations with varying audience sizes. The Telegram channels associated with the interviewed organizations exhibit diversity in terms of audience size, with the Telegram channels ranging from 2000 to 40.000 subscribers in September 2023. This intentional variation in audience size aims to capture a broad spectrum of organizations.

For safety reasons, interviews were exclusively conducted with organizations operating from EU member states and outside of Belarus. This precaution was taken to ensure the safety of participants. Since 2020, numerous Belarusian civil society organizations have been compelled into exile, but have persisted in their activities from other European countries

(Penov, 2023). The focus on organizations operating from abroad is considered representative of the broader Belarusian civil society, due to the consequences of the events in 2020.

The recruitment process for participants in this study employed a snowball sampling technique. Initiated through the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, three organizations were initially identified, forming the foundation of the sample. Subsequently, these organizations facilitated the identification of additional contacts, expanding the sample through subsequent referrals. Snowball sampling was deemed suitable due to the inherent challenges associated with reaching Belarusian NGOs and independent media entities directly. Nevertheless, some organizations have been recruited through the Telegram channels and groups catalogue (*Telegram Channels and Groups Catalog / Belarus — TGStat*) if they were verified NGO's or independent media operating from the European Union.

All interviews were conducted online as the organizations are spread out over different countries in the EU. Signal, a platform with end-to-end encryption for messages and calls, was chosen to ensure the security and privacy of communication. All the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. For security reasons, the recordings and transcripts were stored on an external encrypted hard drive with any personally identifiable information deleted from the transcripts. Stringent measures were implemented to safeguard participant anonymity and privacy.

Interviews were conducted until recurring themes surfaced, and the emergence of a few new themes suggested a saturation of data. Consequently, the data was deemed suitable for a comprehensive qualitative content analysis. The interviews underwent manual transcription, enhancing familiarity with the data. Subsequently, the qualitative data analysis software NVivo was utilized to code the interview transcripts, identifying recurring themes and patterns. The choice of inductive content analysis was based on the limited existing research. Codes were directly derived from the data rather than being predetermined based on prior research, as in deductive content analysis. With new interviews being added, earlier more subtle patterns and aspects continued to be identified from the data (Vears & Gillam, 2022). This coding helped to closely examine the data, and identify overlapping patterns throughout the interviews. The use of inductive content analysis contributed to the receptiveness for unexpected findings, and a deeper understanding of how digital authoritarianism has impacted activists and users on Telegram.

### 3.4. Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is related to the sensitive nature of the topic, exploring the intersections of digital authoritarianism, activism, and personal experiences in the context of Belarus. Participants, along with their colleagues or friends, may have grappled with direct experiences of repression. Moreover, in this setting characterized by repression and security concerns, it is essential to maintain the safety and anonymity of interview participants. This has been a challenge.

To mitigate risks, participants residing exclusively in the EU were selected for interviews, and efforts to safeguard their identities were maximized. All research data has been stored securely, encrypted and anonymized. Importantly, the thesis omits participant information that could lead to identification. However, participants might choose to withhold certain details or modify their responses as a precautionary measure against potential risks.

The emotional and personal connection to the topic could also influence the reliability of data collected, as participants navigate the delicate balance between candidness and protection of their own and other's experiences. To address these concerns, the informed consent procedure explicitly communicates the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality measures are upheld. The interview structure is designed to allow participants control over the depth of the information that is shared.

A limitation of this study, stemming from the sensitivity of the topic and security concerns, is the challenge of accessing interview participants, particularly given the limited number of Belarusian NGOs and independent media available for study. Many organizations are challenging to reach due to the absence of contact information on their website or social media accounts.

To overcome this challenge, specific NGOs and independent and independent media contacts were obtained through my internship at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This not only facilitated access but also created trust from these organizations. Consequently, interviews were successfully conducted with these organizations, and they provided me with contacts to other similar organizations active on Telegram.

Lastly, my intermediate proficiency in Russian and lack of knowledge of Belarusian necessitated the conduct of interviews in English. Despite participants' exhibiting exceptional English proficiency, the language barrier poses a potential limitation, impacting the depth and nuance of obtained data. To address this limitation, considerable effort was invested in creating an environment where participants felt comfortable expressing their thoughts in a

non-native language. Participants were afforded time and space to articulate their responses, recognizing the potential challenges posed by language differences. While it is acknowledged that the choice of English may have influenced participant engagement, the expectation is that, given the international nature of the organizations based in the European Union with connections to foreign governments, English proficiency would not significantly hinder communication for the majority of participants.

### **3.5. Ethical considerations**

This research has received approval from the University of Glasgow School of Social and Political Science ethical committee, and the outcomes have been communicated to the Jagiellonian University Ethics in Research Committee. Measures were implemented to ensure secure data storage and encryption, prioritizing the protection of participants' identities and safety.

Stringent protocols were followed, including the encryption of data and its storage on an external encrypted hard drive, securely housed in a locked cabinet. None of the stored documents contained any personally identifiable information, such as names, organization names, locations, or email addresses. Upon the conclusion of the research project, all data will be promptly and permanently destroyed.

To further enhance participant privacy, communication was conducted through Proton Mail, utilizing its end-to-end encryption and zero-access encryption features. Online interviews were conducted via Signal, a platform renowned for its robust end-to-end encryption. Audio recordings were captured using a separate audio recorder with a USB adapter, allowing direct uploads to the external encrypted hard drive.

Moreover, informed consent was obtained through a plain language statement and oral consent, ensuring participants were well-informed and willingly participating in the research.

## 4. Findings and analysis

### 4.1. Summary of findings

This thesis is built around the hypothesis that the activity on Telegram has been influenced negatively in response to the suppression of protests and heightened repression, and has limited the chances for political mobilization. The interviews showed that this hypothesis was correct and that Telegram no longer has the same role in Belarusian society as in the early protest phase in 2020 due to the transformation of the digital authoritarian practices used. In the early days of the protests, the platform was widely used for political activism, protest coordination, accessing uncensored information but was also crucial in creating horizontal connections between people. This study found that the authorities overlooked and underestimated the influence of Telegram in August 2020. In line with Boulianne and Lee (2022), Telegram was a relatively safe space outside of state monitoring and repression due to its newness and could therefore play an important role in political mobilization efforts. Nevertheless, the factor of time has benefitted the authorities who have intensified the use of more targeted second- and third- generation internet controls (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010) to cut down opportunities for political mobilization. This has resulted in new legislation, disinformation and propaganda, breaking down on the potential to form horizontal connections, self-organized, decentralized groups. As a result, Telegram has become a place for ‘information activism’ (Halupka, 2016) and ‘citizen journalism’ (Luo & Harrison, 2019), a place to receive and disseminate uncensored information to Belarusians, but it is no longer a space for horizontal communication and self-organizing groups as it was in 2020. The ‘extremist’ labeling of Telegram channels and groups has politicized Telegram. The platform nowadays largely consists out of a politically engaged audience. After the 2020 protests many of the digital authoritarian tools have targeted Telegram specifically, and therefore in a way Telegram has fallen victim to its own success.

The main body of this analysis section is broken into three parts. The first section (4.2.) analyzes the transformation of digital authoritarianism observed within the timeframe of this study. The interviews showed that the authoritarian toolbox to limit activity on Telegram has been ‘upgraded’ and has become more subtle and fear-based within the time-span of the research (Roberts, 2020). Instead of the initial largely friction-based, and first-generation tools used in the beginning of the protests, the authorities have intensified the more targeted second- and third-generation internet controls. This includes far-reaching legislative reforms, effectively outlawing all political actors on Telegram, and the increased spread of

disinformation and propaganda on the platform. This shift underscores the adaptive capacity of authoritarian regimes in their digital authoritarianism (Boulianne & Lee, 2022). In Belarus, these tools are enacted on ‘regular’ citizens too rather than merely targeted on journalist and activists (Roberts, 2020). In 2020 Telegram was enabling horizontal connections, an opportunity that social media offers especially under authoritarianism (Gruzd & Tsyganova, 2015; Lysenko & Desouza, 2012; Shirky, 2011). However, this democratizing potential has been countered by the Belarusian authorities through the more targeted use of the second- and third generation tools of digital authoritarianism.

The second section (4.3.) looks at the effects of these digital authoritarian practices on subscribers and administrators. The interviews showed that Telegram was an important place for the creation of horizontal connections, and that people were self-organizing via the platform (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Telegram was a place where people could safely communicate and exchange opinions with one another at a very low, or even at no cost (Gruzd & Tsyganova, 2015; Lysenko & Desouza, 2012; Shirky, 2011). The use of digital authoritarian tools has led to self-censorship amongst the population, transforming Telegram from a platform facilitating horizontal ties, into a news aggregator. The participatory culture and horizontal ties that previously characterized Telegram, are no longer flourishing. Instead it is a place for single-way communication, in which people have passive role (Sinpeng, 2020; Wall & Zahed, 2015). The role as a news aggregator is however important as accessing independent news, especially in authoritarian settings, increases the chances for mobilization (Shirky, 2009). Moreover, Telegram is a key source for independent media to receive information from people who are inside Belarus. As a result, ‘information activism’ (Halupka, 2016), and ‘citizen journalism’ (Luo & Harrison, 2019) have become one of the few, essential pillars of activism that can increase the opportunities for people to mobilize and get involved in collective action. Nevertheless, the amount of ‘information activists’ has decreased and thereby impacted the reach of ‘extremist’ channels. This is related to the fact that the costs of accessing and sharing independent information nowadays demands additional efforts and risks, which no longer everyone is willing to invest (Roberts, 2020). This also includes people who used to run grassroots activities on Telegram as most of them have stopped. Besides the effects of digital authoritarianism, the lack of quick results has led to a general news fatigue amongst the Belarusian population. This decrease in ‘information activism’ and more broadly the depoliticization of a part of the Belarusian population, is problematizing the potential for future political mobilization.

The third and last section (4.4.) analyzes the resilience showed by Telegram users and administrators in withstanding digital authoritarian practices through innovative tools and strategies (Feldstein, 2021b). It demonstrates how administrators attempt to make the platform safer for themselves, their readers and sources, but also how Telegram as a private entity, increases the safety of its users. The resilience shown largely protects and informs citizens on how to continue ‘information activism’ (Halupka, 2016) through better anonymization. However, anonymization is counterproductive for building horizontal connections (Nikolayenko, 2022). Many of the ‘updated’ digital authoritarian tools target Telegram, and the horizontal connections specifically. As a result, a form of resilience shown by organizations is to diversify their reach by moving to other platforms too that are less politicized and not as exposed to digital authoritarianism.

#### **4.2. The transformation of Belarusian digital authoritarian practices**

In 2020 Telegram has been underestimated as a power for political mobilization by the Belarusian authorities, and in response has seen a transformation and increase of digital authoritarianism, as is derived from the interviews. In this section, the emphasis is on the transformation that has occurred in the use of digital authoritarian practices in Belarus since 2020. The results fall in line with news coverage and common expectation, but it is essential to understand which practices are used and that the Belarusian authorities have shown growing attention and capability to muddle the waters in the Telegram sphere. This is essential to understand the further analysis in 4.3. and 4.4.

In 2020 Telegram was an uncensored, and relatively ‘safe’ space, in Belarus and became widely used for political activism and protest coordination. The authorities underestimated the power of the online space and were very much surprised by the situation. As multiple interviewees stated: ‘The authorities did not expect massive protests. The government did not pay that much attention to Telegram, they do not believe in it. This was a big mistake of the government.’, ‘The authorities did not know it could be used for that purpose. They could not cope with this sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of people that were active online.’

The factor of time has benefitted the authorities and they have gotten better control over the online space and the Telegram space in particular. This shows how regimes can adapt themselves, and that Telegram’s success can be partially ascribed to the initial underestimation of the Belarusian regime of the platform’s influence. As an interviewee

noted ‘In the meantime they had time to learn a lot and had time to work with the information that they have.’ The fact that Telegram was overlooked and underestimated by the authorities, aligns with the study of Boulianne & Lee that revealed new social media platforms offer advantages for collective action due to their newness (Boulianne & Lee, 2022). The newness of Telegram contributed to its relative safety, free from state monitoring and repression. Nevertheless, this advantage of new platforms is only temporary, as governments learn to adapt (Boulianne & Lee, 2022). This evolution will be analysed below using the framework of Weber (2019), showing the transformation on digital authoritarian practices and the subsequent effect on Telegram’s role.

#### *4.2.1. Surveillance*

The interviews have shown that the surge in Telegram’s popularity in 2020, has led the Belarusian government to intensify surveillance on the platform. Nowadays Telegram channels and groups are being monitored. Surveillance serves as the first step, to be informed what and where other tools of digital authoritarianism need to be used (Weber, 2019). The increased monitoring of activity on Telegram proves the growing attention it has received from the authorities, and that the factor of time has proved beneficial to the authorities. Interviewees highlighted the shift and the increased surveillance on Telegram: ‘They have started surveilling Telegram, which has made it unsafe to use Telegram. Belarusian authorities have started entering chat groups under anonymous names, trace people their Telegram nicknames and use it for persecution later. Another tactic that is used, is to track Belarusian users through their phone numbers. ‘, ‘in 2023 the government is using software and bots, and knows how to de-anonymize people.’

One of the de-anonymization tools used, mentioned in the interviewed is Kotatogram, an app revealing user IDs and all their past messages in Telegram chats. It can export entire chats, including the messages from individuals who left chats and channels or deleted their Telegram accounts already. If someone has not deleted their messages before leaving the chats or channels, it can still be found through Kotatogram. Apart from using existing technologies to their benefit, authorities create fake accounts to enter groups, or mirror original opposition channels. This tactic allows them to surveil members, access names, or even obtain phone numbers if not concealed by users, as derived from the interviews.

While tech-savvy individuals can often circumvent earlier surveillance tactics, Belarusian authorities extend their reach beyond the online realm. People their political

activities may be confined to the internet, but they may face scrutiny during street checks. This was described by an interviewee: ‘People get arrested and they physically check your Telegram activity and that of others who are in the same chats [...] Security forces have also installed bots on cell phones of arrested people through which they collect Telegram content’. This tactic not only exposes the detainee’s activity online, but also endangers others. These findings show that alongside technological advances of the authorities, more traditional repressive levers continue to be used. Therefore, digital authoritarianism is actually intrinsically linked to physical authoritarianism, and is simply a part of the authorities repertoire of repression, illustrating the interconnectedness of the online and physical realm (Weber, 2019).

Besides journalists and activists being targets of surveillance, regular citizens in Belarus have been affected too, contrary to earlier literature that reprisals are mostly enacted on journalists and activists (Roberts, 2020). This constant threat of security agents being able to force you to reveal your phone and Telegram activity, coupled with the potential persecution for past comments or a channel subscription, facilitates an environment of fear and self-censorship (Richards, 2013). This sentiment was expressed by an interviewee: ‘People are afraid to use Telegram. You do not have to be very active [on Telegram] to be caught. It does not matter whether you delete everything, you will always leave some traces behind online.’

Moreover, digital authoritarianism, and online surveillance has less barriers regarding national borders. The interviewed organizations working in exile all noted that they are being monitored by the authorities, showing that similar to Iran’s digital surveillance, it is exerted even when activists are no longer residing in the country. This poses additional challenges for activists in exile in safeguarding their sources and readers as highlighted by Michaelsen (2017).

#### *4.2.2. Censorship*

##### *Internet outages and blocking of websites*

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, the day of the presidential elections in Belarus, the internet got blocked almost completely for a couple of days until August 12. In the subsequent months, more localized and shorter periods of internet outages took place on Sundays when the weekly protests took place (*Более 70 Часов Белорусы Провели Без Мобильного Интернета - Новости Беларуси - Хартия’97*, 2020). Nevertheless, the interviewees noted

that sometimes Telegram was still accessible during these Internet outages which in turn led to its increased popularity: ‘Even back in 2020 when the entire Internet was shut down, people could still access Telegram from time to time. It was hell but we could.’ Telegram’s owner Pavel Durov tweeted: ‘We enabled our anti-censorship tools in Belarus so that Telegram remained available for most users there. However, the connection is very unstable as Internet is at times shut off completely in the country’ (Durov, 2020).

This shows the key role of private companies in digital authoritarianism as highlighted by Feldstein (2021b), as shown through the example of Telegram. The social media platform enabled its anti-censorship tools in response to the protests and sided with the Belarusian protesters, but Telegram was neither fully immune.

The total costs of the internet restrictions in 2020 were calculated to have costed the country \$336.4 million (*The Global Cost of Internet Shutdowns 2020 Report*, 2021) and have likely impacted one of the most promising economic areas in Belarus, namely the IT sector. In 2016, IT accounted for 5,7 of the country’s GDP and Belarus was labelled the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe (Murphy, 2020). However, after 2020, this form of first-generation internet control was not observed by any of the interviewees: ‘They did not even block the Internet last February during the [Belarusian constitutional] referendum protest, which coincided with the start of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine and people took to the streets. It looked as if they could have done it again, but they did not’. The interviewees linked the decision not to cut off the Internet to the economic impact, ‘They know that cutting the internet costs hundreds of thousands, millions of revenues for their economy, which is already struggling’.

From 2021 onwards no complete Internet outages were observed, and the authorities seem to have turned towards more subtle and targeted tools in order to prevent mobilization. This contradicts with the dictator’s dilemma (Howard et al., 2011; Saleh, 2012), and shows that Belarus has refined its toolbox, and a digitalized society can exist without harming the economy if it uses more advanced tools of digital authoritarianism.

In the early days of the protests, not only the Internet was shut-off, but international media outlets, independent Belarusian media outlets and human rights organizations were made inaccessible. Moreover, many social media and VPN services were blocked too as highlighted by an interviewee: ‘The authorities have been blocking websites, meaning people could only access some media channels via Telegram. It helps to prevent people from getting information.’ The blocking of online sources has continued since the protests, and by Spring 2023 all major independent media and NGO websites remain blocked. Article 13 of the

Media Law allows the restriction of access to domestic and foreign websites ‘in the event of a threat to national security’ (*Belarus: Freedom on the Net 2023 Country Report, 2023*). The Belarus authorities have expanded the list of blocked websites to support this censorship.

Telegram plays a pivotal role in navigating the challenges posed by censorship, as Telegram initially served as a means to circumvent the internet outages. In the present context, it continues to function as an essential tool for bypassing censorship, as many websites of independent media and NGO’s remain blocked. For this reason, independent media have moved to Telegram, which is one of their main channels for disseminating information to Belarusians, emphasizing the platform’s significance beyond establishing horizontal connections.

Contrary to Deibert’s (2010) observation that former Soviet countries would generally avoid first-generation controls to side-step the label of an ‘international human rights pariah’, Belarus seems to have taken a different trajectory. The occurrences of internet shutdowns in 2020 and the widespread blocking of numerous websites of independent Belarus media, foreign news outlets, and human rights organizations, opposes this reluctance associated with first-generation controls. In this landscape, social media, particularly Telegram, emerges as vital tool for evading these controls, allowing users to access blocked content.

Furthermore, Belarus has evolved its approach to digital authoritarianism. When faced with the surge in online activity on Telegram in 2020, the authorities predominantly relied on first-generation internet controls, and mainly internet outages. In the meantime, the country has added more nuanced and targeted tools of digital authoritarianism to complement the first-generation controls. This will be discussed in the following parts on legislation (second-generation) and disinformation and propaganda (third-generation). This shift underscores the adaptive capacity of authoritarian regimes in their digital authoritarian toolbox.

### *New legislation*

In the aftermath of the protests, the Belarusian government has approved a dozen new laws, amendments and resolutions designed to hinder any form of opposition, showing that second-generation internet controls have been expanded. In the beginning of 2021 Lukashenka declared the current standards too ‘liberal’ and enabled the protests in August 2020 (Zochowski & Klysinski, 2021). New laws have not only been implemented to regulate the access to domestic and foreign websites, but have reached a much wider scope. As mentioned by an interviewee: ‘The forms of repression have evolved as the authorities have come up with new pieces of legislation that restrict everything which is not restricted yet.’ A

returning theme in the interviews was that the internet legislation is based on ‘protecting national interests’, ‘state security’, and ‘countering extremism’, all open to broad interpretation. Nevertheless, violation of this legislation has major consequences and is a crucial tool in censoring the (online) information space.

The intensified efforts to expand second-generation internet controls, and the resulting self-censorship and fear-based climate among protestors, shows how the authorities wanted to stop Telegram’s use for horizontal communication between potential protestors. Horizontal communication increases the chances for protest mobilization and thereby pose a danger to regime stability. The Belarusian authorities’ response was reactive and ad-hoc, with new legislation as an important pillar to cut down on new opportunities for protests.

Even though the law ‘On Combating Extremism’ already existed since 2007, it has been subject to amendments ever since, and in particular after the 2020 protests it underwent a number of changes and became the basis for censoring unwanted content (Marin, 2023). In May 2023, the lists of Extremist Materials contained 3323 materials, of which about one third consisting of Telegram sources (Marin, 2023). In particular, Article 19.11 of the Code of Administration for the ‘dissemination of Extremist materials’ has been widely applied. This criminalizes sharing content from ‘extremist formations’ or commenting and liking any of its information (Marin, 2023). Hereby, any person referring to an organization, informal group or content labelled ‘extremist’ can be prosecuted. In the past years, the authorities have included hundreds of Telegram channels to lists of ‘extremist materials’ and continue adding new ones even up till now. An interviewee mentioned that ‘There has been a slow process of declaring channels extremist’. Any somewhat political or critical economic or societal information shared on Telegram, has been labelled extremist. Reading and subscribing to such channels is illegal. ‘The authorities have effectively outlawed all politically active actors on Telegram’.

It is evident that the legislation has become much stricter since August 2020, and what was legal to do on Telegram in the past, is currently punishable by law. The new and amended laws, have also increased persecutions and detention of Belarusians for their online activities. This has included running social media channels or chats, but also merely commenting or reposting from ‘extremist’ organizations. A group of lawyers that discussed and coordinated their activities via a Telegram group, were declared an ‘extremist’ formation, and the owner of the chat was sentenced to 8 years. However, people are nowadays also being punished for the acts they committed in 2020 and were legal back then. Thereby the past is criminalized. This was expressed by an interviewee: ‘People have to purge the history

of their Telegram activities till 2020 where everyone was carefree, and many did things that is illegal today. [...] People who used to run local grassroot activities on Telegram, uniting people from say one neighbourhood, but they stopped running those Telegram channels or groups. They thought they were okay [as they stopped their activities], but they were targeted years after', 'Photos and videos of the [2020] protests, and past social media activities are still being watched by the security forces to punish people years later.'

The fact that the Belarusian authorities are still going after people who were running neighbourhood groups, or commented in a nowadays 'extremist' Telegram channel, three years after, shows that besides being overwhelmed by the online activity of so many people, they still perceive Telegram as a threat. It shows that the Belarusian tools have become increasingly reliant on second-generation and its intimidation and self-censorship (Polyokova & Meserole, 2019).

Self-censorship is not merely imposed to protect oneself, but also to protect in-prison friends, family or colleagues as expressed by an interviewee: 'In cases where our in-prison colleagues are involved, that some of them [the political prisoners] are told that the behaviour of their friends and associates in the media field, could influence their well-being while in prison.'

According to Roberts, fear-based mechanisms, involving reprisals for creating or accessing information poses less risk to ordinary citizens, and is mostly enacted on journalists and activists (Roberts, 2018). In Belarus however, fear-based censorship is currently enacted on ordinary citizens too who comment or like content online that is 'extremist', as an interviewee mentioned: 'Even people having [an extremist Telegram channel] open on their phone, means that people can go to jail for several weeks.'

Censorship in Belarus in 2020, according to Roberts' (2020) model, was mostly friction-based, requiring users to invest more time and effort in accessing specific information through the blocking of websites, shutting down the Internet and the use of VPN's. It was only later that online activity became increasingly fear-based by imposing costs to users of Telegram through imprisonment and the fear that sharing or accessing information brings. Large scale imprisonment of (former-)administrators only started on a large scale in 2021, and it was only in 2021 that the legislation on 'extremism' was defined more broadly, and it took time to label more organizations and materials as 'extremist'. This fear has led to self-censorship, and damaged the possibility for the creation of horizontal ties, thereby complicating the opportunity for political mobilization.

### *4.2.3. Disinformation & propaganda*

Similar to the use of more sophisticated censorship through second-generation internet controls, it took a while before the Belarusian government started to use third-generation internet controls (disinformation & propaganda) more broadly on Telegram. This was expressed by an interviewee, ‘The representation of the regime on Telegram has been growing. Some of their channels were created in 2019, but most of them have been created much later. Generally, the eco-system of propaganda is growing in Belarus, and there are more individuals becoming active in the pro-regime forces.’

Even though the state sponsored media started to establish their own Telegram channels, the number of subscribers was, and still is small compared to the anti-government channels. In fact, the authorities have forced people to subscribe to their channels to make them seem more popular, as expressed by an interviewee: ‘In 2021 people started to be forced to subscribe to pro-government channels. The propaganda tried to show the population that Lukashenko is popular, and has more subscribers than Tichanovskaya [opposition leader in exile]’. Another interviewee noted ‘Workers of universities, state bodies and city councils were forced to subscribe to propaganda channels on Telegram, this has been an institutional practice to attract people to use Telegram.’

The artificially created followers and forced subscription of employees makes it hard to determine the actual popularity of pro-government channels. Nevertheless, looking at past and current numbers of Telegram subscribers of state-controlled channels, we can clearly tell that anti-government and independent channels are far more popular. The number of subscribers of NEXTA Live, the most popular anti-government Telegram channel in Belarus, reached more than two million subscribers, whereas the largest pro-Lukashenka channel had about 60,000 (Aleksejeva, 2020). Moreover, multiple interviewees highlighted that pro-regime channels, particularly those from the city councils, are not well read amongst its subscribers, ‘there may be 3000 people in the state Telegram groups and only 100 are reading the messages. This shows that people do not want to read this information.’

Even though the authorities might not have been successful in establishing a large audience on Telegram, it is not that surprising that pro-regime channels are less popular than the pro-democratic forces. Telegram is not the main source for the Belarusian authorities, as they have access to all traditional media. Instead, the pro-democratic forces have only few platforms left for their coverage. Nevertheless, the pro-regime channels did become a source for activists and independent media to retrieve information about (political) prisoners. ‘It is

funny in a way that we get much information about arrest from those channels. It may sound cynical, but that is how it works. The authorities are so crazy about posting the atrocities that they commit’.

The Belarus authorities have been more successful in spreading disinformation and muddling the waters on Telegram, as highlighted in the interviews: ‘Around October [2020], the misinformation started and they [the authorities] understood that Telegram is a danger. They were gaslighting people by sending pictures of police that was in a certain place, while there was nobody. People would say to gather at a location and then a big group of protesters would show up and the police was there.’ Another method is the creation of fake channels, copying the original political channels and use them to uncover people their identities. ‘The authorities are misleading and phishing people [via Telegram]. They use bots that disclose your identity, and they are creating fake accounts. An account is created that has a name almost similar to the original one. The name, and sometimes even the phone numbers of people who are subscribed to a channel are visible to the administrator. This is very dangerous if it is fake.’ There have even been attempts of KGB agents to win over the trust of people who are involved in activism by pretending they are fighting for the same cause. KGB agents are trying to contact people [via Telegram] and try to win their trust so they can uncover their identities.’.

Moreover, interviewees also stated that the pro-regime channels contain a lot of hate speech, inciting hate and threatening people, ‘Such channels use a lot of hate speech, show horrible pictures and videos which are still allowed on Telegram. Very violent calls against the opposition are made, and there is a lot of cursing. Most people dislike this type of content’. It is clear that the Belarusian authorities have increased their presence on Telegram, and even though in number of subscribers and readers they might not be as successful, hate speech is becoming more normalized. Disinformation was used to mislead people during the protests, but slowly became more important to uncover people their identities. Later more pro-regime Telegram channels appeared, that incite hatred through the use of aggressive hate propaganda. This divides the pro-regime and pro-democracy sides further, and politicizes the platform.

This part of the analysis, clearly shows that due to the growing attention and capability to involve in the Telegram sphere, the use and evolution of digital authoritarian tools has increased. All three generations of internet controls are present in Belarus contradictory to Deibert et al. (2010), and digital authoritarianism has become intrinsically interconnected with physical authoritarianism. In the active protest phase the tools used were mostly friction-

based (first-generation), but its legal framework has seen a complete revision (second-generation), and the authorities have intensified its presence on Telegram with disinformation and propaganda (third-generation). Not only journalists and activists have been targets of digital authoritarianism, as suggested in earlier research (Roberts, 2020), but regular citizens have been affected too in the case of Belarus. Looking at the use of all the different digital authoritarian tools, it is clear that the earlier optimism of Telegram in 2020 as a ‘free space’ has been undermined by government actions, lessening – but not removing – the chances for political mobilization on Telegram. In the past, Telegram was enabling horizontal connections, an opportunity that social media offers especially under authoritarianism. However, this democratizing potential has been countered through the more targeted and advanced use of the generational tools of digital authoritarianism. As highlighted by Morozov (2011a), dictators can improve and customize their censorship, making it possible for totalitarianism and economic benefits of Internet access to go hand in hand, proving that the element of time can work in favour of dictators.

#### *4.2.4. Tectonic changes*

In Belarus, similar to the Arab spring (Moore-Gilbert & Abdul-Nabi, 2021), ‘authoritarian downgrading’ has occurred, in which the protests exerted substantial influence on the character of the wider political system, and away from democracy rather than moving closer to democracy (Robertson, 2010). In Belarus this trend of ‘authoritarian downgrading’ is also visible in the digital authoritarianism used on Telegram, impacting political mobilization efforts in Belarus. Therefore, Telegram is no longer fulfilling the same role in Belarusian society as it did in 2020. This is expressed by multiple interviewees ‘There have been tectonic changes [in what role Telegram had and currently has in Belarusian society], and not for the better unfortunately. [...] It was an important platform for political mobilization over the short period of time from the election being announced in May 2020, till November of 2020’, ‘It seems like in terms of political engagement and civil engagement, Telegram is not the best way anymore’.

Before the authorities started blocking websites, pushed legal reforms and wide spread repressions started, the online space served as a place where people could be relatively free. Mainly through social media, people were able to organize civic and political campaigns. Information was shared online, communities were created, and online petitions were organized. Since the implementation of new laws these activities have become harder and

more dangerous. This has changed Telegram's role from one facilitating horizontal ties, into a news aggregator, as active interference on the platform nowadays comes with major risks. This is expressed by an interviewee: 'People are very afraid to use Telegram, and the authorities do everything so people remove the app from gadgets and phones. Telegram has become a news aggregator, and is no longer used for mobilization and discussions.'

In the mobilization phase, Telegram has proven to be a useful tool, however the critique of social media activism is that it lacks depth and sustainability to have a lasting effect in the post-mobilization phase (De Angelis & Badran, 2021). However, in the case of Belarus and Telegram, there has definitely been a lasting effect in the post-mobilization phase as expressed by ones of the interviewees, 'People know because of back then [protests of 2020], that you can find trustworthy and uncensored information on Telegram. That is key. It is one of the few sources where you can find news on things that you can read or hear on television. For example on the war in Ukraine, Telegram is one of the few places where you can reach this information.'

This proves that, even if horizontal connections are no longer formed on Telegram, 'information activism', in which people consume, aggregate and distribute information, is still flourishing (Halupka, 2016), 'Telegram is one of the key digital tools used to receive uncensored information [...]. There are not so many ways to access uncensored information [in Belarus]. It's Telegram, websites through VPN, or YouTube. These are the main channels of information.' The protests have helped to create awareness that uncensored information can be found on Telegram. The consequences of information activism do usually not involve direct changes to power structures, but could be important in the long-term (Halupka, 2016). Especially in Belarus where the authorities have a monopoly over the public discourse, consuming independent and alternative information via Telegram increases the opportunity for people to mobilize and get involved in collective action (Shirky, 2009).

Moreover, besides Telegram serving as a source to read uncensored information, it also serves as a key way of receiving information from within Belarus for many organizations and independent media due to 'citizen journalism', in which 'ordinary individuals act as journalists during some part of creating content for journalism coverage' (Luo & Harrison, 2019). The importance of Telegram as a source of information was expressed by an organization, 'For us, Telegram is and will be the key means of gathering this information'

An important Telegram channel that was mentioned by many is the 'extremist' Belarusian Hajun, that shares information about the activity of the Russian military on Belarusian territory and in the airspace of the country. It is the second biggest channel on

Telegram in Belarus with more than 500.000 subscribers (*Rating of Telegram Channels / Belarus — TGStat, 2023*). The main source of information is coming from Belarusian subscribers of the Telegram channel. Similar to other Telegram channels, people can provide the administrator with information via the channels' chatbot. The importance of 'citizen journalism' in Belarus is major to keep people informed, as most journalist are working from exile and this is one of the few channels to reach information from a society that is getting more closed off. However, 'citizen journalism' also allows for a participatory culture, and makes people active participants. Especially in the increasingly repressive environment that Belarus has become, 'information activism' and 'citizen journalism' are essential to keep the opposition simmering for potential future political mobilization if a 'window of opportunity' would arise.

### **4.3. Effects of digital authoritarianism**

#### *4.3.1. Channel administrators: the effects of digital authoritarianism for their work*

Earlier research on Telegram in Belarus, showed that Telegram has been crucial in challenging the government's media monopoly in Belarus, engage in discussions, but also facilitated in the organization of social movements (Kuznetsova, 2023). As such, in 2020 Telegram was a place crucial for the creation of horizontal connections. However, the digital authoritarian practices have influenced these dynamics, and have turned Telegram into a place for horizontal connections, to a place suited largely for one-directional form of communication. Safety precautions are taken by channel administrators to protect their readers, as expressed by an interviewee, 'We do not allow our readers to comment [on posts]. They can react with emojis, likes or dislikes. Only the administrators can see this. [...] It was completely clear that the comments should be switched off after online resources were designated as extremist content. Even people having it [the Telegram channel] open on their phone could go to jail for several weeks'.

Besides precautions taken by channel administrators that have impacted the possibility for two-way, horizontal communication, many groups and channels have been deleted completely as it is too dangerous to be an administrator of such a group when residing in Belarus, or to engage in its discussions when you are not abroad. This was expressed by multiple interviewees, 'People who used to run local grassroot activities, uniting people from say one neighbourhood but dropped running those Telegram channels or groups', 'There is less activity on Telegram nowadays, even discussion in local groups has become too dangerous.[...] there are fewer group chats than before.'

This is a complete shift compared to how people described the activities on Telegram back in 2020, ‘Via Telegram, volunteers were helping family members of political prisoners with money, or bringing them food. People were gathering in different neighbourhoods and in the past people announced on Telegram, we are meeting here at this time and we will go to this prison to protest’, ‘people were organizing their own protests: taking pictures with the national flag [historic white-red-white flag that became the symbol of the protests], displaying national symbols, organizing concerts, gatherings to drink tea with their neighbours. Many people distrusted each other so it was important for people to realize that their neighbours were against the regime’.

This new and passive, single-way of communication prohibits the development of trust and horizontal connections. Earlier empirical findings have indicated that unity and solidarity play a crucial role in enabling individuals to overcome their fear of state-reprisal (Nikolayenko, 2022). Nowadays, people are no longer having an active role as they can only receive independent news on Telegram, but do not have the opportunity to discuss societal issues any longer or to gather with other like-minded people and built trust. This lessened the chances for political mobilization.

The transformation of digital authoritarianism after the protests has not only impacted the work of Telegram administrators, but also their personal situation significantly. The majority of Belarusians who were previously actively creating Telegram content, have continued their work from exile. ‘People who are active and create content know it’s very dangerous and are mostly abroad. 99% or even more is abroad. [...] I don’t see any reason to run a Telegram channel when you are in Belarus because it would limit your outreach and engagement with your readers.’ This has made Telegram administrators working from exile increasingly dependent on ‘citizen journalism’ (Luo & Harrison, 2019) and ‘information activism’ (Halupka, 2016) received through chatbots on Telegram by people who are still in the country. Informing citizens is essential in encouraging people for political participation and mobilization in authoritarian contexts (Diamond & Plattner, 2012; Halupka, 2016; Ruijgrok, 2016; Shirky, 2009).

Moreover, the interviews showed that the labelling of extremism has had a significant impact on activity on Telegram, and that either people have started to work from exile, or have quit their ‘political’ activities. When the first organizations started to be labelled as ‘extremist’ by the authorities, channels’ content became less political as mentioned in the interviews, ‘Some channels tried to limit political information before they were declared extremist. They tried to avoid getting into the extremist list. Once they relocated, they started

publishing everything they wanted to publish.’, ‘We have returned to old journalistic practices since being relocated.’ It shows that organizations and individuals who were active on Telegram have resorted to self-censorship in the studied timeframe due to fears of being put on the ‘extremist’ list (Youm, 2015).

The relocation of political actors and organizations has led to a growing gap between people who are inside and outside of Belarus, as expressed by an interviewee, ‘There is a gap between the organizations and activists outside Belarus, and many of their target groups that are inside Belarus, and people are afraid and being persecuted.’ Back in 2020, a lot of people who were previously not interested in politics, were using Telegram solely reading channels. This shows that broader audiences became interested in the political, and information was disseminated from highly dedicated groups to previously less engaged participants (Tucker et al., 2017). Nowadays, increased digital authoritarianism has mostly impacted the presence of this ‘middle group’ of previously unengaged and de-politicized citizens on Telegram. This ‘middle group’ can be of crucial importance for a representative and large movement, and therefore their absence harms the potential for political mobilization.

Besides, the ‘middle group’, the administrators are of importance for political mobilization. However, activists working abroad have neither escaped the authoritarian pressures fully. One of the interviewee’s addressed how the administrators of channels involved in spreading information on the war in Ukraine, could face serious threats, ‘[He could face] physical threat from the authorities because to them he is a threat because he discloses this information about Belarus’ involvement in the war. About Wagner groups, about Russia’s troops in Belarus. Those are very brave people, not like us [human rights activists]. [...] He [the administrator] should be very knowledgeable how to prevent being targeted himself.’ As time passes, opportunities for change diminish, and it becomes harder to get reliable information from Belarus, there is a danger that administrators abroad are no longer willing to dedicate the time and risks associated with their work. This willingness to bear these additional ‘costs’ fluctuates over time periods and user profiles, but is a legitimate concern as expressed in the interviews, ‘Administrators and activists time is not endless, the biggest enemy is the availability of these people in Belarus and abroad’.

#### *4.3.2. The audience: the effects of digital authoritarianism for their activity*

Not only administrators and activists are being targeted with the digital authoritarian practices, but so are the people using the channels on Telegram, as expressed in the interviews, ‘The biggest factor for people not being active on Telegram anymore is repression. The most important is that people are afraid they can be imprisoned any day, and it can be anyone’. Reading Telegram channels, and especially being active on Telegram nowadays involves additional risks and demands courage, ‘It looks like being on Telegram today requires some level of courage I would say. [...] It looks like most people who are politically active on Telegram know what the costs are of being politically active there or even being there.’ In particular ‘citizen journalism’ (Luo & Harrison, 2019) and ‘information activism’ (Halupka, 2016) has become increasingly dangerous, as expressed by an interviewee, ‘Reaching out to us [with information via Telegram] takes courage, it is not secure, you are not secure being in Belarus, your phone can be accessed with violence at any moment.’

The addressed fear and courage that is associated with activity on Telegram nowadays, and in particular the ‘extremism’ label that many organizations have received, has hugely impacted the number of subscribers. This was expressed by the interviewees, ‘It [labelling organizations ‘extremist’] worked efficiently and people unsubscribed to these channels that were unsafe. [...] We lost about 20% of subscribers, but NEXTA lost even more’, ‘It [labelling our organization ‘extremist’] had a huge impact and our subscriptions lowered with 60%’. Organizations assume that the subscribers they lost after the ‘extremist’ label are the Belarusians who are still in the country and for whom it is unsafe to be subscribed. This however, does not mean that people do not access these Telegram channels any longer, ‘The basic behaviour of users on Telegram is not being subscribed to a channel, because it is not safe. People are only accessing without being subscribed.’

Nowadays due to the increased risks when using Telegram for accessing independent media or sharing information with organizations, people had to delete their personal pictures, change their names and biographies as it previously contained personal information which could uncover them. This was expressed in the interviews ‘Some people had pictures on their profiles, and other personal information. Nowadays users should be literate and knowledgeable in terms of security. It requires medium, at least medium level of digital literacy at least.’ Instead of creating unity and solidarity (Nikolayenko, 2022), the anonymity in which everyone nowadays operates on Telegram creates an atmosphere of distrust and breaks the horizontal ties, an aspect that was so crucial for political mobilization in 2020.

This section proves that being on Telegram as a Belarusian to access and spread information nowadays demands additional efforts and risks. This is accomplished through friction-based censorship, as well as fear-based censorship (Roberts, 2020), through threats and imprisonment. A subset of the population is unwilling to invest this additional risks and time to read or share independent information, which makes it more likely for them to turn to state sponsored media instead (Roberts, 2020), or potentially avoid the news all together. Nowadays, with people in Belarus not being subscribed to activist and ‘extremist’ Telegram channels anymore, it has become hard to observe changes in the amount of ‘information activists’. Nevertheless, it seems as if the increased barriers and dangers have impacted the reach of ‘extremist’ channels and decreased the amount of ‘information activists’, as expressed by an interviewee, ‘It looks like, speaking broadly, people who were active on Telegram as political activists, talking to their audiences, or civil society in general. They are not so efficient in reaching out to their target groups in Belarus anymore.’

However, this loss of audience, consequently affecting the chances for political mobilization, is not merely the effect of digital authoritarian tools used. A growing part of Belarusian citizens feels a sense of fatigue in its democratic resistance. The constant negativity, lack of quick results, and a lack a window of opportunity for change has led people to become increasingly uninterested to participate or even to read online initiatives on Telegram. This was expressed by an interviewee ‘There is a sort of national depression in which people have given up their hopes for changes. There is a news fatigue, because people have realized that there will be no quick changes.’ This sentiment is confirmed in a report from Belarus in February 2023 in which 58% of respondents answered that if they avoided reading or watching the news in the past year, it was because all the negative news brought them in a bad mood (Кудревич, 2023). This shows a decrease of ‘information activism’ and more broadly that a depoliticization has occurred amongst a part of the Belarusian population. Depoliticization is definitely not a fruitful breeding ground for political mobilization.

At the same time, multiple administrators noted that when specific events occur, they notice huge increases in the number of readers of their posts, ‘There is fatigue of the bad news, but there will always be people who are interested in uncensored content. If a specific event happens, we notice there is more interest to reach our information’. This proves that people know where to find uncensored information when they are looking for it, even if they are usually not active on Telegram anymore. Moreover, this is in line with Roberts who established that whether people are willing to pay the additional costs to access filtered information, can vary across time periods and users (Roberts, 2020). During the active protest

phase, the belief that something could change was at its height, whereas the further you shift away from ‘a window of opportunity’ the less motivated people become. However, people might be mobilized once an opportunity opens up as an interviewee mentioned that, ‘nowadays people are desperate and tired, but they still preserve this genuine discontent with the regime.’ Nevertheless, sustaining the same number of readers, channels, groups and interaction on Telegram compared to 2020 has proven impossible. It is crucial to emphasize that this study only captures the situation up to 2023, but it would be particularly intriguing to see how Telegram unfolds itself in the next ‘window of opportunity’.

#### **4.4. Resilience**

We have established that the Belarusian authorities have adapted and improved their tools to suppress online activity in the past years, and how this has affected administrators, activists and users on Telegram. However, as authoritarian regimes can adapt their digital authoritarianism to lessen opportunities for political mobilization, so do users, activists and even private entities such as Telegram learn to secure themselves. Civil society groups and political activists have many innovative tools, ideas and strategies to fight back against digital authoritarianism (Feldstein, 2021b).

##### *4.4.1. Resilience of Telegram administrators and users*

The Telegram channel administrators that were interviewed expressed that they all have been informing their readers and subscribers through guidelines after their ‘extremist’ designation, ‘We prepared guidelines, some tips how to behave, how to interact with us after this [‘extremist’] designation. We have published it across all our media platforms. It is difficult to influence the physical behaviour of people in Belarus. It sounds like we are trying to scare them, but the prison terms that people get for just talking to extremist formations are huge so we should be very careful with that.’ One of the most crucial tips shared with readers, is the need to unsubscribe from ‘extremist’ channels. They can still read it by searching for the channel, and deleting the search history. ‘This basic behaviour of users on Telegram is not being subscribed to a channel, because it is not safe. People are only accessing without being subscribed, it is safe. [...] Okay, people have to delete their search history, but it is easy.’ Other tips shared are using foreign SIM cards and register to social media platforms with this foreign number. Belarus has a mandatory SIM card registration,

which links people's phone numbers to their identities. 'You have to register your phone number to use Telegram, but people can be registering to foreign numbers. There are special services that organize this', 'People can have accounts registered on foreign sim cards. This is not banned today'. Moreover, there are also precautions that people have taken themselves to make it safer to keep using Telegram, but not necessarily instructed by organizations as noted by an interviewee, 'Many people have phones with which they do not go on the street with and on which they read independent news. Another method is that people always log out of the [Telegram] application and delete it.'

However, not only readers of Telegram channels have to be careful. In particular 'citizen journalists' (Luo & Harrison, 2019) and 'information activists' (Halupka, 2016) who are providing 'extremist' channels with information are in danger. For this reason, channels act incredibly cautious with the information that is provided to them, and do everything in their power to make it harder to trace their sources' identity. 'Citizen journalists' residing in Belarus that provide organizations with valuable information, have been instructed to take pre-cautions, and only a very limited number of employees is informed who this person is as highlighted by an interviewee, 'We have someone with whom we work together, but we have told this person not to take pictures anymore, and only share trustworthy information with us. Only two people in our organization know who this person is.' Moreover, messages and posts are delayed to complicate tracing back specific information to an individual, but also through the strict anonymization of sources, as noted in the interview, 'The sources are protected by posting, sharing some news with a delay so that it would be difficult to track the person and link this information to a specific location, trial or incident. All sources in Belarus are strictly anonymous. That is a rule, because sometimes it may jeopardize family members or some local activists that are still there, lawyers, that are also under pressure in Belarus', 'We have been explaining what the consequences of sharing information with us are in the first place, which is the most dangerous.'

Some of the safety measures are not instructed, but are used on people's own initiatives. Nevertheless, they are frequently observed by administrators. One such safety measure is indirect sharing of information through acquaintances residing outside of Belarus. This was described by an interviewee, 'It is not a protocol but we know that people who are in Belarus and share information with us, share this information to us indirectly. They can ask their friends, acquaintances who are outside Belarus. [...] And then the person based outside, reaches us and shares this information with us'.

Many Telegram channels have informed their readers and sources by informing them about the dangers, and the possible precautions to take. However, besides channels informing their own audiences, new grassroots Telegram initiatives have emerged of which the one of the core objectives is to instruct on the safe use of the platform. The most popular is the group called the Cyber Partisans who are active both on Telegram and make YouTube videos. An interviewee described this, ‘There are some initiatives whose key objective is to teach, to instruct users how to use Telegram securely. CyberPartisans, for example.’ The most popular tool developed by the Cyber Partisans is *Partisan Telegram*, also known as P-Telegram. It is an almost identical copy of the original Telegram app built on Telegram’s open-source code. It has the option to install an SOS password, which is a fake password and adds additional security. If the fake password is entered on P-Telegram, the person’s pre-selected chats and channels are automatically deleted. There are other initiatives that are very helpful for activists and users, but that could be used to the benefit of the authorities too. This shows that resilience initiatives is a double-edged sword, and social media remains a battlefield that can have positive and negative consequences. This was expressed by an interviewee, ‘There is one initiative where people can check their past activities on Telegram, and it tells people how to purge their history of actions from back till 2020. But there were controversial comments that it could be used by the authorities as well. [...] It is still evolving but it’s a good sign that these grassroots online initiatives emerged to help people not to be arrested or otherwise persecuted. It is good, but it always has two sides. These tools are unfortunately also used to target and track people’

All of the previously discussed initiatives show that administrators and users try to fight back against digital authoritarianism through the use of innovative tools (Feldstein, 2021b). Nevertheless, the safety measures that are taken largely include ways to anonymize oneself, or to provide information from within Belarus more safely to independent media or human rights organizations. Thereby it largely weapons citizens to continue ‘information activism’ (Halupka, 2016), by making additional efforts such as foreign sim cards, VPN’s and deleting search history (Roberts, 2020). However, it demonstrates the difficulty to weapon individuals who want to build horizontal connections, interact in more grassroots initiatives. Anonymization has become necessary for safety reasons nowadays, but the cornerstone of such grassroots initiatives is trust and unity (Nikolayenko, 2022). This means that only more professional organizations, that have the resources to flee the country, and that are based on one-way forms of communication have managed to stay active. This creates a more nationwide Telegram, rather than a grassroots, horizontal platform in which literally and figuratively

speaking distance is widening. This seems to have made the mobilization on Telegram nowadays more traditionally structured than in 2020, ran by organized groups and clear leadership. ‘Connective action’, the form of protests that is enabled through social media, in which individuals are loosely connected, decentralized and self-organized (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), has largely disappeared.

A minor exception to the disappearance of decentralized and self-organized groups, is the activity of some smaller, private, underground groups, or in one-on-one conversations there is still some ‘political’ activity besides reading and spreading news. This was expressed by interviewees, ‘People are still helping families of political prisoners financially, but this is happening in private on Telegram, but no longer publicly as before’, ‘There are also some private, underground language groups through which people learn Belarusian, and people are still communicating and active there’.

#### *4.4.2. Resilience of private entities: Telegram*

As Feldstein has identified three stakeholders, of which private sector entities are one, in this part we analyse how Telegram has shown resilience against digital authoritarianism (Feldstein, 2021a). The Belarusian authorities have started monitoring, manipulating and restricting access to Telegram, but simultaneously Telegram has sided with the Belarusian protesters, and has updated features to increase the safety of its users on the platform. In the beginning of the 2020 protests, Telegram changed some of its policies and upgraded features in favour of the protesters. A tweet on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2020 by Pavel Durov revealed that Telegram enabled its anti-censorship tools to remain accessible in Belarus (Durov, 2020) and showed its political alignment with the protesters by making the Belarusian language available on the platform a few days after the protests started (*В Telegram Официально Появилась Возможность Выбрать Белорусский Язык*, 2020). Moreover, the historic white-red-white Belarusian flag which became the symbol of the protests, was introduced as a sticker (*Telegram поменял эмодзи с флагом Беларуси*, 2020). Besides Telegram’s owner statements and symbolic gestures, more important are its updated features making the platform safer to use for activists. This fact that Telegram showed resilience was addressed by an interviewee, ‘Telegram upgraded some features during the protests that the users demanded’. The updates that were made included the option for group administrators to post messages with the groups’ name and photo rather than their personal one (‘Анонимные админы.’, 2021) hiding the lists of participants to everyone in the group except for the

administrator (Mironenko, 2022), and the possibility to prohibit the forwarding of messages, or taking screenshots (*Владельцы Telegram-Каналов Смогут Запрещать Скриншоты и Пересылку Сообщений - Ведомости*, 2021).

Moreover, Telegram has blocked multiple popular Belarusian progovernment channels since the protests in 2020, some after the requests of human rights organizations. One of the channels that has been deleted multiple times are those of the GUBOPiK, the Main Department for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption in Belarus. Their channels are posting confession videos of political prisoners, and after the channels are being blocked new ones keep arising (*Telegram Deletes GUBOPiK Channel*, 2022). This was highlighted by an interviewee, ‘Telegram has deleted channels of propagandists, but they keep creating new channels again. There is a lot of money going to all of these channels from the authorities. Telegram is deleting them, but I don’t know if it’s enough. Especially since new channels are constantly created’, ‘Some [pro-government] pages are sometimes deleted, but it takes time, there is no strict policy, and new pages are created to share this content.’

Even though Telegram’s updates did help the protesters, and the study of Wijermars & Lokot (2022) that found Belarusians perceive Telegram an ally in their struggle against pervasive repressions and digital censorship, a more critical approach to Telegram’s actorness has been taken. A lack of policy was addressed as content is only sporadically deleted, people and the motives of Telegram for their support are unclear to the interviewed administrators. Most importantly, many Telegram users are still being identified by security services for their actions in 2020, and this creates the idea that Telegram could do more to protect its users in Belarus. This was addressed by an interviewee, ‘From what I know, security services can still track and identify the actions of people from a couple of years ago, it looks like they could do more. Maybe it would be good if Telegram would offer opportunities to delete messages [...] I believe that it should do more to protect people in repressive environments in Iran, in Russia.’ Another interviewee addressed the problem that deleting your account on Telegram does not automatically delete all the sent messages, ‘It is much easier to close an account on YouTube than on Telegram because the owner of Telegram believes in freedom of speech, in an American, absolute, way. Telegram did show some support in the beginning. They tweaked some setting to overcome the blocking as a sign of support. But maybe it just a matter of wanting a larger audience, and not because they are for democracy. But it did help.’

In a way, this shows how Telegram has to an extent is succumbing to its own success. Due to Telegram having such a central role in the protests in 2020, many digital authoritarian tools used were specifically targeting Telegram and this has in turn completely transformed

the platform. In the interviews, the administrators of independent media channels addressed that they have expanded their online activities to TikTok, which has gained popularity in Belarus and is rapidly politicizing (Goldstein, 2022). This shows that a form of resilience of organizations is also to move towards other platforms that are less exposed to digital authoritarianism, and are entertainment platforms without such strong politicization.

#### *4.4.3. Political platform and only place for mobilization*

In the beginning of the protests, the interviewees mentioned that Telegram was a platform attracting users who were previously not interested in politics and it brought an audience from various social and political position together. However, the labelling of Telegram channels and groups as ‘extremist’ by the authorities and the increased fear that comes with the use of the platform nowadays, has turned it increasingly political and has mostly left a politically engaged audience on Telegram. The new ‘extremist’ legislation imposed by the authorities has therefore polarized the platform. This was addressed by the interviewees, ‘Telegram is now the key messenger for people with a political stance and who have a political opinion to share. [...] Other messengers are more often used for daily communication without the political element’, ‘It [Telegram] is still the most political platform, still up till now. But you should care before you start reading content on Telegram or even write to friends on Telegram as people know people are being watched’. The pro-regime propaganda and hate speech nowadays, has even polarized Telegram further. The absence of this broader and larger audience, the lack of deepened engagement and breaking of horizontal ties has cut down much of the potential for political mobilization. In a way, two information bubbles have been created, a pro-democracy and a pro-regime one.

The digital authoritarian practices have proved successful as organizations have adapted their content depending on the social media platform. This was expressed by an interviewee, ‘Besides having a Telegram channel we also have an Instagram and Facebook account under a different name, which is not labelled ‘extremist’. On Instagram we largely devote attention to the Belarusian culture and language. We distribute different information on different platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, with Telegram containing the most political information of all of them.’ This has led surveillance and repression of the authorities to be more targeted, lowering the political costs of digital authoritarianism. The authorities have improved and customized their toolbox, contradicting the ‘dictator’s dilemma’ (Morozov, 2011a).

Despite Telegram losing its role in political mobilization efforts, Telegram has remained an important place for the dissemination of independent news. Digital platforms remain the only accessible way to engage with citizens who want changes as almost all political and civil actors have been silenced or expelled. In the current conditions, any chance for democratic resistance was expressed to occur in the online space. An interviewee mentioned, ‘Maybe some mobilization will be online, offline is completely unrealistic. Online is the space where this can happen. [...] As you can be relatively anonymous, you can access information, people, decision-makers, leaders without seeing them physically which is convenient.’ It was expressed by an interviewee that once an event occurs, a momentum arises, people will join Telegram again, ‘People are joining Telegram again when things are happening, for example with the landing of the [Ryanair] plane [in which Roman Protasevich, owner of the NEXTA channel was arrested], and there was also a huge spike during the start of the war in Ukraine’.

In January 2023 there were 4.3 million social media users in Belarus, which represents 45% of the population (*Digital 2023*, 2023) and its internet penetration rate even reaching 82%, one of the highest in Central and Eastern Europe (*Mobile Internet Reach in CEE Region 2022*). Earlier studies showed that authoritarian countries with high internet access, social media and digital platforms are serving as spaces to freely express political opinions, and to mobilize for civil and political resistance (Shirky, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). The sentiment expressed by the interviewees that the online space is the only space left for mobilization in Belarus, therefore fully corresponds with Rudnik’s (2023) observation that in authoritarian regimes with high Internet penetration technology is the only available tool for mobilization.

## 5. Conclusion

Following the large-scale Belarus protests in 2020, there was widespread academic interest for the role of Telegram in protest mobilization and coordination in the country. However, existing literature primarily focused on the active mobilization phase, neglecting a comprehensive analysis beyond 2020. Especially after 2020, authoritarian practices increased in the offline sphere and were expected to have targeted the online sphere and Telegram in particular.

The first sub-question of this thesis aims to answer which digital authoritarian practices are used in the Telegram sphere, and found that in the timespan of this study the digital authoritarian tools used on Telegram by the Belarusian authorities have seen a complete transformation. In 2020 Telegram has been underestimated as a power for political mobilization, partially due to its newness which can be an advantage for social media platforms in repressive contexts (Boulianne & Lee, 2022). The authorities understood how Telegram could be used to create horizontal links between potential protesters. In order to cut down horizontal communication, a transition of digital authoritarian tools has occurred within the timeframe of this study from largely friction-based, first-generation tools in the active protest phase to more targeted second- and third-generation internet controls. Its legal framework has seen a complete revision and the authorities have intensified their presence with disinformation and propaganda. These practices have been used alongside more traditional repressive levers, proving how digital authoritarianism and physical authoritarianism are intrinsically linked. Contrary to earlier literature that reprisals are mostly enacted on journalists and activists (Roberts, 2020), regular citizens in Belarus have been affected too. This has led to intimidation, self-censorship, anonymization (Polyokova & Meserole, 2019) which complicates horizontal communication. Through the use of more targeted second- and third- generation tools of digital authoritarian the chances for political mobilization on Telegram have lessened. This proves the potential for dictators to improve and customize their repression (Morozov, 2011a) and opposes the dictator's dilemma (Howard et al., 2011; Saleh, 2012).

The second sub-question answers how these digital authoritarian practices have impacted the Telegram sphere. Telegram transformed from a mobilizing, coordinating platform that facilitated horizontal ties, into a news aggregator. This rather passive, and single-way of communication prohibits the development of a participatory culture and horizontal connections (Wall & Zahed, 2015). Instead Telegram has become a platform for

‘information activism’ in which people consume, aggregate and distribute information (Halupka, 2016). Even though the platform’s functionality has shifted, it still fulfils an influential role as accessing independent information in the long term is essential for political and social change, and increases the chances that people will be mobilized (Shirky, 2009). Nevertheless, even accessing or sharing independent information nowadays demands additional efforts and risks, which no longer everyone is willing to invest (Roberts, 2020). The increased barriers and dangers have impacted the reach of ‘extremist’ channels and decreased the amount of ‘information activists’. The decrease in ‘information activism’ and more broadly the depoliticization of a part of the Belarusian population, is problematizing the potential for future political mobilization.

The third- and last sub-question answers in which way resilience has been demonstrated in response to the challenges posed by digital authoritarianism. The interviews showed that civil society groups and political activists have many innovative tools, ideas and strategies to fight back against digital authoritarianism (Feldstein, 2021b), but most resilience weaponizes citizens in anonymizing oneself, or helps people to read or provide independent news more safely. As a result, it largely support citizens to continue ‘information activism’ (Halupka, 2016). It proves how complicate it is to protect citizens while still being able to build horizontal connections, as anonymization is one of the pillars to safety but simultaneously ineffective for horizontal communication (Nikolayenko, 2022). As Telegram and its opportunity for horizontal connections, played such an important role in the protests of 2020, the new digital authoritarian practices were targeting Telegram and these horizontal ties specifically. As a result, to an extent Telegram has succumbed to its own success. One of the forms of resilience shown by organizations, is to move to other and potentially newer platforms that are at least for now, less exposed to digital authoritarianism.

Overall, digital authoritarianism has severely impacted political mobilization in Belarus between August 2020 until September 2023. Telegram was a platform bringing an audience together from various social and political positions, even those previously uninterested in politics. Horizontal connections were formed, protests were coordinated here, grassroots initiatives erupted and citizens were self-organizing. However, the second- and third generation internet controls have cut this opportunity for horizontal connections, which is so crucial for political mobilization safer (Gruzd & Tsyganova, 2015; Lysenko & Desouza, 2012; Shirky, 2011). Telegram has been politicized and polarized due to second- and third-generation tools, and due to fear-based repression many citizens have lost the willingness to bear the additional ‘costs’ that come with accessing Telegram (Roberts, 2018). As such, the

more professional organizations, with clear leadership and that have fled the country, have managed to stay active on Telegram. These structures are more ‘traditional’ and nation-wide compared to the ‘connective action’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) seen in 2020. These organizations’ communication is based on one-way forms of communication and ‘information activism’. Even though ‘information activism’ is important as it can encourage political participation and mobilization (Halupka, 2016), this study demonstrates how the use of digital authoritarianism on Telegram has been successful in cutting down opportunities for political mobilization in Belarus. Nevertheless, the online space remains more free than offline and therefore the only available tool for mobilization in Belarus’ authoritarian context (Rudnik, 2023). As a result, Telegram remains a potential danger to regime stability.

### **5.1. Avenues for future research**

The dynamic nature of online spaces in changing political landscapes, coupled with the increasing adaptability of authoritarian regimes to digital technologies, presents an interesting avenue for extended research on Telegram’s trajectory in Belarus post-2023. A more comprehensive longitudinal study could delve beyond public group chats and channels, exploring the potential migration of discussion to closed chats perceived as safer. Moreover, it would be interesting to see how Telegram, or potentially another social media platform unfolds itself in the case of a new ‘window of opportunity’ in Belarus. Additionally, examining how censorship has influenced information consumption on Telegram post-2020 would be valuable, shedding light on its role as a primary source for independent news, the challenges it encounters, and its efficacy in disseminating uncensored information. This exploration could offer insights into the effects of censorship on ‘information activism’ in authoritarian contexts, considering its impact on people’s mobilization and involvement in collective action (Ruijgrok, 2016).

Furthermore, a comparative study across different authoritarian countries would enhance our understanding of how Telegram’s dynamics vary in diverse contexts. Such research could investigate whether the platform is perceived as an actor supporting democratic resistance (Shirky, 2009), and how it functions as a tool for political mobilization across various geopolitical landscapes.

This study grappled with inherent limitations, with the safety of interviewees being the foremost concern. Relying on interviews with activists who have left Belarus introduced a potential bias, as their experiences may differ from those who remained. The inability to interview ‘normal’ users due to safety constraints emphasizes the importance of interpreting

the findings within this contextual limitation. Moreover, the rapid evolution of the technological landscape raises concerns about the potential for the study to become outdated. Additionally, while the study identified how enhanced and targeted digital authoritarianism changed Telegram and has limited the potential for political mobilization on the platform, other factors, such as news fatigue and the absence of a window of opportunity, may also have played a role in these changes. Acknowledging these constraints, this study offers a modest contribution to understanding the more prolonged development and role of social media after the active protests phase, illustrating how these dynamics can undergo tectonic shifts. Moreover, it addresses how the potential that social media offers for ‘connective action’ and horizontal ties can be affected by digital authoritarianism.

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## Appendix 1. Interview guide

### 1. Introduction

- Greeting the interviewee and explaining the purpose and objective of the interview
- Mentioning the recording, how data is stored and who will have access to it
- Ensuring the interviewee's consent to proceed with the interview

### 2. Digital landscape in Belarus

- How do you think Telegram changed things in Belarus?
- Has the use of Telegram in Belarus changed since August 2020?

### 3. Channels

- What type of content is mostly shared on your channel?
- How do you assess the impact and reach of your channel?

### 4. Role of Telegram in Mobilization

- What role does Telegram have in Belarusian society?
- Is Telegram nowadays still playing a role in mobilization, organization or in the dissemination of information?

### 5. Digital authoritarianism

- Have you faced any censorship or restrictions imposed on your channel?
- Did your organization change the content on Telegram over time?
- How do the Belarusian authorities target activists on Telegram?

### 6. Resilience

- Have Telegram channels or administrators implement safety measures since 2020?
- Has Telegram improved any features to make it safer?
- Have people been resilient, and came up with solutions or creative ideas to withstand or counter these digital authoritarian practices to remain active on Telegram?

### 7. Future of Telegram in Belarus?

- Looking ahead, how do you envision the role of Telegram evolving in the Belarusian media and political landscape, considering the ongoing challenges?

### 8. Conclusion

- Summarizing key points
- Is there anything you would like to add?
- Thanking the interviewee for their time and participation
- Reiterating the confidentiality of the interview and next steps