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Researching the authoritarian: a conversation on methodology and ethics in closed contexts

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Abstract. In this academic conversation we reflect on authoritarianism and its implications for research and researchers. Framed within the global authoritarian turn, the conversation explores a variety of practical, methodological, and ethical challenges of researching authoritarian politics, practices, and spaces.

Specifically, we discuss losing field access due to repression or violence, followed by a reliance on secondary materials; the censorship or closure of media and the challenges of working with ephemeral digital material; and the declining reliability of sources due to manipulation, silencing, and displacement. These conditions force researchers to consider when data become too compromised to continue inquiry while simultaneously highlighting ethical dilemmas about protecting vulnerable contacts – including from repressive state practices that shift over time and create new vulnerabilities. The conversation contributes to the burgeoning literature on research in authoritarian contexts and argues that audiences from the broader West have much to learn from those in the post-socialist East.

1 A conversation on researching the authoritarian

This conversation takes place between two academics in Switzerland, one from the East and the other from the West. Both have lived experience with authoritarianism and met to discuss the practical and ethical challenges of researching the authoritarian. The conversation was recorded in two sessions and transcribed with noScribe software, then verified and corrected by the authors. The transcript was edited for clarity. References and exact quotations were added post-factum.

Sven Daniel Wolfe: What makes researching in the authoritarian different from researching non-authoritarian contexts?

Dasha Kuletskaya: I think we should begin by defining what we mean by "authoritarian". Are we referring to specific political contexts or geographic areas traditionally associated with authoritarianism? Or are we talking about particular practices, like restricted access to information or data?

I'd argue it's more about the practices we're dealing with, so it's more of a spectrum than a fixed location. In my research on Belarus, I encountered many of these practices. Interestingly, when you apply that experience to Western Europe, you can recognize similar patterns – less explicit, but still present.

SDW: I've had the same experience. Personally, I'm not comfortable talking about "authoritarian states" or even "authoritarian contexts". It's a bit clunky, but I prefer saying "spaces shaped by authoritarian practices".

In general, I follow Marlies Glasius (2023), who encourages a focus on authoritarian *practices* rather than *states*. As you said, this lets us identify different forms of authoritarian behavior in contexts we might otherwise overlook, especially if we're using traditional political science or international relations frameworks that categorize the world into discrete nation-states.

For example, let's take the 2024 Paris Olympics. The way they were presented to certain neighborhoods in Paris wasn't much different from how they were presented for some com-

munities in Sochi 2014. It was stunningly authoritarian. In some of my mega-events work I drew parallels between authoritarian practices in France and Russia that might otherwise be missed, since you wouldn't normally think to compare these two countries (Wolfe, 2023). It's hard to destabilize these container imaginaries, though. But maybe we should also explore what "authoritarian" itself means?

DK: Two books come to mind here, *Rationality and Power* by Flyvbjerg (1998) and *The Power Broker* by Robert Caro (1975). Both, while set in democratic contexts, explore how knowledge in planning and urban development is created and the role power plays in epistemic practices and planning cultures. Take for instance how Robert Moses shaped New York, described in *Power Broker*. To me, his methods fully fit the definition of authoritarian. This includes also his blatant efforts to withhold information and silence researchers, journalists, and politicians who questioned his work. For me, authoritarianism is ultimately about the concentration of power: who has the power to create knowledge about the processes we observe? And how controlled is that knowledge production? That's one way to approach it.

SDW: And it's that concentration of power that can have such dramatic and terrible effects for people, both direct and indirect. Centering analysis on the fulcrum of power might explain why authoritarian-style governance at the national or federal level can be so hostile to universities (Golosov, 2024; Orlov, 2023). They represent an alternative form of knowledge production. At its best, academic knowledge challenges dominant narratives and, ultimately, the power to define reality, which is the heart of the authoritarian project – to define what's real and what's not.

So the core of authoritarian practice hinges on the monopoly of power, specifically the power to shape reality and make decisions. The question is if that power is contested or not. Is someone's ability to control space, expression, or lived experience being challenged?

Authoritarianism is one flavor on a spectrum of power. On one end you have democratic expressions of power: shared, rotating leadership, institutional mechanisms that ensure transparency and fairness. Or you can have dictatorial power, where one actor not only sets the rules but defines the very structure of reality. Does that sound right to you?

DK: Yes, and it's important to highlight that authoritarian contexts prefer to be black boxes. Transparency and access to information challenge existing power relationships – consider the battles for narrative control, particularly with the US war unfolding in Iran (Andringa et al., 2026). I'd also add that, for me, it's about how much diversity the discourse can tolerate. Who has the right to claim truth? How much conflict is allowed in truth production?

SDW: Exactly. That's why I'm drawn to the academy, because I want to highlight that diversity. Authoritarian truth projects can dictate reality and punish dissent, but they don't necessarily change material facts. They can try to suppress reality, but it still exists.

DK: Sometimes they do create reality, though.

SDW: I'm not disputing that, but I'm thinking of the famous Soviet agricultural theorist. Lysenko? He tried to defy biological reality by insisting agricultural practices follow Marxist–Leninist ideology instead of genetics. But biology doesn't work that way. You plant a seed, and it grows under certain conditions. It doesn't conform to ideology.

DK: Or to bring a more recent example: the *Financial Times* just reported about the Line project in Saudi Arabia attempting to defy the laws of gravity (*End of The Line: how Saudi Arabia's Neom dream unravelled*, 2025). Yet even an extreme concentration of power and resources in one person's hands, as in this case, can't bend the laws of physics.

SDW: That's a wonderful example. You can create and enforce your reality, you can punish dissent, but gravity is still gravity. Despite these authoritarian efforts to define reality, a diversity of thought still persists. I think part of our role in the academy is to identify and give voice to these excluded voices, and to connect them to global processes.

So, how do we do that? How do you actually do the work? You did your research in Belarus – how did you physically go about producing knowledge, gathering information, processing it? And what's different about doing that in Minsk compared to, say, Minneapolis?[1]

DK: It's something that changes over time, and it also depends on who you are and how visible your research is. I started researching Minsk in 2018, before I even began my PhD, so I was completely under the radar. I didn't think of it as doing research in an authoritarian context at the time.

I began by looking into Dana Holdings, the government-aligned real estate developer owned by the Serbian oligarch family Karić (Kuletskaya, 2022, 2026). Back then, the context was still relatively open. Yes, you had to be cautious when approaching state actors, but generally, people were willing to talk, and access to the field was quite good. I could travel back to Minsk, collect data, and even present at a government-supported event, the Minsk Design Week [in May 2019].

That was still possible in 2019, just one year before the protests and the subsequent closing. What's interesting is seeing how access to the field disappears and how that affects your results and your approach to research. I haven't been back to Belarus since 2021. So now, any papers or pub-

[1] Between the two recording sessions, Minneapolis transformed from a peaceful city (indeed, SDW cited it precisely because it was benign) into an epicenter of national conflict instigated by the masked paramilitary Trump regime forces known as ICE. We kept "Minneapolis" instead of editing in a different city to underscore the speed and volatility of conditions when authoritarians attempt to consolidate power. Within months, Minneapolis became a flashpoint of authoritarian practices in the USA, but also a site of resident resistance. DK notes that Minsk was also peaceful when she began her research and highlights the similar dynamics between these cities.

lications I produce are based either on material I gathered earlier or on what I can access remotely.

You saw my presentation on the Belarusian solidarity movement of 2020 in Tirana [at the 11th International Urban Geographies of Post-Communist States Conference in 2025]. The material I used there was either collected from online resources or came from people who witnessed the events and documented them and who gave me access to their data. For me personally, that raises questions about how we use data collected by others.

Another issue is the availability of data and how quickly it can disappear. In Minsk, some information vanishes faster than you can record it. For example, you might check statistical data, and then COVID hits. And suddenly life expectancy statistics are no longer available because they could be used to calculate excess mortality, data the government intends to withhold.

Then there's the reliability of data. If statistics are produced by a government agency, can you trust them? How do you verify them? There was one case where mortality statistics were verified by an activist group, and they found major discrepancies between the official numbers and the actual data (Matson, 2025). But verifying that requires creative methods – including hacktivism – far beyond what we're used to in Western academic contexts.

So, the two key points here are related to the availability and reliability of data. You have to save and document everything as you go. And if it carries a political dimension, you have to question and verify every piece of information, even something as straightforward as mortality statistics.

SDW: When I first moved to Russia in 1998, I wasn't an academic. It was a much freer, very different Russia – hard for people to imagine now, but it really was. My lived experience there is part of why I appreciate Glasius's work on the authoritarian red line that divides what you can say and do, and what you can't. I'd argue that line runs through every society. In the US, you're not going to get great answers from the CIA. You just sort of know that – it's embodied knowledge. Theoretically, you should be able to ask anything, but in reality, there are codes and red lines.

I wasn't aware of any of that when I first arrived in Russia. I always felt safe. Even when I had run-ins with the police, it didn't occur to me that this reflected authoritarian heritage, like being stopped and asked for papers. To me, that was just how things worked there. Like in the US, you carry your driver's license, and that's what you show when someone asks for ID. I didn't apply a political label to Russia or judge how the country functioned.

Then things started closing at the political level. Some people trace it to the beginning of Putin's first term, but personally I didn't notice widespread changes until his return for a third term, after Medvedev. That third term is when processes that had been bubbling under the surface became visible (Gel'man, 2015; Treisman, 2018). Even though some smart and brave people were ringing alarm bells before, I don't think it penetrated mass consciousness. People wanted stability and jobs. But in the third term, after the Bolotnaya protests [in 2011–2012], the screws tightened for real. The stakes rose dramatically.

I moved back to Russia in 2013. I was a researcher by then, but that didn't change what I was doing or how I was acting. I was walking around, talking to people, and taking pictures of buildings, same as always. But now, those actions were suddenly forbidden and brought me to the attention of the authorities. I crossed the authoritarian red line because it was moving beneath me. The red line is not stable.

So time is a factor, and I really liked what you said about how that time shift changes research practices. You have to document everything differently. I've lost potential papers because I only bookmarked sites and didn't save them locally. In Russia a lot of good investigative journalism was done on independent blogs, which functioned for a while as spaces of relative freedom (Wolfe, 2021). When those got shut down, if you didn't save them properly, they're gone forever.

Now, quickly, to the authoritarian project in the United States. One of the first things the Trump regime did in his second term was to start scrubbing data from government sites. Even the White House site showed 404 Page Not Found for a while after the inauguration. Climate data disappeared, and so did anything about gender or race or inequality. And just recently, Gallup announced that they're no longer measuring presidential approval ratings, ending a run of 88 years of benchmark research (Braun, 2026). Naturally they announced this has nothing to do with Trump, but for those of us with eyes, it is not just extremely alarming – it is a sign of how closely the American authorities follow the authoritarian playbook. We can already predict what's coming next.

DK: Yes, viewed from the East, the events in the United States – shocking to many Western European observers – seem strikingly familiar. What is shocking to me though is the speed at which they are unfolding. What took decades in Eastern Europe takes months in the United States. It is unsurprising that American scholars studying Eastern European history recognize the familiar playbook and decide to leave the country (Lopez and Wang, 2025).

As for disappearance of online sources, what you describe is very similar to what happened in Belarus. There, it wasn't blogs like in Russia – it was independent newspapers. Online newspapers were shut down, but some of them migrated to other channels, fearing legal persecution after being retroactively classified as extremist material. Sometimes you can still find previous publications using the Wayback Machine. In any case, information that can be located within minutes through tools like Nexis in Western European contexts, in Belarus often requires a considerable amount of creative online digging.

SDW: I also want to talk about issues of safety and our responsibilities to others. And you also mentioned retroactive legal change. Could you talk more about that?

DK: Absolutely, this is a crucial point for researchers. The disappearance of information is a double-edged sword. On one hand, governments try to silence information because the more people know, the more attention a cause gets, both inside and outside the country. But there's also intentional removal of information on the other side, to protect people from state persecution. That's exactly what happened in Belarus, and it's still happening. Even five years after the mass protests of 2020, legal cases are being initiated based on photos or social media posts made at a time when those actions were still legal.

This raises serious ethical and methodological questions for us. Anything you publish that includes identifiable people or sources could be used as evidence in legal proceedings. It puts pressure on researchers and even more so on journalists. There were iconic protest images that circulated globally. Many of the people in those images were later prosecuted or had to flee the country (Bekova, 2021; Chestnok-LIVE, 2024; Zerkalo, 2022). So, availability of information can be both empowering and problematic.

Another example: a journalist made a documentary about the protests in Belarus. He scraped videos from social media and argued that the material was already publicly available. But when the documentary went online, it drew renewed attention from authorities. They used it to identify people in the footage and discredit the journalist's work (BBC News, 2023). So even if the material is already online, amplifying attention around it can increase the risk for those involved.

And that's where your idea of the shifting authoritarian red line comes in. It might be in one place when the action happens, but it can shift later. Images documenting actions when they were legal can be used as evidence in court retrospectively, after they became illegal. The authoritarian line shifts not only in the present, but also in the past.

SDW: This is great but terrible example of the some of the dangers in using online material. Social media might be publicly available, but there's still an expectation of privacy, so using that data non-consensually is problematic (Pink et al., 2015). In this case, though, it's more than a distanced ethical or theoretical positioning. It's actually exposed people to risk and harm.

Then there's the whole retroactive legal dimension. Part of the authoritarian project is literally to control time, to exert their will over the past and the future. It is so frightening. This is not just about maintaining control or punishing people. It's about spreading fear.

DK: As for controlling time, this is hardly new. Writing of the past has always been inextricably linked to power. Historiography is full of accounts of how the past is written and rewritten to serve the present. In the Belarusian case, it is just the very recent past, but the mechanism is the same. And yes, to spread fear is the primary goal.

SDW: It's absolutely terrifying. Any action I take today could later be deemed illegal. In Russia, one tactic is to declare certain groups "undesirable" or "extremist".

DK: Belarus does exactly the same.

SDW: And now, with this retroactive approach – which hasn't yet come to the USA, but I'm sure it will – you're exposed to entirely new dimensions of risk, punishment, and control. We really are seeing this develop in the United States too. Trump and the rest of the so-called MAGA movement routinely calls the Democratic Party things like "a radical left extremist terrorist organization". And people say, "Don't take him seriously, he's trolling". But Masha Gessen (2020) tells us to believe the autocrat. When they say what they're going to do, believe them. In the US, people have this naive belief that the system will hold, and we don't see the danger. But then see the attorney general directing law enforcement to investigate "extremist groups" (Lynch, 2025). It's the same language and the same strategies, but we haven't yet seen people wake up en masse. Here and there, sure. Lots of little victories, which are extremely important. But nothing on the scale that will actually interrupt authoritarian consolidation, at least not yet. To me it feels like my fellow US Americans are stuck in reaction mode, playing defense – and losing.

Back to Russia: you can see the power of labeling. The state labels someone or a group as extremist. It started with queer people, labeling "non-traditional values" as extremist propaganda. Now it's feminism. If you liked a feminist-themed post on VKontakte [the Russian version of Facebook], they can use that as evidence that you're part of an extremist organization. And doing this retroactively? Changing the laws so that past behavior is prosecutable in the present? Staggering.

DK: Yes, social media is a dangerous tool – and not only in authoritarian contexts. You can be prosecuted for social media posts in Germany or Switzerland – just recently the German police initiated a criminal case against someone who called Friedrich Merz "Pinocchio" on Facebook (Baden-Württemberg, 2026) – which raises questions about the limits of free speech. How much can you say? What are you allowed to say and what aren't you? There are social media posts that people are prosecuted for, sometimes rightfully, but sometimes just because the authorities can. I think that brings us back to another key point in our definition of authoritarianism: fear. Fear that leads to self-censorship. As a consequence, people stop expressing their opinion. To me, that's a clear feature of authoritarianism: you're too afraid to cross the red line because you're not sure where exactly it is.

SDW: Exactly. That uncertainty is a crucial element of fear. It takes a certain kind of courage to speak up, even if you're "just" an academic, a supposedly small figure who doesn't matter to the authorities. You have to decide: do I close off lines of inquiry? Do I participate in self-censorship? Do I believe this work is important enough to continue? I think Paul Goode wrote about this, when he was facing increasing restrictions in Russia (Goode, 2010). He said, basically, that if we don't want to abandon research in closed contexts – and we shouldn't – we have to learn how to navigate this shifting and treacherous terrain.

Another point is that how we perceive ourselves is not how the state perceives us. I'm reminded of the story of Katherine Verdery, the anthropologist who did her PhD work in communist Romania. In time, she learned that the security services were monitoring her, and the pressure grew. But she continued returning to Romania to live and work and had all the personal and professional connections of a normal life. After the regime fell and things opened up, she requested her surveillance file from the Securitate. She expected a small folder but instead received something like three thousand pages of material. They had been following her obsessively (Verdery, 2018).

She had considered herself a harmless PhD student, then a harmless academic, too small and unimportant to pay attention to. Certainly not a threat! But the security services saw her very differently. They built up whole personality profiles for her and interpreted her research as spycraft. And even more uncomfortably, some of her close friends – I mean, people she had shared true and intimate moments with – actually informed on her. Some of them were real friends, but also informants. She also reflects on how academic work does resemble spying, and she plays with the fuzziness of researcher identity and social systems. Decades later, she's this renowned professor and expert on Romania, but she's still grappling with feelings of betrayal and confusion. She understands that not only did some of her friends inform on her, but it was *her* presence that put them at risk. It's all very tangled.

In my world, I have a friend from Volgograd who probably had to report on me. *Had to* or *chose to*, I don't know. I have other friends I no longer contact because I don't want to put them at risk. Our friendship is interrupted because I've become toxic, due to me being kicked out of Russia. Verdery calls it being *radioactive*. Either way, it's contagious, and that complicates the research process even further, which is a good segue to something you mentioned earlier: what are our obligations to people in the field? Are we exposing them to risk or to harm?

DK: The practices of denunciation and surveillance are, of course, not new (Bergemann, 2017). Think of the recent book by Lea Ypi, *Indignity: A Life Reimagined*, where she discovers Albanian state security surveillance files while researching the life of her grandmother (Ypi, 2025), or the classic film *The Lives of Others* (Das Leben der Anderen, by Anon, 2006), a well-known Stasi story showing how state surveillance in the DDR worked.

These might seem far-fetched comparisons, but one shouldn't underestimate how similar things still are today in many contexts. That brings me to an example of how this system of surveillance and denunciation can be subverted. In Belarus, there exists a hacktivists group, Cyber Partisans (see, for example, Schrijver and Ducheine, 2023), which fights for freedom of information. They regularly hack into state agency servers to retrieve potentially important information. Once, they hacked into the KGB reporting system and got access to the KGB archive of denunciations sent through the KGB website. In total, 12 500 reports from people reporting on neighbors, friends, anyone. Many using their real names and phone numbers.

There's a fascinating documentary made by journalists who called these people after 2020 and asked, "Do you remember reporting someone back then? Why did you do it?" It's an incredible piece of journalism (Anon, 2023). You hear their voices, their justifications. What I'm saying is we shouldn't oversimplify this as "the state vs. the people". Sergei Dovlatov once famously said about the Soviet purges: "We endlessly rail against Comrade Stalin, and, of course, with reason. All the same, I would like to ask – who wrote four million denunciations at the time of the Stalinist terror?" (Dovlatov, 2011:79–80).

SDW: There's a comedian in the States who created a fake hotline for ICE deportation tips. To the surprise of many people – but not you or me, I guess – there were tons of "ordinary" people who called in to try and get their neighbors deported (America's Deportation Obsession, Caught on Tape (w/ Drew Harwell), 2026).

DK: If we connect all this to research ethics, I don't believe there can be a fully ethical, completely risk-free approach that still enables meaningful work in these contexts. Still, one must take every possible precaution to not endanger others. And it's not just about endangering people – it's also about endangering the practices that enable resistance against authoritarian control.

Again, an example from Minsk, where in 2020, when all official communication channels including newspapers were silenced, people turned to Telegram groups and chats for self-organization. There was a brief window when all these local chats were mapped and openly accessible (dze.chat, 2025). You could see a map of Minsk with neighborhood chats marked, and you could join your local group to organize with others through an open-access link (Herasimenka, 2020).

It was unproblematic for about a week. When the state was busy clearing major protests from the streets, they didn't have the capacity to monitor the digital space. But once they did, the practice became dangerous. So eventually, neighborhood chats went underground. New methods emerged. If you research this, you can report on the visible part of the process. But when I interviewed someone about it, I asked, "Do these chats still exist?" They said, "Yes, they do, but I'm not going to tell you anything". Because these practices still exist and allow people to coordinate. And the less that's known about them, the better.

SDW: That's so interesting! And a brilliant segue to our next point: the blurriness between researcher and activist postures. For me, my birth country is going through a terrible period of political closure. When I write about that, am I an activist? Am I an academic? Is my academic posture activist in one context but not in another?

Naturally, different countries have different research cultures. I have friends in Brazil who are academics and activists

at the same time. They'd lecture in the morning, then go to the barricades in the afternoon to protest, get tear-gassed, then go back to teaching the next day. That's a very dynamic academic–activist posture. In Switzerland, the context is quite different.

I'm wondering: you're Belarusian. You're a researcher. And you have your own political views about what's happening in your birth country. How do you relate to these questions of objectivity, neutrality, and the purpose of the academic project? How do you make sense of that blurriness? How do you see your role, especially given your background in Belarus and what happened in 2020?

DK: I wouldn't call what I do activism. I think activism requires a more direct, day-to-day involvement in the politics of the country you're researching. For me, it's more about being in a position where I have the time, infrastructure, and freedom to investigate issues that people inside the country cannot. So I wouldn't call myself an activist, but I do believe that the position I'm in comes with a certain responsibility.

SDW: I don't consider myself an activist either. But the authorities did. And that's the thing: what I considered normal research practices, the Russian authorities saw as activism. They arrested me for it. To be more specific, some authorities called me an activist and others called me a spy. Either way, it was a means to transform me into a different legal category and kick me out.

DK: I never asked the Belarusian authorities what they thought of me. But of course, the piece I wrote on the 2020 protests wasn't neutral (Kuletskaya, 2025). And going back to the question of neutrality and objectivity: I'm not a "neutral" researcher. I have a political position. But I believe being a researcher obliges you to be objective, but objectivity is not the same as neutrality. As a researcher, you can be non-neutral, but you must be objective.

SDW: Or at least strive toward objectivity.

DK: Exactly. It would be very positivistic to claim full objectivity. But you can be explicit about your sources, your practices, your data, and how you form your opinions.

SDW: I subscribe to that. And I think it's especially important now, as certain norms and freedoms are changing – particularly in the United States, which has outsized influence globally.

There's a concerted effort to censor scholars in all manner of institutions around the country. For example, a number of professors at Syracuse, including Farhana Sultana, have been censured or suspended (FIRE Letter to Syracuse University, 30 September 2025, 2025). This is happening to scholars who are more visible outside the ivory tower, those who are vocally critical, or who are women, or people of color. They're more vulnerable to a regime that is openly racist in the States.

Going back to issue of time: if you're against an authoritarian project, as I am, and you want to halt or slow it, the time to act is now. Or ideally, yesterday. Because it won't be easier next year. It won't be easier in 10 years. These practices become durable, and people somehow grow accustomed to them because ordinary life continues. There's this tendency to imagine a totalitarian state as this grim Soviet stereotype, where it's never springtime. But even under totalitarian rule, people live, love, laugh. I don't think too many people in the USA really grasp that.

DK: I'd like to add to that. The practice of suspending or censoring researchers isn't limited to authoritarian regimes. It happens in democratic countries too. I'm thinking of unfounded accusations by *Neue Zuricher Zeitung* against Prof. Samia Henni at ETH (News, 2025) or the anthropology professor Ghassan Hage suspended from Max Planck in Germany for a public statement deemed antisemitic (EASA, 2024). These practices occur everywhere. The major difference is, however, whether they provoke public opposition or are silently tolerated.

SDW: That returns us to your idea of how much diversity the discourse can tolerate, which leads back to the question: it's not just what we research, how we do it, or how we position ourselves. It's about being able to describe reality. I don't know exactly how we counter the authoritarian turn, but I keep returning to Havel's idea of dignity and living within the truth (Havel, 2018 [1978]). The idea that at the very least we must name all this as an authoritarian strategy. These are some of the ways power tries to subvert reality, and we counter it by naming things as they are.

DK: I think naming things as they are is a good place to close. That's the core purpose of academic project. And one of its main values lies in its ability to hold a diversity of perspectives – yours, the optimistic American one, and mine, the doomsday Eastern European.

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