

# SOCIAL NETWORKS AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

by Joseph Siegle

## Transitions without social networks

Belarus rarely comes to mind when one thinks of pioneers in the global democracy movement. Yet as the Soviet Union drifted toward dissolution, Belarus was poised to emerge as one of Eastern Europe's first democratic states. Opposition political parties had formed in the late 1980s under *glasnost* and had begun challenging the ruling Belarusian Communist Party. After Communist Party leaders were discredited and forced to resign for supporting the failed *putsch* in Moscow in August 1991, opposition leader Stanislav Shushkevich was elected president of the parliament and head of state in September. He proceeded to lead Belarus on a path of political openness, respect for civil liberties, and market-oriented economic reform.

As with other post-socialist transitions, Belarus endured a sharp economic contraction, steep inflation, and botched privatization. The former Communist Party capitalized on popular grievances to charge the Shushkevich government with corruption and agitate for closer ties to Moscow. Lacking a unified democratic coalition and cohesive civil society networks that could counter this rearguard action, Shushkevich was politically isolated and forced from office in January 1994. Six months later, Alexander Lukashenko was elected president. He reinstated price controls, renationalized key segments of the economy, shuttered independent newspapers, and overrode separations of power established for the parliament and Central Bank. Domestic intelligence agencies were reconstituted and civil liberties repressed. Two badly flawed presidential elections later, social networks remain fragmented and Lukashenko—widely regarded as “Europe’s last dictator”—retains power to this day.

## “Colored revolutions”: the promise and shortcomings of nascent social networks

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, democracy advocates in Georgia, Serbia, Ukraine, and to a lesser extent Kyrgyzstan invested considerable effort developing *networks* for political reform, drawing on the experience and support of established democracies. Building in part on the lessons of the successful resistance to the Communist regime in East Germany—which culminated in the collapse of the Berlin Wall—these networks relied on principles and techniques of nonviolent protest popularized by the “Clausewitz of nonviolent warfare,” Gene Sharp. Organizationally, these movements reflected a network-centric approach that eschewed centralized structures and offered a tactical flexibility and maneuverability that helped cope with attempts to repress activities.

The prototype of these opposition networks was Otpor, which played a key role in the “Bulldozer Revolution” that brought about the downfall of Slobodan Milošević’s regime in Serbia on October 5, 2000. Otpor, a group of reform-minded young people, claimed 100,000 registered members. Western support ranged from the strategic (internal organization and communications structure) to the mundane (cans of spray paint). While Serbia’s 2000 revolution was not “colored” (it claimed the moniker of the Bulldozer Revolution after one of the more memorable episodes from a day-long protest in which bulldozer operator Ljubisav Đokić, nicknamed Joe, fired up his engine and charged the building of Serbia’s state television), it offered a new, effective approach to organizing democratic resistance. In the years that followed, similar scenarios played out in Georgia (Kmara, the Rose Revolution), Ukraine (Pora, the Orange

Revolution) and Kyrgyzstan (KelKel, the Tulip Revolution).

The democratic road is frequently a rocky one, though, especially in places where democratic norms and civil society networks are still emerging. The aftermaths to the colored revolutions have been no exception. The assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in March 2003 by an unrepentant gunman with ties to the Milošević regime dealt a serious setback to the reform process in Serbia. In Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili, after winning 96 percent of the presidential vote in 2004 following the Rose Revolution, embarked on vigorous reforms. But the pace soon slackened. By November 2007, tens of thousands of protesters had gathered in central Tbilisi to demand his resignation. He responded with tear gas, a state of emergency, and a media blackout. In Ukraine, the two most prominent leaders and former allies of the Orange Revolution have been locked in an increasingly acrimonious battle for power that has helped fuel a resurgent Communist Party. Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution served notice to Central Asia's leaders that change was in the air, but early enthusiasm soon gave way to political infighting.

### **Solidarność: the power of a resilient social network**

Poland's experience reflects another perspective from the spectrum of democratic transitions. In response to the crushing of workers' strikes in 1976, opponents of Communist Party rule established the Workers' Defense Committee to help those repressed by the government.<sup>1</sup> To advance this effort, an underground press was created, helping to carve out the first independent public space of the modern Polish era. This precedent inspired the formation of other independent organizations, with highly differentiated agendas

and geographic coverage. Citizen participation and engagement grew steadily—resulting in an array of political and economic networks that helped organize the population and pressure the government for reform. It was from this backdrop that the Solidarity movement emerged and was officially recognized in 1980.

Intent on reversing this new independent force, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, leader of the military government, declared martial law in December 1981. Thousands were arrested and an estimated 100 people were killed. A curfew was instituted, independent organizations were banned, and media and educational institutions were closed or censored. On the face of it, Jaruzelski's gambit had paid off: Solidarity was banned and could no longer play an official role.

Yet Poland's invigorated civil society networks did not wilt. Instead, they continued their struggle for independence by maintaining a broad underground movement. While the government controlled the official sphere, Solidarity remained the legitimate voice of most Poles. This stalemate continued until 1988, when deteriorating economic conditions—coupled with the opening presented by *glasnost*—led the government to compromise with Solidarity and avoid renewed working class unrest. As part of the deal, Solidarity and other independent movements were relegalized, opposition parties were able to contest some seats in upcoming parliamentary elections, and civil society was allowed to operate freely. The decisive triumph of independent candidates in June 1989 led to a Solidarity-led coalition government and the establishment of parliamentary democracy. Four presidential elections later, Poland has doubled its per capita income and is a member in good standing in the European Union and NATO.

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed background of Poland's transition, see Michael Bernhard (1993).

## Social networks in transition

There are many reasons why some countries experience smoother democratic transitions than others. However, as the experiences outlined above illustrate, one important distinguishing feature is quality of social networks. These networks provide the resilient institutional sinew that holds a reform movement together through the challenges and pushback that inevitably are encountered. Indeed, the relative depth of formal and informal social networks is demonstrably instrumental in the relatively successful democratic transitions of the Baltic states, Benin, Chile, Mongolia, South Africa, and Central Europe more generally. By contrast, the comparative scarcity of robust social networks is one of the factors underlying the faltering experiences of Armenia, Ecuador, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Pakistan, Russia, and Central Asia, among others.

And pushback is a common feature of democratic transitions. Fifty-five percent of all contemporary democratizers have experienced at least one episode of backsliding. A third of these revert, at least temporarily, to autocracy—and the associated higher probabilities of conflict, underdevelopment, and humanitarian crisis.<sup>2</sup> While the process of political transformation is inevitably bumpy, understanding the factors that contribute to more successful democratic transitions can help reduce significant hardship. Understanding how to cultivate resilient social networks in countries with an authoritarian past (or present) is therefore a top priority.

## Why democratic networks matter

### *Networks help overcome collective action challenges*

An early hurdle democratic reformers face is overcoming the “challenge of collective action.” In autocracies, a small minority monopolizes the key levers of influence—the military, media, financial

resources of the state, and key party posts—to the detriment of the majority. The imbalance persists because those that benefit are small in number, easy to organize, and clear about what they would lose by a more inclusive governing structure. In contrast, the disadvantaged majority is geographically dispersed, difficult to organize, and poorly informed. Moreover, individuals face real risks in bucking the system, which they must weigh against the uncertain benefits they would realize from greater pluralism. The result is an increasingly entrenched elite minority with ever greater resources to maintain their hold on power. Overcoming this imbalance requires organizing and educating this majority, then mobilizing it for collective action. Establishing networks of associations, civic groups, chambers of commerce, labor unions, and other citizen groups can do just that. Networks build connections among numerous individuals and small groups, greatly accelerating access to information. This information, in turn, empowers individuals by ending their isolation and showing that their grievances are widely shared.

Network-centric citizen groups, especially given the power of “Web 2.0,” can play a major role in building collective action. Such groups connect like-minded people, link the individual to a broader national or global issue, and harness these individual aspirations to a focused plan of action around which the populace can rally. Moreover, exposure to a network’s pluralistic governing structure and the sense of ownership that comes from subscribing to a larger cause are powerful and enduring forces for greater political participation. Networks simultaneously limit the need for centralized direction and allow for maximum flexibility in the pursuit of reforms. In so doing, they spread the risk any one person faces while increasing the resiliency of a reform movement.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, 75 percent of democratizers that experience these reversals regain their democratic trajectory within three years (Halperin, Siegle, and Weinstein 2009).

### ***Social networks build trust***

Democracies rely on trust to a greater extent than do other systems of government. Citizens must have sufficient confidence in the integrity and regularity of an electoral process, for example, if they are to wait until the allotted time on the electoral calendar to replace unresponsive or ineffective leaders through the ballot box. Where these conditions do not hold, citizens grow alienated and disillusioned with the democratic process. Similarly, realizing that they must be perceived as legitimate if they are to govern, democratic leaders rely on citizens to support them when they pursue policies aligned with the interests of the majority and to participate in the civic institutions on which democracy depends. At its core, then, democracy is a series of compacts, based on trust, between citizens and their leaders.

Participation in networks helps build trust. It develops mutually rewarding relationships between individuals—bonds that increase confidence in and commitment to a society. Horizontal networks allow citizens from different geographic areas, ethnic groups, income classes, or political persuasions to come together around shared interests. The cross-group linkages created in this process are enormously important for building a shared national identity. In this way, social networks are the ties that bind a society together. Importantly, not all associations build trust: they may pursue parochial or criminal interests and be organized internally on nondemocratic lines. Examples include the Ku Klux Klan, the mafia, extralegal paramilitary associations, or financial pyramid schemes.

Creating strong societal networks in pre-democratic societies often requires moving past citizen fear of participation and taking initiative. Surveillance and government informants have taught citizens to be wary of what they share. As the writings of Robert Putnam and others have shown, however, (re)building these social networks is critical to long-term societal health and prosperity. Nations with stronger social cohesion tend to be more stable, better off economically,

less susceptible to crime and violence, and subject to lower levels of corruption (Putnam 1993).

### ***Networks ensure accountability***

Networks are not dominated by a single person or group but require buy-in from many individuals and organizations. Power is typically diffused and leadership is subject to checks and balances. Because leaders must secure the approval and support of their constituencies, they have incentives to pursue the collective interest rather than a narrow personal agenda. Accountability, in turn, has a moderating effect on the priorities of a political movement, mitigating tendencies toward radicalism.

Access to information is an indispensable feature of accountability. Information aids transparency and allows individuals to assess how well leaders are doing their jobs. Members of a network are more likely to be well-informed and able to incorporate rapidly evolving developments into their decision making—and adapt accordingly. This suppleness and the relative autonomy of each individual or group in a network make networks ideal organizational structures during times of transition.

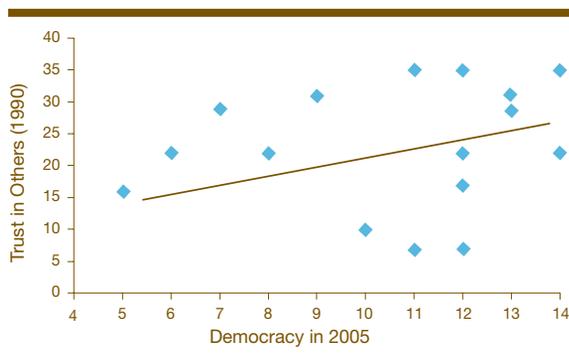
Social networks not only ensure open information flows within a society but also allow members to benefit more readily from the transfer of knowledge, experience, and resources from outside the country. Better access to information helps offset the advantages of the entrenched power structures. Linkages to the outside world also raise awareness of repression—introducing another potentially powerful lever for change. External attention, moreover, constrains the abuses that an autocratic government might want to exert to hold power in the face of an increasingly galvanized opposition. Conversely, ignorance about what is happening in a distant country often blunts concerted international pressure. That is why dictatorships in Zimbabwe and Burma have banned most international visitors, especially the media.

## Some lessons learned

Examining the relationship between the existence of networks and democracy is difficult because of the paucity of comparable cross-national data on associations. Defining associations and accounting for differences among them present vexing challenges. One common proxy for the richness of associational life in a society is degree of trust. Citizens in societies with higher levels of trust are more likely to participate in and join associations of various types. Launched in 1981, the World Values Survey now covers 80 countries and some 80,000 people—capturing information on personal values, attitudes, participation in associations, and trust via some 200 questions. These data allow for an analysis of the relationship between trust and democracy, the latter being defined by the Freedom House democracy index.

The relationship between depth of societal trust and subsequent successful democratization appears reasonably strong (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Controlling for income, democratizing societies that had higher levels of trust in 1990 have attained significantly stronger democracy scores, on average, in 2005. For example, Bulgaria, Mexico, Poland, and South Korea all scored in the top quartile on the rankings for trust in 1990. They each subsequently scored in the top 10 percent

**FIGURE 1. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIETAL TRUST IN DEMOCRATIZERS AND SUBSEQUENT LEVEL OF DEMOCRACY**



Sources: World Values Survey; Freedom House

of the Freedom House index in 2005. Conversely, democratizers such as Brazil, Romania, and Turkey scored below the median on the trust scale in 1990, and rank in a lower democracy tier 15 years later.

This pattern corresponds to the close links between the richness of associational life and the quality and durability of democracy across provincial governments in Italy famously documented by Robert Putnam. Controlling for income, citizens in northern Italy have tended to participate in voluntary membership organizations at much higher rates than citizens in southern Italy. These organizations were typically recreational and cultural groups, such as soccer clubs, choral societies, hiking clubs, literary circles, and Lions Clubs. Communities with higher association participation also had higher rates of newspaper readership—another indicator of information access and engagement in community affairs. The institutional performance of regional governments in provinces with a richer associational life was far superior—as defined by greater stability among cabinet ministers, more timely approvals of annual budgets, and more extensive and responsive service delivery in day care centers, health clinics, or agricultural loans. Associational density was a far better predictor of institutional performance than other commonly cited explanations for good governance such as social stability, education, urbanization, personnel stability, or political party. Citizens in northern provinces were also far more satisfied with their local governments; they had more direct contact with their local government representative and these discussions tended to focus on issues of public interest rather than on requests for personal help (for licenses, jobs, and so on).

Contacts between politicians and citizens in southern Italy, in contrast, tended to be more typical of client-patron relationships. Predictably, citizens in less associationally rich communi-

<sup>3</sup> Democracy is measured using the Freedom House *Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*. The Freedom House index generates an annual rating between 2 and 14 for every country in the world.

ties reported feeling more exploited, alienated, dependent, and powerless than their compatriots elsewhere.

The notion that societies with better integrated social networks generate superior economic outcomes is supported in other research. In a study of 121 rural water projects, Deepa Narayan found that villages in which inhabitants, on average, participated in two or more associations had far higher project performance—as well as lower levels of infant mortality, better childhood school attendance, and higher per capita income levels (Narayan 2002, 1997). Similarly, a study of the effective management of smallholder agricultural irrigation schemes—a notoriously difficult coordination challenge often involving hundreds of disparate households with incentives for diversions and free ridership—found that strength of associations is the most critical element to their success and sustainability (Ostrom 1997). Associations that set out clear rules for coordination—allocating benefits and responsibility for paying costs—and credibly commit members to a sequence of future actions are far more productive. Crafting associational rules that create incentives for reciprocity ensures ongoing investments in social capital and favors the durability of the irrigation scheme.

### Implications

Countries embarking down the democratic path do not begin from the same starting point. Nations with crosscutting social networks are much better placed to quickly exchange information across a large number of people, overcome collective action disadvantages, and adopt institutions of oversight and accountability that will facilitate successful democratic transitions. Understanding the depth of horizontal networks in a society undergoing a transition, accordingly, is a priority for targeting external assistance. In societies that are starting from a strong base of societal cohesion, relatively greater emphasis can be given to strengthening the existing public

institutions. In societies that lack these networks, a top priority is to create them.

Recognizing that network promotion is a medium- to long-term endeavor and something the society itself must own, external actors can encourage this process via projects that provide incentives for inter-group collaboration and redress practices of societal fragmentation. Initiatives may include national service projects that integrate youth from all segments of society, media expansion and training, social marketing and educational campaigns, external study tours to societies known for their strong social cohesion, leadership training for national leaders and youth inculcating norms of public spiritedness and inclusiveness, coalition building, and development of local chapters of membership organizations, to name a few possibilities.

This review does not suggest that democratization should wait until a society has a dense network of associations. Weak societal networks are frequently the symptom of years of autocratic governance that has purposely restricted independent voices. Societal trust will have a hard time emerging in societies where citizens fear their neighbors may be government informants. In these cases, the focus should be on creating an enabling environment for network development that reformers can seize when democratic openings emerge—as occurred in Poland or in the early days of the colored revolutions. Recognizing that democratization and network development will be iterative in these contexts should also help adjust expectations for what will likely be a long transition, subject to persistent pushback.

Initiatives to stimulate and strengthen societal networks are a strategic investment in pre-democratic societies. These networks represent a valuable resource in themselves, contributing to improved levels of well-being and social harmony. They also build the norms, skills, and organizing capacity that can challenge political monopolies and facilitate more successful democratic transi-

tions. Importantly, membership associations of many types, and not just overtly political organizations, contribute to enhancing information exchange, social organizing, and citizen self-initiative—critical ingredients for reform, particularly in societies where political activities are prohibited and the democratic process is starting from a very low point. Building social networks is also relevant for societies starting down the democratic path without a deep tradition of associational life, since these societies are more likely to experience backtracking. Investing in social networks in these contexts expands opportunities for successful democratic transitions in the short term and, perhaps more critically, for sustaining them over the long term.

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