Critical, co-opted, coerced?
Non-state actor responses to autocratization in the International Labor Organization

Maria Debre, Zeppelin University
Faradj Koliev, Stockholm University

The International Labor Organization (ILO) stands out in its institutional design by granting equal decision-making power to representatives from workers' unions, employer organizations, and governments. While non-state actors are independent and empowered on paper, this article examines the extent to which they can exercise their power in practice, particularly in addressing state non-compliance with fundamental labor conventions. Specifically, it explores whether unions and employer organizations alter their behavior in response to the autocratization of target states, and under what conditions they choose to punish non-compliance or accommodate these states. The analysis draws on an original dataset of complaints lodged against governments in the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) by unions, employer organizations, and international union federations. We find a differential effect depending on regime type and type of convention: while democratic backsliding increases the likelihood of complaints by unions, autocratic consolidation decreases the likelihood – but only for conventions concerning core freedom rights. In contrast, autocratization does not affect the complaint behavior by employer organizations and international actors, showing the differential effect of autocratization for unions versus employers, but also the limits of a boomerang effect. Thereby, this study contributes to our understanding of the power of non-state actors to exercise important oversight functions in IOs in the face of rising authoritarianism.

Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, numbers and influence of civil society organizations (CSOs) rose exponentially in the wake of the global democracy promotion agenda (Dietrich 2013; Murdie 2014; Ottaway and Carothers 2000). CSOs have become indispensable to global governance, playing crucial roles to promote and protect human rights (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Reiners 2021; Risse and Sikkink 1999) for instance by acting as watchdogs over norm violations (Murdie and Peksen 2013; Smidt et al. 2021). Many international organizations (IOs) have therefore expanded formal access rights for non-state actors, recognizing the potential of civil society to enhance effectiveness, accountability, and legitimacy of global governance (Sommerer and Tallberg 2017; Tallberg et al. 2013). The International Labour Organization (ILO) is an exceptional and early representation of this trend through its unique tripartite structure. This grants unions and employer organizations not only access and consultation rights, but equal decision-making power alongside governments. Designed to ensure deep and broad participation, this structure is intended to empower non-state actors as key stakeholders in shaping international labor standards and monitoring state compliance.

However, CSOs are increasingly confronted with a shrinking civic space, facing restrictions on their ability to organize, operate, and mobilize (Chaudhry 2022; Dupuy et al. 2021). According to V-Dem data (Papada et al. 2023), over the past decade, the number of countries significantly restricting civil society participation has increased more rapidly than any other indicator of democratic decline, making the shrinking civic space a defining feature of the third wave of autocracy (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Autocratizing states have passed restrictive NGO laws, criminalized independent union activities, and suppressed strikes through legal and extralegal means (Brechenmacher and Carothers 2019; Rutzen 2015). For example, in Hungary, the Orban government has curtailed the right to strike and made fundamental changes to labor laws[1], while in Turkey under Erdogan, independent unions have faced systematic repression including arrests of labor activists.[2] Under the Trump administration, labor advocates charge that the government has pursued an unprecedented assault on union rights, voiding federal union contracts, stripping collective bargaining rights for one million federal

[1] https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/11/orban-hungarys-new-slave-law-risks-first-general-strike-since-fall-of-communism.html
[2] https://www.ituc-csi.org/turkiye

workers, firing the head of the National Labor Relations Board, and rolling back worker protections – all while branding itself as pro-worker.[3]

Research on the shrinking civic space has mostly focused on how authoritarian regimes suppress civil society at home. However, far less is known about how these restrictions affect civil society's work in IOs. When civic actors face domestic repression, they may adjust their strategies in international settings. In some cases, this may mean retreating from confrontational tactics such as naming and shaming or relying on transnational advocacy networks, especially when these strategies offer diminishing leverage under authoritarian conditions (Pallas and Bloodgood 2022; Bob 2005; Cloward 2016). In other cases, this might mean a more confrontational stance in IOs in an attempt to put pressure on governments from above (Henry and Sundstrom 2021). To understand how processes of autocratization affect civil society's role in IOs, we ask: Can non-state actors in international organizations continue their monitoring function when member states autocratize?

To address these questions, this article examines how unions in the ILO respond to autocratization among its member states. We assess the extent to which they remain critical actors and continue to exercise their monitoring functions to hold states accountable – or whether there are signs that they are co-opted or coerced by their governments, or replaced in their oversights functions by other actors. We focus particularly on unions as a category of civil society actors with major mobilization potential and thus as an existential threat to autocratic governments. However, we also include employer organizations and international union federations in our analysis. We analyze union engagement in the ILO, particularly the filing of complaints (so-called observations) in the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR). We draw on a newly compiled dataset covering the time 1994–2023 from the ILO's NORMLEX database. This mechanism offers a rare institutionalized channel through which domestic civil society actors can directly challenge government behavior in an international forum, making it a crucial lens for studying union responses to autocratization.

Our analysis yields three key findings. First, we find that autocratization significantly reduces the likelihood that unions file complaints to the ILO, but only in contexts of autocratic consolidation, where autocratization occurs in already authoritarian regimes. This pattern

[3] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/sep/01/labor-day-workers-trump

supports the expectation that unions are less likely to exercise their monitoring role when they are repressed or strategically co-opted by regimes that seek to control civil society. These effects are especially pronounced in the domain of core labor rights, such as freedom of association and collective bargaining, which are central to union autonomy and thus often the main targets of authoritarian interference.

Second, we find that episodes of democratic backsliding in otherwise democratic regimes are associated with a statistically significant increase in union complaints. This suggests that even as democratic norms and institutions begin to erode, unions in democratic contexts are more likely to mobilize international mechanisms to resist domestic restrictions. These findings imply that unions in backsliding democracies retain stronger institutional resources and mobilization capacities than their counterparts in autocratic settings, allowing them to activate international oversight particularly in relation to fundamental conventions.

Finally, our results show no statistically significant effects of autocratization or democratic backsliding on complaints filed by employers or international trade union federations like the IOE or ITUC. This finding contradicts expectations of a boomerang effect which posits that transnational actors such as international NGOs (INGOs) would step in to fill the gap when domestic unions are silenced. Additionally, they also suggest differential vulnerability across national actors. Unions are directly targeted and constrained because independent mobilization and organizing is perceived as a political threat to regime survival. Employer organizations on the other hand might either choose less confrontational routes of engagement, or be less under attack by autocratization governments.

This study makes several important contributions to the literature on civil society participation, IO resilience of and the future of global governance under conditions of autocratization. First, it moves beyond debates on CSO access, examining the consequences of shrinking civic space for non-state actor agency and participation in IOs (Hanegraaff et al. 2020; Tallberg et al. 2013; Vikberg 2023). Second, it contributes to research on IO resilience, assessing whether CSOs can continue to exercise oversight functions in the face of political pressures from autocratic member states (Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Debre and Sommerer 2025; Gray 2018; Ikenberry 2018). Finally, it provides new empirical insights using novel data on union behavior in the ILO from 1970 to 2023. The findings have significant implications for ongoing debates about the role of civil society in international politics (Dellmuth and Bloodgood 2023; Hall et al. 2025; Pallas and Bloodgood 2022). As IOs increasingly include autocratizing member states,

understanding whether and how CSOs maintain their oversight role is crucial for assessing the future of global governance in an era of rising authoritarianism (Cottiero et al. 2025; Debre 2025).

Union Responses to Domestic Autocratization

In the context of the ILO, unions have historically played a pivotal role in upholding labor standards and advocating for workers' rights, and to thereby hold states accountable to the commitments made in ILO conventions under the unique tripartite structure. This framework grants unions and employer organizations not only formal voting power alongside governments in the International Labour Conference but also the right to submit observations and complaints to expert committees such as the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), and to sanction non-compliant behavior in the Conference Committee on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CAS), thereby directly challenging governments' self-reporting and exposing non-compliance with international labor standards. In doing so, they fulfill an important oversight function, scrutinizing, evaluating, and shaming governments for failures to uphold their obligations under ILO conventions. By enabling non-state actors to provide input and monitoring to expert bodies who review and publicize governments' conduct, unions and employer organizations thereby fulfill an important participatory and delegation-based accountability function in IOs (Grant and Keohane 2005). In consequence, unions and employer organizations are crucial to achieve more accountable and legitimate global governance outcomes (Scholte 2011; Steffek 2010; Tallberg and Uhlin 2011).

However, the rise of autocratization in member states presents significant challenges to the traditional functions of these unions within the ILO's tripartite framework. We understand autocratization as a significant and sustained movement away from liberal democracy, encompassing transitions across a continuum of regime types (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). This definition allows us to capture the gradual and often incremental erosion of democratic institutions and practices which characterizes many post–Cold War cases of democratic decline. The question of conceptualizing and measuring autocratization remains at the center of vibrant scholarly debate. Some scholars argue that it overlooks more subtle qualitative transformations, calling for more context-sensitive or actor-centered analyses (Cassani and Tomini 2020; Tomini 2021). Others have raised concerns about the validity of expert-coded indices like V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI), which are central to most large-N

studies of backsliding. For instance, Little and Meng (2023; 2024) warn that subjective assessments may overstate global backsliding trends, since more objective indicators such as electoral turnover or political violence show the health and continuing resilience of democracy around the globe.

While we acknowledge concerns about the subjectivity of expert-coded measurements, we argue that much of this critique overstates the limitations of such datasets. Indeed, objective indicators focused on institutional presence or formal rule changes often fail to detect the more subtle and gradual transformations that characterize recent episodes of democratic decline. As highlighted in a recent special issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics* (2024), contemporary autocratization is not marked by sudden institutional ruptures but by the incremental erosion of democratic norms and practices (e.g., Knutsen et al. 2024; see also: Bermeo 2016; Boese et al. 2022). Precisely because these shifts are diffuse and difficult to capture with formal institutional data alone, we maintain that expert-based measures remain indispensable for identifying patterns of autocratization that are central to our theoretical and empirical analysis.

This section explores theoretical perspectives on how unions from autocratizing states may adapt their behaviors, particularly concerning their participation in the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), the committee where unions can lodge complaints – so-called observations – against non-compliant governments. To theorize the effects of autocratization on union behavior in the ILO, we build on three distinct but interrelated theoretical perspectives: rational institutionalist approaches on formal IO access rights, domestic politics perspectives on the shrinking civic space and comparative autocracy research, and constructivist approach on transnational advocacy and the boomerang effect.

According to rational institutionalist perspectives, IOs provide platforms that empower non-state actors to influence global governance independently of their domestic governments by formalizing access and participation rights (Abbott and Snidal 1998; Goldstein et al. 2000; Tallberg et al. 2013). The ILO is a particularly strong case of institutionalized access and participation rights for unions and employer organizations. Its tripartite structure gives non-governmental actors formal and meaningful participation rights in both deliberation and decision-making. According to Article 3 of the ILO Convention, governments must select their worker and employer delegates from the most representative organizations, and the ILC Credentials Committee ensures compliance with these rules. In principle, this structure enables

unions to act independently of government preferences, including in processes of norm enforcement and compliance monitoring such as the CEACR.

Moreover, scholarship on labor movements under authoritarian rule shows that unions may retain unique mobilizational capacity, especially where other forms of civil society are banned or repressed. Under this view, unions can remain critical actors in IOs and continue or even increase their monitoring function, even when nominated by autocratizing governments. In fact, Russian and Chinese NGOs continued to attend annual COP summits to pressure their governments on climate issues from above, even though they face systematic repression at home (Henry 2021; Henry and Plantan 2022). Under this view, unions remain critical actors that may even increase monitoring of their governments in IOs, even when nominated by autocratizing governments. We can therefore formulate the first hypothesis:

H1 (Autonomy Hypothesis): Unions become more likely to exercise their rights as monitoring actors in the ILO in response to autocratization of their nominating government.

A second set of expectations stems from comparative politics research on shrinking civic space and civil society co-optation under autocracy. Authoritarian and autocratizing regimes often exhibit a dual character of de jure pluralism and de facto repression. While allowing for formal associational life, such regimes impose increasingly restrictive constraints on independent NGOs – collectively discussed as shrinking civic space (Brechenmacher and Carothers 2019; Buyse 2018). These include legal restrictions such as strict funding and registration laws (Dupuy et al. 2016; Glasius et al. 2020; Rutzen 2015), defamation and libel suits (Sim 2011), expanded internet surveillance (Gohdes 2020; Parkinson et al. 2019), and even state-sponsored violence and repression (Bakke et al. 2020; Chaudhry 2022).

Under such contexts, NGOs including unions may be structurally dependent on state resources or legal privileges such as recognition of collective bargaining rights or the right to strike, which makes them vulnerable to subtle forms of co-optation and pressure. Studies of NGO adaptation have shown that civil society actors may adjust their advocacy strategies under these conditions by adopting more conciliatory discourses, avoiding overt criticism, or engaging in self-censorship to preserve legal status and operational capacity (Hall et al. 2025; Pallas and Bloodgood 2022).

Moreover, autocratizing states often pursue strategies of capture. One prominent method is the creation and support of government-organized NGOs (so-called GONGOs), which simulate civil society participation while ensuring alignment with regime interests. The proliferation of GONGOs was already noted in the 2000s when authoritarian regimes responded to increasing international and domestic pressure to democratize (Naim 2009). Instead of allowing independent civil society more liberty, autocrats instead employed a mock compliance strategy by infiltrating civic space with co-opted and controlled organizations to put up a façade of liberalization (Carapico 2000; Doyle 2017; Lewis 2013; Spires 2011).

As a consequence, these facts may manifest in union representatives refraining from submitting complaints to oversight bodies or using their platform to affirm government positions in IOs. Alternatively, state may also aim to nominate unions with government-aligned positions that are less likely to execute monitoring functions. We can therefore formulate the second hypothesis:

H2 (Co-optation Hypothesis): Unions become less likely to exercise their rights as monitoring actors in the ILO in response to autocratization of their nominating government.

Severe autocratization may not only lead to co-optation but to the complete silencing of independent union voices. As regimes intensify repression—through mass arrests, banning of organizations, or violent crackdowns—unions may be unable or unwilling to participate in international forums like the ILO. Withdrawal or abstention from ILO activities may reflect a broader strategy of enforced disengagement by repressive governments or preemptive self-preservation by union actors. Constructivist approaches, particularly the boomerang model, offer a lens through which to understand potential compensatory mechanisms. Keck and Sikkink (1998) argue that when domestic activists are blocked by their governments, they can appeal to transnational advocacy networks (TANs) or International NGOs (INGOs) to amplify their demands and exert external pressure. In the labor context, transnational organizations like the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) or unions from democratic member states may act on behalf of silenced domestic unions by submitting complaints or raising violations in ILO monitoring bodies

Accordingly, we can formulate a third hypothesis:

H3 (Boomerang Hypothesis): Unions become less likely to exercise their rights as monitoring actors in the ILO in response to autocratization of their nominating governments, while International NGOs (INGOs) become more likely to exercise monitoring rights.

Research Design

We focus on the International Labour Organization (ILO) because it offers a unique opportunity for studying how autocratization affects the link between domestic civil society and international organizations. Unlike most international organizations, the ILO is based on a tripartite structure that formally integrates governments, workers, and employers into its decision-making and supervisory bodies. This institutional design rests on the independence of unions and employer organizations, which are expected to provide an autonomous voice in the making and monitoring of international labor standards. When governments become more authoritarian, this independence is often constrained or undermined, making the ILO a particularly revealing arena for assessing the broader political consequences of autocratization. Our focus on unions is motivated by their historical importance in democratization and their role as core actors in social movements. Trade unions have long been central not only to advancing workers' rights but also to mobilizing for broader political change, including struggles against authoritarian regimes. Employers, while often less studied in political science and international relations, are equally crucial in the ILO's design.

To assess these questions, we rely on a new dataset of complaints- also referred to as "observations" – submitted to the CEACR. The dataset covers a nineteen-year period from 1994 to 2023 and was compiled from the ILO's NORMLEX database.[4] The complaints procedure provides both unions and employers with the opportunity to signal deficiencies in their governments' application of ILO conventions. This right is guaranteed in Article 23 of the ILO Constitution, which obliges member states to transmit their compliance reports not only to the ILO but also to representative unions and employer organizations at the national level (ILO 1919). These organizations are then entitled to submit their own comments, critiques, or "observations." Typically, they stress the practical problems of implementation, such as restrictions on union organizing, discrimination against certain categories of workers, or gaps between legal commitments and workplace realities.

[4] https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:1:0::NO:::

The CEACR, composed of independent legal experts, examines these government reports together with the submissions from unions and employers. This process is an essential pillar of the ILO's supervisory system: it provides a systematic check on governments' often self-serving and incomplete reports. By comparing official compliance claims with ground-level accounts from workers' and employers' organizations, the CEACR can identify discrepancies and highlight areas of concern. In this way, the complaints mechanism not only enhances the credibility of international labor monitoring but also functions as one of the few institutionalized channels through which domestic civil society can directly engage with an international organization.

Since its establishment in 1919, the ILO has adopted more than 190 international labor conventions, of which roughly 150 remain in force. These conventions cover a wide array of issues, ranging from the earliest attempts at global standard-setting on working hours to recent conventions addressing workplace violence and harassment. Among these, the ILO prioritizes a set of fundamental conventions that articulate the most basic principles of international labor rights. The category of fundamental conventions was formally defined in 1998 and initially included eight conventions; in 2022, two occupational safety and health conventions (No. 155 and No. 187) were added. In this study, however, we focus on the original eight conventions because they provide longer temporal coverage and because nearly all ILO member states have ratified them. These eight conventions, illustrated in Figure 1, can be grouped into four broad issue areas: Freedom of association and collective bargaining; elimination of forced labor; elimination of discrimination, and abolition of child labor.

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining
No. 87: Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948
No. 98: Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949

Forced Labor
No. 29: Forced Labour Convention, 1930
No. 105: Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957

Discrimination
No. 100: Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951
No. 111: Discrimination Convention, 1959

Child Labor
No. 138: Minimum Age Convention, 1973

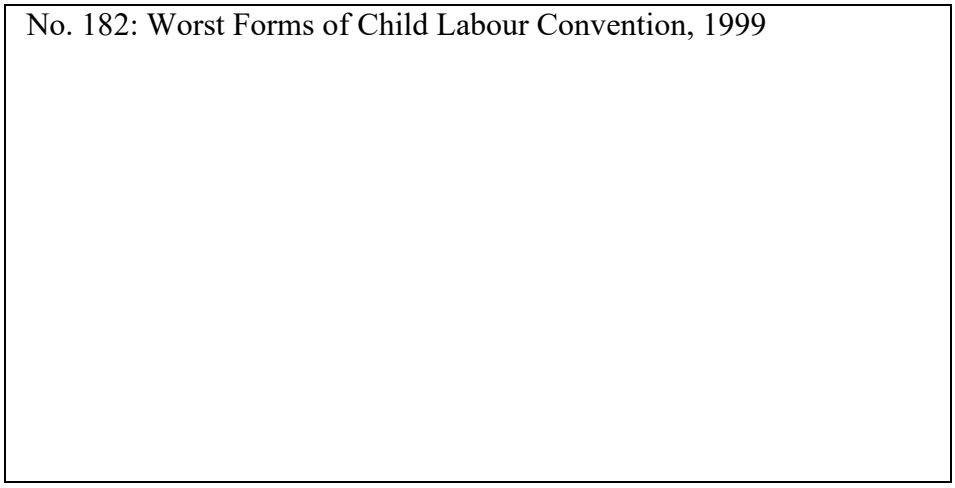

Figure 1. Fundamental Conventions of the ILO

Our theoretical expectations relate most directly to the "freedom" conventions (87 and 98), which include the right to organize and bargain collectively. These rights are especially sensitive to political regime change, as authoritarian governments often target union autonomy and restrict associational freedoms. However, we also assess the impact of autocratization episodes across the other three issue areas, which serve as important points of comparison. This broader scope allows us to evaluate whether autocratization primarily affects rights related to freedom of association, or whether its effects spill over into other areas of labor rights.

Our dataset includes complaints from domestic unions and employer associations as well as from the main international confederations of these groups: the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the International Organisation of Employers (IOE). While we privilege the role of union complaints in our main analyses, we also examine employer complaints and those filed by the ITUC and IOE. This allows us to assess whether the patterns we identify hold across different non-state constituencies of the ILO.

Dependent variable

Our main dependent variable captures whether a trade union lodged a complaint - or "observation"- to the CEACR regarding one of the fundamental conventions. This is coded as a binary outcome, where a value of 1 indicates that at least one union complaint was filed in a given country–year–convention, and 0 otherwise. This variable is central to our analysis, as it reflects the extent to which unions make use of the ILO's supervisory procedures to contest government practices and to draw international attention to labor rights violations. In addition

to this, we construct several complementary dependent variables to capture the activities of other non-state actors in the ILO system.

First, we generate a binary variable for employer organizations, coded as 1 if an employer association lodged a complaint pertaining to one of the fundamental conventions in a given country–year, and 0 otherwise. This measure enables us to compare whether autocratization episodes affect workers and employers in similar or different ways.

Second, we identify complaints lodged by the ITUC. The ITUC, as the global federation of national trade union centers, plays a crucial role in supporting local affiliates and in raising labor rights concerns at the international level. From the NORMLEX database, we isolate ITUC complaints and construct a binary variable coded 1 if the ITUC submitted a complaint in a given country-year-convention, and 0 otherwise. This allows us to test whether international union organizations respond differently to autocratization compared to domestic unions.

Finally, we construct an additional binary variable for the IOE, which serves as the global counterpart to the ITUC in representing employer interests. Although the IOE is less frequently analyzed in the political science and IR literature, it provides an important reference point. By including the IOE, we can assess whether international employer organizations also intensify their use of the CEACR mechanism under conditions of autocratization, or whether this behavior is more characteristic of workers' organizations.

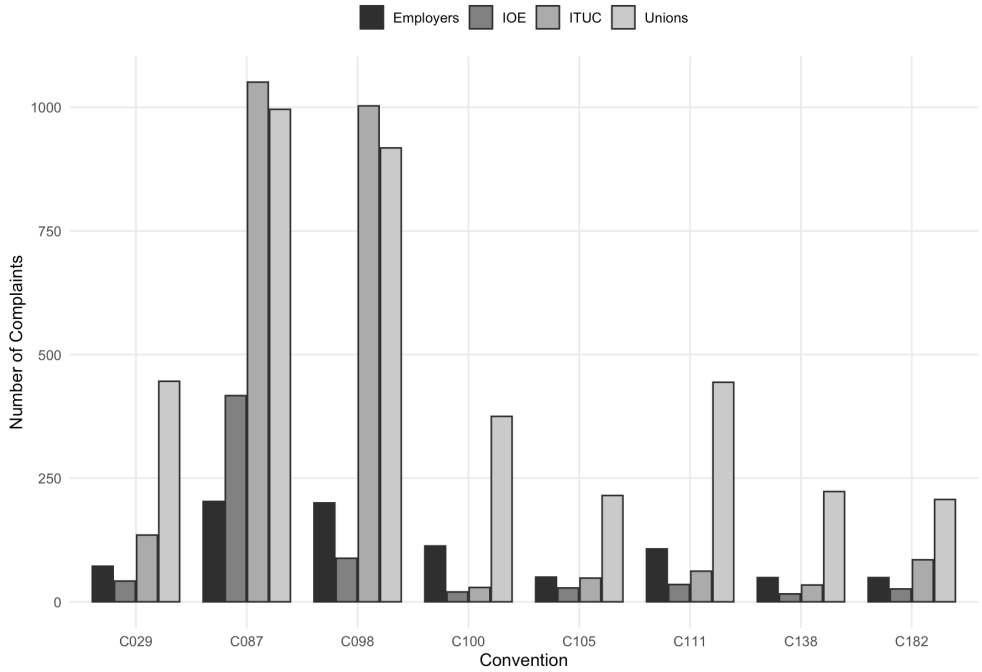

Figure 2. Total Number of Complaints per Actor, 1994-2023

Figure 2 illustrates the total number of complaints lodged by non-state actors in the ILO over the period 1994–2023. Several patterns stand out. First, the overwhelming majority of complaints, across all actor types, concern the two core conventions on freedom of association (C087) and the right to collective bargaining (C098). These rights are widely considered the cornerstone of free and independent trade unionism, and they underpin the exercise of all other labor rights. Moreover, restrictions on union organizing or collective bargaining are often among the earliest and most visible consequences of autocratization, which helps explain why these conventions attract the greatest number of complaints.

Second, Figure 2 also shows that complaints are not limited to freedom of association. Significant numbers of complaints have also been raised under conventions dealing with forced labor (C029 and C105) and discrimination (C100 and C111). This suggests that unions and employers alike use the CEACR mechanism to highlight broader labor rights violations, not just those related to associational freedom.

Finally, the distribution of complaints by actor type reveals other differences. Unions are by far the most active users of the complaint mechanism, lodging more complaints than employers, the ITUC, or the IOE. This reflects their position on the front line of labor rights struggles and their direct exposure to violations in the workplace. The ITUC and IOE, as

international-level organizations, focus their interventions primarily on the most fundamental conventions, especially C087 and C098. Their concentrated activity underscores the symbolic and practical importance of these conventions in the ILO's normative framework. Employers, meanwhile, file fewer complaints overall, though their presence across most conventions indicates that they also see the mechanism as a way to contest government practices that may hinder business interests or distort fair competition.

Independent variable

Our main independent variable is autocratization, measured using the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset (Maerz et al., 2024). The ERT dataset provides a dichotomous indicator that captures substantial and sustained declines in V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). In other words, it identifies periods when countries experience meaningful episodes of democratic backsliding that are long-lasting enough to be considered regime transformations. This measure allows us to systematically identify when governments move in an authoritarian direction and to link such episodes to the behavior of non-state actors in the ILO.

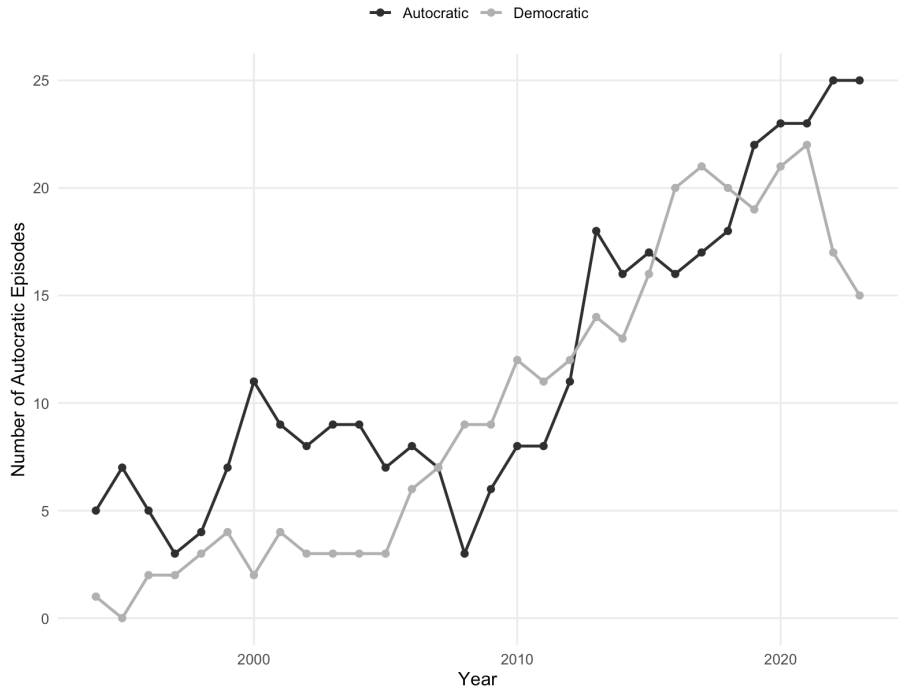

Figure 3: Total Number of Autocratic Episodes by Year and Regime Type

To illustrate the distribution of autocratization episodes, we draw on V-Dem's Regimes of the World (RoW) classification, which sorts countries into four regime types: Closed Autocracy, Electoral Autocracy, Electoral Democracy, and Liberal Democracy (Lührmann et al. 2018).

For the purposes of our analysis, we collapse these categories into two groups: Autocracies, which include both Closed and Electoral Autocracies; and Democracies, which include both Electoral and Liberal Democracies. Figure 3 presents the distribution of autocratization episodes across these regime types during the study period (1994–2023).

Figure 3 suggests that, during the first decade of our period of observation, autocratization episodes were more frequently observed in countries already classified as autocracies, reflecting processes of authoritarian consolidation or deepening. From the late 2000s onwards, however, the pattern changes: episodes of autocratization increasingly appear in democratic contexts as well, contributing to the broader global narrative of democratic backsliding. These episodes provide reason to assess how non-state actors behave not only in established autocracies but also in democracies experiencing democratic backsliding.

In addition to autocratization, we include several control variables identified in the labor rights literature (Mosley & Uno, 2007; Kim, 2012; Koliev et al., 2021; Peksen & Blanton, 2017). These controls capture both economic and political factors: Trade openness (trade as a share of GDP), Foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows as a share of GDP, Economic development, measured as GDP per capita (constant prices), Population size, measured as the total national population. All of these variables are drawn from the World Development Indicators (WDI) maintained by the World Bank.[5] They are relevant to control because they capture the international and domestic economic conditions that may shape both labor rights practices and the incentives of unions and employers to file complaints.

Finally, we control for the ideological orientation of governments, as left-leaning governments in general found to be more favorable to labor rights and union activity. To measure government ideology, we use the Bjornskov-Rode Political Regime Dataset (Bjørnskov & Rode, 2020), which provides data on executive partisanship and ideology for most countries and years included in our study. This allows us to test whether governments with left-oriented executives reduce the likelihood of labor rights complaints compared to governments with centrist or right-leaning orientations.

[5] https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators

Findings

We employ logistic regression models due to the dichotomous nature of our dependent variables. In all models, the independent variables are lagged by one year to reduce the risk of simultaneity bias and to ensure temporal ordering, i.e. that autocratization episodes and other covariates precede the observed complaint behavior. Moreover, we include year fixed effects to control for global temporal trends, country fixed effects to capture unobserved time-invariant characteristics, and convention fixed effects to account for systematic differences across the fundamental conventions.

Table 1. Logistic Regression

	DV: Unions complaints			
	Fundamental		Freedom	
	Autoc	Demo	Autoc	Demo
Autocratization	-0.190	0.242*	-0.521*	0.247
	(0.126)	(0.115)	(0.205)	(0.164)
Left-government	16.183	12.133	15.655	13.528
	(2,631)	(1,631)	(1,564)	(1,087)
GDP per capita	0.0001	-0.00003*	0.0005**	-0.00003
	(0.0001)	(0.00001)	(0.0002)	(0.00002)
FDIs	-0.010	0.001	0.016	0.003
	(0.011)	(0.002)	(0.015)	(0.003)
Trade/GDP	-0.003	0.010***	-0.014**	0.013***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Population	-0.993	0.877	-0.674	1.858*
	(0.573)	(0.508)	(0.904)	(0.742)
Constant	-4.426	-17.383*	7.531	-31.166**
	(3,374.666)	(7.574)	(15.277)	(11.064)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Convention FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	11,110	15,947	2,859	4,678
Log Likelihood	-2,362.979	-4,742.266	-917.429	-1,946.915
Akaike Inf. Crit.	4,973.957	9,746.532	2,052.858	4,139.830
Note:				<0.05*p**p***p<0.001

Because autocratization episodes may represent different mechanisms depending on regime type – autocratic consolidation in autocracies versus democratic backsliding in democracies –

we separate the analysis into two samples. Autocracies combine Closed and Electoral Autocracies based on V-Dem's RoW categories, while Democracies combine Electoral and Liberal Democracies. In Table 1 and Table 2, we report our main results for union complaints across different issue areas. Models 1 and 2 in Table 1 focus on all fundamental conventions, while Models 3 and 4 are restricted to the two conventions most central to union rights: freedom of association and collective bargaining. Models 1 and 2 in Table 2 focus on conventions related to forced labor, while Models 3 and 4 focus on conventions addressing discrimination.

Table 2. Logistic Regression

	DV: Unions complaints			
	Forced Labor		Disscrimination	
	Autoc	Demo	Autoc	Demo
Autocratization	0.011	0.085	-0.019	-0.019
	(0.293)	(0.304)	(0.278)	(0.278)
Left-government	2.188	1.853	1.858	1.858
	(9,283)	(9,985)	(9,292)	(9,292)
GDP per capita	0.00005	-0.00005	-0.0001	-0.0001
	(0.0001)	(0.00003)	(0.0002)	(0.0002)
FDIs	-0.027	-0.010	-0.016	-0.016
	(0.024)	(0.019)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Trade/GDP	0.007	0.005	0.003	0.003
	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Population	-3.317*	-0.953	0.546	0.546
	(1.368)	(1.385)	(1.368)	(1.368)
Constant	33.902	8.960	-47.972	-47.972
	(12,423.720)	(20.548)	(8,870.030)	(8,870.030)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Convention FE	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,989	4,005	2,825	2,825
Log Likelihood	-403.340	-764.697	-433.041	-433.041
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,042.681	1,779.395	1,098.081	1,098.081
Note:				<0.05*p**p***p<0.001

Our main findings are threefold. First, we find that autocratization has a statistically significant and negative effect on the likelihood that unions lodge complaints to the ILO. This supports our hypothesis *H2*: unions are more likely to be constrained, co-opted, or repressed during

autocratization episodes. Importantly, these effects are concentrated in the context of conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining – the most critical for union survival and independence – and are salient under autocratic consolidation.

Second, we also find some support for H1. Specifically, we find that democratic backsliding leads to a statistically significant and positive impact on union complaint behavior. Unions in democratic states are more likely to turn to the CEACR mechanism when their countries experience episodes of backsliding. This also suggests that even when democratic principles erode, unions in these contexts are better equipped institutionally and organizationally compared to unions in autocracies, to resist government restrictions and to internationalize their struggles by appealing to the ILO.

Finally, our analysis does not lend support to our Boomerang Hypothesis (H3). We find no statistically significant effects for complaints lodged by INGOs – that is, the IOE and ITUC– or national employer organizations (Table 3). We interpret this pattern as reflecting the differential exposure of actors: unions are directly targeted by autocratization episodes, especially in authoritarian settings where independent organizing is perceived as a political threat to regime survival. Employers and international organizations may be less directly affected or may pursue different strategies of engagement.

Table 3. Logistic Regression (Conventions 87 & 98)

	Dependent variables:					
	ITUC		*IEO*		*Employers*	
	Autoc	Demo	Autoc	Demo	Autoc	Demo
Autocratization	0.043	-0.035	-0.219	0.519	-0.277	0.178
	(0.177)	(0.167)	(0.474)	(0.303)	(0.618)	(0.284)
Left-government	17.558	16.368	-1.797	-3.042	-1.672	-3.593
	(3,142)	(5,112)	(7,050)	(5,435)	(38,435)	(29,333)
GDP per capita	0.00004	-0.0002***	0.0004	0.00005	0.001	-0.0001
	(0.00005)	(0.00004)	(0.0004)	(0.00003)	(0.001)	(0.00004)
FDIs	-0.007	0.004	0.004	-0.002	0.041	0.003
	(0.013)	(0.004)	(0.022)	(0.004)	(0.060)	(0.019)
Trade/GDP	-0.006	-0.002	0.005	-0.004	-0.010	-0.001
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.013)	(0.008)	(0.020)	(0.008)
Population	-1.943*	0.087	-1.477	-2.250	0.211	-3.312
	(0.917)	(0.925)	(4.107)	(1.904)	(5.451)	(1.701)
Constant	28.081	-19.941	2.031	13.514	-27.045	26.799
	(15.360)	(617.112)	(5,263.697)	(1,657.622)	(11,121.250)	(2,483.903)
Country FE	No	No	No	No	No	No
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Convention FE	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Observations	2,859	4,678	2,859	4,678	2,859	4,678
Log Likelihood	-1,109.917	-1,640.886	-271.421	-659.407	-118.783	-762.243
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,437.833	3,527.773	760.842	1,564.815	455.567	1,770.486

Note: <0.05*p**p***p<0.001

Conclusions

Our study demonstrates that the effects of autocratization are not confined to the domestic arena but extend to the international level, affecting the ability of some non-state actors to use the complaint mechanisms of IOs while empowering others. In the context of the ILO, we show that unions from regimes undergoing autocratic consolidation become significantly less likely to submit complaints to the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), while unions from democratic backsliders are more likely. Employer organizations in turn do not seem to alter their behavior in an observable manner. This finding highlights the critical role of the ILO's accountability architecture to deal with autocratization early on.

These results have direct relevance to current developments in countries like Turkey, Hungary, and the US, where governments have severely curtailed union freedoms, imposed burdensome registration requirements, or promoted loyalist labor organizations. In these cases of democratic backsliding, while heavily under pressure, we can expect that unions will be able to escalate their fight to the ILO to put pressure on the governments to comply with fundamental conventions. It is thus no surprise that the current Trump administration has singled out the ILO in its campaign against international "wokeness." In September 2025, the administration had announced – although not fully confirmed – that they are intent on cutting major funding to the ILO and to install the current US economic advisor Nels Nordquist – a close Trump loyalist – to the important position of ILO deputy director with extended rights to oversee policy implementation and restructuring.[6] This case shows the important function the ILO and the unions have to put pressure on states to comply with fundamental labor standards.

Our findings also raise important questions for further research. While we document a decline in union complaints from autocratizing states, we cannot fully determine whether this reflects co-optation, self-censorship, or direct repression, each of which carries different implications for international advocacy. In future interations of the paper, we thus aim to asses union voting behavior in the International Labour Conference (ILC) to gain a more differentiated picture on union behavior and be able to assess whether unions align more closely with government positions during episodes of autocratization or abstain from voting altogether. Additionally, we

[6] https://www.reuters.com/business/world-at-work/international-labour-organization-staff-fear-job-losses-trump-proposes-107-2025-09-01/

also aim to examine if governments governments are shielded from international scrutiny or if complaints are taken up and shamed in reports by the Committee on the Application of Standards (CAS). This will also allow us to understand better the role of the ITUC and IOC during moments of autocratization.

Bibliography

Abbott, K. W., & Snidal, D. (1998). Why states act through formal international organizations. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *42*(1), 3–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002798042001001

Bakke, K. M., Mitchell, N. J., & Smidt, H. M. (2020). When States Crack Down on Human Rights Defenders. *International Studies Quarterly*, *64*(1), 85–96. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz088

Bermeo, N. (2016). On Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, *27*(1), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012

Blake, D. J., & Payton, A. L. (2015). Balancing design objectives: Analyzing new data on voting rules in intergovernmental organizations. *The Review of International Organizations*, *10*(3), 377–402. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-014-9201-9

Boese, V. A., Gates, S., Knutsen, C. H., Nygård, H. M., & Strand, H. (2022). Patterns of Democracy over Space and Time. *International Studies Quarterly*, *66*(3), sqac041. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac041

Bovens, M. (2007). Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework[1]. *European Law Journal*, *13*(4), 447–468. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0386.2007.00378.x

Brechenmacher, S., & Carothers, T. (2019). *Defending Civic Space: Is the International Community Stuck?* (No. Working Paper). Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Buyse, A. (2018). Squeezing civic space: restrictions on civil society organizations and the linkages with human rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, *22*(8), 966–988. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2018.1492916

Carapico, S. (2000). NGOs, INGOs, GO-NGOs and DO-NGOs: Making Sense of Non-Governmental Organizations. *Middle East Report*, (214), 12. https://doi.org/10.2307/1520187

Cassani, A., & Tomini, L. (2020). Reversing regimes and concepts: from democratization to autocratization. *European Political Science*, *19*(2), 272–287. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-018-0168-5

Chaudhry, S. (2022). The Assault on Civil Society: Explaining State Crackdown on NGOs. *International Organization*, *76*(3), 549–590. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818321000473

Cottiero, C., Hafner-Burton, E. M., Haggard, S., Prather, L., & Schneider, C. J. (2025). Illiberal regimes and international organizations. *The Review of International Organizations*, *20*(2), 231–259. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-024-09556-1

Debre, M. J. (2025). *How Regional Organizations Sustain Authoritarian Rule: The Dictators' Club*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Debre, M. J., & Dijkstra, H. (2021). Institutional design for a post-liberal order: why some international organizations live longer than others. *European Journal of International Relations*, *27*(1), 311–339. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120962183

Debre, M. J., & Sommerer, T. (2025). Are non-democracies taking over? Autocratization and international organization membership. *Cooperation and Conflict*, *online first*.

Dellmuth, L. M., & Bloodgood, E. A. (Eds.). (2023). *Advocacy Group Effects in Global Governance: Populations, Strategies, and Political Opportunity Structures*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27864-8

Dietrich, S. (2013). Bypass or Engage? Explaining Donor Delivery Tactics in Foreign Aid Allocation*: *Bypass or Engage? International Studies Quarterly*, *57*(4), 698–712. https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12041

Doyle, J. L. (2017). State control of civil society organizations: the case of Turkey. *Democratization*, *24*(2), 244–264. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1159555

Dupuy, K., Fransen, L., & Prakash, A. (2021). Restricting NGOs: From Pushback to Accommodation. *Global Policy*, *12*(S5), 5–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12974

Dupuy, K., Ron, J., & Prakash, A. (2016). Hands Off My Regime! Governments' Restrictions on Foreign Aid to Non-Governmental Organizations in Poor and Middle-Income Countries. *World Development*, *84*, 299–311. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.02.001

Glasius, M., Schalk, J., & De Lange, M. (2020). Illiberal Norm Diffusion: How Do Governments Learn to Restrict Nongovernmental Organizations? *International Studies Quarterly*, *64*(2), 453–468. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa019

Gohdes, A. R. (2020). Repression Technology: Internet Accessibility and State Violence. *American Journal of Political Science*, *64*(3), 488–503. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12509

Goldstein, J., Kahler, M., Keohane, R. O., & Slaughter, A. (2000). Introduction: Legalization and World Politics. *International Organization*, *54*(3), 385–399.

Grant, R. W., & Keohane, R. O. (2005). Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics. *American Political Science Review*, *99*(1), 29–43. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055405051476

Gray, J. (2018). Life, death, or zombie? The vitality of international organizations. *International Studies Quarterly*, *62*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx086

Hall, N., Reiners, N., Basu, S., Chaudhry, S., Henry, L., Medie, P. A., et al. (2025). Challenges and Opportunities for Transnational Advocacy. *International Studies Review*, *27*(3), viaf015. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaf015

Hanegraaff, M., Vergauwen, J., & Beyers, J. (2020). Should I stay or should I go? Explaining variation in nonstate actor advocacy over time in global governance. *Governance*, *33*(2), 287–304. https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12427

Hawkins, D., Lake, D. A., Nielson, D. L., & Tierney, M. J. (2006). Delegation under anarchy: states, international organizations, and principal-agent theory. In D. G. Hawkins, D. A. Lake, D. L. Nielson, & M. J. Tierney (Eds.), *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations* (1st ed., pp. 3–38). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491368.002

Heldt, E. (2017). Regaining control of errant agents? Agency slack at the European Commission and the World Health Organization. *Cooperation and Conflict*, *52*(4), 469–484. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836717703673

Henry, L. A. (2021). *Bringing Global Governance Home: NGO Mediation in the BRICS States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press USA - OSO.

Henry, L., & Plantan, E. (2022). Activism in exile: how Russian environmentalists maintain voice after exit. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *38*(4), 274–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2021.2002629

Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The end of liberal international order? *International Affairs*, *94*(1), 7–23. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241
Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Cornell University Press. https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801471292
Knutsen, C. H., Marquardt, K. L., Seim, B., Coppedge, M., Edgell, A. B., Medzihorsky, J., et al. (2024). Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *57*(2), 162–177. https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652300077X
Lewis, D. (2013). Civil Society and the Authoritarian State: Cooperation, Contestation and Discourse. *Journal of Civil Society*, *9*(3), 325–340. https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2013.818767
Little, A., & Meng, A. (2023, January 17). Subjective and Objective Measurement of Democratic Backsliding. SSRN Scholarly Paper, Rochester, NY. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4327307
Little, A. T., & Meng, A. (2024). Measuring Democratic Backsliding. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *57*(2), 149–161. https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652300063X
Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization*, *26*(7), 1095–1113. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029
Murdie, A. (2014). *Help or Harm: The Human Security Effects of International NGOs*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
Murdie, A., & Peksen, D. (2013). The impact of human rights INGO activities on economic sanctions. *The Review of International Organizations*, *8*(1), 33–53. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-012-9146-9
Naim, M. (2009). What Is a GONGO? *Foreign Policy*. https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/13/what-is-a-gongo/. Accessed 2 October 2024
Ottaway, M., & Carothers, T. (Eds.). (2000). *Funding virtue: civil society aid and democracy promotion*. Washington, D.C: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
Pallas, C. L., & Bloodgood, E. A. (Eds.). (2022). *Beyond the boomerang: from transnational advocacy networks to transcalar advocacy in international politics*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
Papada, E., Angiolillo, F., Gastaldi, L., Köhler, L., Lundstedt, M., Natsika, N., et al. (2023). *Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*. Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg. https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/. Accessed 27 November 2023
Parkinson, J., Bariyo, N., & Chin, J. (2019, August 15). Huawei Technicians Helped African Governments Spy on Political Opponents. *WSJ*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/huawei-technicians-helped-african-governments-spy-on-political-opponents-11565793017. Accessed 15 April 2023
Reiners, N. (2021). *Transnational Lawmaking Coalitions for Human Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108976763
Risse, T., & Sikkink, K. (1999). The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction. In *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (pp. 1–38). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/20049553
Rutzen, D. (2015). Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): Civil Society Under Assault. *Journal of Democracy*, *26*(4), 28–39. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0071

Scholte, J. A. (Ed.). (2011). *Building Global Democracy?: Civil Society and Accountable Global Governance* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511921476

Sim, C. (2011). The Singapore Chill: Political Defamation and the Normalization of a Statist Rule of Law. *Washington International Law Journal*, *20*(2), 319.

Smidt, H., Perera, D., Mitchell, N. J., & Bakke, K. M. (2021). Silencing Their Critics: How Government Restrictions Against Civil Society Affect International 'Naming and Shaming.' *British Journal of Political Science*, *51*(3), 1270–1291. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123419000693

Sommerer, T., & Tallberg, J. (2017). Transnational Access to International Organizations 1950–2010: A New Data Set. *International Studies Perspectives*, *18*(3), 247–266. https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekv022

Spires, A. J. (2011). Contingent Symbiosis and Civil Society in an Authoritarian State: Understanding the Survival of China's Grassroots NGOs. *American Journal of Sociology*, *117*(1), 1–45. https://doi.org/10.1086/660741

Steffek, J. (2010). Public Accountability and the Public Sphere of International Governance. *Ethics & International Affairs*, *24*(1), 45–67. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7093.2010.00243.x

Tallberg, J., Sommerer, T., Squatrito, T., & Jonsson, C. (2013). *The Opening Up of International Organizations*. *The Opening Up of International Organizations*. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107325135

Tallberg, J., & Uhlin, A. (2011). Civil Society and Global Democracy: An Assessment (. In D. Archibugi, M. Koenig-Archibugi, & R. Marchetti (Eds.), *Global Democracy: Normative and Empirical Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.

Tomini, L. (2021). Don't think of a wave! A research note about the current autocratization debate. *Democratization*, *28*(6), 1191–1201. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1874933

Vikberg, C. (2023). Non-State Participation in International Organizations 1998–2017: Introducing a New Dataset. *International Studies Perspectives*, ekad018. https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekad018