

Background

Understanding the onset and process “closing space” is vital for designing and implementing democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) programs. Based on desk research and interviews with over 200 respondents, CEPPS/IRI developed detailed narratives of closing space processes in five countries to help answer the following questions:

- What are the early warning signs of closing space?
- What are the common tactics of closing space?
- How does closing space progress over time?
- How do malign international actors shape domestic closing space processes?
- What are the dynamics of democratic resurgence in previously closing space settings?

With this information, policymakers and implementers can formulate more timely, holistic, and targeted programs that respond to closing space conditions and increase democratic resilience to closing space.

Key Findings

The Closing Space Process

The pace of closing can vary widely from several months to several years. However, most cases of closing remain a process, not a distinct event, like a coup d'état.

PRECONDITIONS

Key preconditions for closing included relatively powerful executives; “informal” politics, including high corruption and patron-clientelism; weak governance; political polarization and deadlock; and interaction with repressive regimes in other countries.

TRIGGERS

Key triggers for closing varied, and included economic crisis, political violence, the resolution of ongoing conflicts, military intervention in domestic politics, and international events, such as the blocked accession to an international organization.

EARLY STAGE

Initial stages include subtle closing in the political and governing spaces, usually with the incumbent co-opting key governing institutions, including legislatures, the courts, security services, and electoral management bodies, by appointing party supporters to key positions. These gradual movements deprive the opposition of institutional levers to oppose more overt closing tactics later in the process.

LATE STAGE

More overt closing tactics include imposition of administrative barriers, editorial or administrative control over civil society organizations (CSOs) and media outlets; harassment, intimidation, or violence toward dissidents; and overt electoral manipulation and/or selective prosecution of political opponents. In many cases, these steps were facilitated by vague laws or regulations with broad discretion to state officials to interpret and enforce them.

INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES

International influences on domestic closing space processes generally fell into two categories: rhetorical, strategic, or tactical regional diffusion, or more overt rhetorical or material support.

DEMOCRATIC OPENING

Drivers of opening democratic space include corruption and poor governance. While these factors facilitate closing space in the first place, they also provide the opposition with a campaign focal point. Pronounced corruption scandals often mobilize opposition voters against incumbents or convince successor governments they would also be punished for poor governance. In this sense, corruption and patron-client politics are a double-edged sword for would-be autocrats.

Analytical Framework: Spaces, Key Actors, Tactics, and Recommendations

Democratic space is the formal and informal institutional environment that structures political competition within a country. For any given country, that space for competition may be relatively open, as in Denmark, Estonia, or Sweden in 2019, or relatively closed, as in Eritrea or North Korea in the same period. **We define closing space as reduction of freedom in any one of these spaces that is designed to undermine political competition.**



Political/Electoral

The political space refers to the arena for political competition. The primary actors in this space are political parties, elected officials, independent political figures, and election candidates. Example tactics of closing in the political space are:

- Administrative barriers to party registration, campaigning, or holding events.
- Co-opting members of the opposition.
- Political leaders or party members monitored, harassed, arrested, or killed.
- Fraudulent election processes.

Recommendations: Political party support should continue to encourage development of policy programs and investments in party institutions to maintain member loyalty within opposition parties. When closing is already well underway, political party partners may benefit from short-term support for voter education, helping voters navigate difficult registration or voting processes, mobilizing citizens when gatherings are dangerous or banned outright, and for deterring electoral manipulation.



Economic

The economic space refers to the relationship between the structure of markets and political competition. High levels of public corruption represent a relatively closed economic space meaning access to both markets, public goods and services are restricted based on personal connections or ability to pay. The primary actors in this space are business elites, trade unions, and ordinary consumers. Example tactics of closing in the economic space include:

- Politically motivated audits or regulation.
- Public sector patronage.
- Selective distribution of government contracts, permits, licenses, and/or tax benefits.
- Property rights of citizens violated for political reasons.

Recommendations: Programs to support transparency of economic governance, including open procurement systems, professionalization of the state bureaucracy, and building tax capacity may help build resilience to closing space. However, these economic tools are a double-edged sword for would-be autocrats. In closed and closing space contexts, corruption may provide a potent focal point for popular frustration with the incumbent.



Civic/Associational

The civic space is the arena in which associations of citizens meet to discuss and/or advocate for specific issues outside the purview of the state. The primary actors in this space are citizens, civil society organizations and their staff, international non-governmental organizations, and foreign development agencies. Common tactics of closing in the civic space are:

- Administrative barriers to the ability CSOs to register, access resources, and organize.
- CSO staff monitored, harassed, killed, or jailed.
- Incumbent co-optation of civic actors or CSOs.

Recommendations: To build civic resilience to closing space, DRG programs should use coalition- or network-based organizing approaches with a focus on collective action. While diffuse networks and coalitions can bring many resources and broad public support to bear on incumbents, individual network members may be susceptible to repression or co-optation if the group lacks institutions to maintain unity and overcome collective action problems.



Digital

The digital space is where citizens and organizations communicate online. The primary tools in this space are the internet or communication applications (“apps”) on computers, smart phones, or tablets. The companies that provide these products or services are also actors in the digital space. Common tactics of closing in the digital space are:

- Laws criminalizing online speech.
- Legal or extrajudicial monitoring of online activity or speech.
- Permanent or temporary restrictions on accessing the internet or applications.

Recommendations: DRG programs that engage officials on issues of information disorders, terrorism, and/or hate speech should ensure that laws and regulations are limited and targeted, with little room for interpretation, and with clearly designated responsibilities for interpretation and enforcement. To respond to direct tactics like harassment, trolling, doxing, hacking, and DDOS attacks, funders, implementers, and local partners should consider including a technical ICT training component, including on digital operational security, for DRG programs.



Media

The media space captures the environment in which citizens learn and apply knowledge about public affairs and public officials’ performance, with the goal of holding those officials accountable for providing public goods, services, and beneficial public policies. The primary actors in this space are print, radio, and television journalists and media companies and owners. Common tactics of closing in the media space are:

- Threats and violence against critical journalists.
- Censorship, self-censorship, and selective application of laws governing acceptable speech (e.g. slander/libel, hate speech, foreign influence, etc.).
- Editorial pressure on media outlets.
- Manipulation of advertising markets.

Recommendations: DRG media programs should support independent journalists and outlets in protecting themselves and their sources, but should also support the development of independent and sustainable ecosystems, with outlets funded by content consumers and/or advertising by small and medium sized enterprises that are not connected with entrenched patron-client political networks.



Ideational

The ideational space is where citizens and public intellectuals, academics, artists, and cultural leaders share and discuss ideas. The ideational space has two types of actors: First are cultural actors, such as musicians, poets, artists, and stage performers. Second are intellectual actors, such as professors, students, and researchers. Common tactics of closing in the ideational space are:

- Surveillance of classroom discussion and student activities.
- Censorship, harassment, imprisonment and self-censorship of critical academics, researchers, or cultural figures.
- Faculty hiring or advancement and artistic patronage linked to political affiliation.

Recommendations: To counter incumbents’ efforts to reward friendly academics, public intellectuals and artists, DRG programs should encourage transparent governance, including meritocratic recruitment and promotion, within educational, research, and artistic institutions. To thwart closing space ideational space through patronage or politicized recruitment and promotion, DRG programs should encourage the adoption of funding models that are transparent and self-sustaining to reduce the influence of state patronage in the ideational space.



Individual

The individual space captures the degree to which citizens of a country are afforded basic individual freedoms, including private property rights, political integrity, freedom of movement, freedom of thought, conscience and religion and equality under the law. In this sense, individual space refers to governmental and state respect for, and citizen freedom to exercise, fundamental human rights. The primary actors in this space are in individual citizens or non-political groups of citizens that share a common identity, such as religion, ethnicity, language, or sexual orientation. Common tactics of closing in the individual space are:

- Formal or informal restrictions on basic rights such as the right to assemble, protest, or speak freely.
- Identity groups verbally harassed, scapegoated, killed, or arrested.
- New laws targeting the rights of identity groups.

Recommendations: DRG programs should incorporate a deliberate, intentional focus on inclusion, and more specifically, intersectionality. Support for civic engagement, coalition- or network-based advocacy or human rights programs should incorporate a distinct analysis to identify unique challenges faced by groups with intersectional identities. These findings and design elements should be mainstreamed in related program activities. Since incumbents rely on the complicity of non-marginalized identity groups to close the individual space, resilience depends on these groups understanding that they have an interest in defending the rights of smaller and more vulnerable groups.



Governing

The governing space refers to the role of state institutions, including branches of government, ministries and sub-ministerial agencies, and levels of government, in the political process. Closure in this space manifests in partisan control of government branches, the bureaucracy (agencies, commissions and statutory/regulatory bodies) and security services, as well as the weakening of institutional checks on executive power. The primary actors in this space are the institutions of government at the national and local level including the executive, legislature, courts, departments, and state agencies. Common tactics of closing in the governing space are:

- Partisan control government branches, agencies, or committees, such as courts, the election commission, bureaucracy, police, security services, statutory and regulatory bodies, and commissions.
- Informal control of governing bodies through nepotism or patronage networks.
- Constitutional or legal changes that eliminate or weaken the power of other branches of government to hold the executive accountable.

Recommendations: DRG programs should support local partners in identifying and pushing back on official attempts to shift the balance of power between branches or levels of government, especially in the wake of economic crises, public health crises, or natural disasters. Also, DRG support to build state capacity should focus on professionalizing the state administration, including through meritocratic recruitment, promotion, and dismissal. Furthermore, legislative development and programmatic political party programs should help professionalize those institutions in order to help them to better push back against closing space and respond to governing challenges through their own initiatives.

General Recommendations

To anticipate closing space, consider how events in one space might facilitate, or interact with, events in others. For example, small movements in the political and governing spaces may enable more pronounced crackdowns in other spaces. As another example, closing in the digital space in the form of laws restricting free speech online may also affect the civic space by influencing how CSOs conduct or promote their work including advocacy efforts.

Be intentional about program targeting. Actors in distinct conceptual spaces have different strategies and tactics available to them, as well as different incentives. For example, CSO or political party partners who are being directly threatened or intimidated will respond differently to DRG programs than those who are being co-opted by incumbents. Similarly, media partners and human rights organizations have different repertoires of strategies to respond to closing space. Finally, as incumbent parties are often key perpetrators but are rarely unitary, there may be moderates or reform champions that may be amenable to pushing back on closing tactics.

Intervene early. Subtle movements in the governing or political spaces (e.g. co-optation of political competition or shifts in appointment powers) may be more difficult to detect and it may be tougher to mobilize broad opposition to them, especially as opposed to broad restrictions that target large number of citizens. However, success may be more likely if the issue is less salient, and early intervention may disrupt or delay “spirals” of closing space.