Polity Diffusion and Regime Security in Central Asia

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Introduction

More than a decade ago, Alexander Cooley (2013) authored an article in which he coined the term "league of authoritarian gentlemen." In his scholarly contribution, Cooley drew attention to a prevailing phenomenon involving political elites from Russia, China, and Central Asia. He underscored their persistent endeavour to establish alliances characterized by opposition to democratic principles, concurrently formulating strategies and tools designed to counter democratic norms. A decade later, it is becoming increasingly evident that this trend has not merely survived but has, in fact, gathered momentum. The political elites of the Eurasian region appear to have fortified their capacities, becoming more proficient, efficient, and resolute in their pursuit of the shrinking space for political freedoms and civil rights within the region.

This chapter represents an extension of existing research within the scholarly domain of studies in authoritarian political systems, autocratic diffusion, and the concept of authoritarian learning. It seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of prevailing political trends within the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, while also considering their broader regional context. Notably, this study removes Turkmenistan from under its spotlight, as that nation's political leadership has embarked on an evident trajectory toward totalitarianism, making it distinct from the rest of the Central Asian region and the majority of political systems in the world. Turkmenistan truly is a fascinating case and deserves a separate analytical endeavour.

Focusing on the contemporary period, which roughly includes the past five to ten years, this chapter engages in detailed exploration of the multifaceted dimensions characterizing autocratic diffusion. Importantly, it approaches this analysis without any normative judgement or biases toward any specific political framework or ideology. Polity here refers to a political

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system in its larger sense. In Central Asia, a polity refers to one of the nondemocratic illiberal political regimes of Central Asia, which, for the purposes of semantic ease, are grouped under the umbrella term of autocracies. While this grouping does not do justice to the variety and complexity of nondemocratic regimes in the world in general, and in Central Asia particularly, it does help simplify the analysis and fit it into the scope of this contribution.

The research aims to shed light on the intricate interplay of political dynamics that have unfolded within the Central Asian region during the specified time frame. It does so by adopting a holistic perspective that takes into consideration a range of factors including, but not limited to, governance structures, state–society relations, geopolitical influences, and socioeconomic developments.

Moreover, this contribution places the concepts of autocratic diffusion and authoritarian learning within the broader context of international relations, acknowledging the global implications of autocratic diffusion and its impact on the larger neighbourhood of the Central Asian republics. In doing so, it tries to shed some light on the reciprocal influences and interactions between these nations and external actors, whether in the realm of political alliances, economic cooperation, or security arrangements.

To achieve a nuanced and comprehensive understanding, this analysis draws upon empirical evidence on the ground, highlighting some important political developments that have taken place in recent years. Furthermore, it seeks to engage with the evolving discourse surrounding autocracy and its diffusion, thereby contributing to the ongoing dialogue within the academic community.

In summary, this chapter aspires to contribute valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of autocratic diffusion within the Central Asian region and its broader geopolitical context. Through its empirical analysis, it strives to contribute to our comprehension of the complex interplay between political systems, regional developments, and global forces, ultimately advancing our knowledge within this field of study. While it is a task beyond the scope of this chapter, the ultimate hope is to continue the ongoing academic and policy conversation on autocratic alliances, authoritarian learning and know-how, and how it might shape the dominant political systems of the future world.

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Research on Autocratic Polities

Prior to examining the case study concerning the diffusion of autocratic polities within Central Asia, it is important to address certain conceptual and theoretical intricacies that are required for the purposes of clarity and unambiguity. In this section, a detailed analysis of fundamental concepts, particularly "polity" and "autocracy," is positioned within their broader contextual framework. This serves a twofold purpose: first, it establishes a shared and cohesive framework of key terminologies, which will be used throughout this analysis. Second, it serves as a foundational framework upon which the analysis will be constructed. Having established operational definitions of such terms, I will explore the existing research on polity diffusion and look into such phenomena as autocratic diffusion, authoritarian persistence and resilience, authoritarian legitimation, and hybrid regimes. Finally, it is important to reflect on the emerging body of research on Central Asian authoritarianism as the geographic location and the socio-economic and political impact of the shared Soviet past might have made their own contribution to shaping what the region looks like at the present.

Research on Authoritarianism

Academic inquiry into the nature of political regimes has become more vague and obscure in recent times. It increasingly avoids providing clear-cut categorizations and instead positions real-world regimes along a spectrum that spans from an ideal, almost utopian-style democracy governed by the rule of law at one end to what can be considered a hypothetically dystopian dictatorship at the other. Such an approach to definitions and classifications results in a situation whereas political systems exist within an enormously broad range between these two extremes. In an effort to address these issues, a variety of researchers in the field opted for creating new terms to describe the complexities of contemporary political regimes. What follows below is yet another attempt to structure the existing knowledge and understanding of nondemocratic regimes.

Within the framework of this chapter, I define an *autocratic polity* as an illiberal regime that is characterized by the presence of regular elections, but fails to uphold the principles of the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the protection of certain fundamental civil rights and political

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freedoms. In such political systems elections may occur periodically, but they often take place within a context where the core tenets of liberal democracy, such as the safeguarding of individual rights and the checks and balances on government authority, are deficient or undermined. This definition builds upon the existing research and, hopefully, reflects the complexities of real-world political systems.

Michael Wahman and colleagues (2013) contribute significantly to the *categorization* of autocratic political systems by providing a lucid and compelling typology that is rooted in the institutional framework of these systems. According to their classification (Wahman et al., (2013: 23), they delineate two primary categories: authoritarian regimes devoid of elected legislatures, encompassing military regimes and monarchies, and authoritarian regimes featuring elected legislatures, encompassing no-party, one-party, and multi-party political systems. In addition to this discerning typology, they also identify and acknowledge the existence of hybrid regimes within this complex spectrum of political arrangements.

Research on *hybrid political regimes* is probably one of the most exciting and empirically rich domains within the political sciences. Basing their analysis on contemporary and historical cases, researchers like Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan, and others reflect the complexity of contemporary polities. This research has produced some brilliantly nuanced definitions and catchy labels. For example, Way (2009) and Levitsky and Way (2012) developed a framework to understand the grey areas of polities in the former Socialist world—competitive authoritarianism. Competitive authoritarianism denotes regimes that combine authoritarian practices with democratic institutions and are based upon the ruling party strength, the state's coercive capacity, and state control over wealth.

Autocracy promotion is another large area of relevant research in political sociology, anthropology, and international relations. In the existing research, the dominant opinion seems to be that autocracy promotion can be a reality only as a larger concept rather than as a literal set of formal and explicit instruments and mechanisms aiming to promote and replicate a certain political system. Although the literature on the promotion of autocracies has shown some distinct patterns of outside assistance for autocratic polities, there is limited convincing evidence to confirm that these initiatives represent unified, coherent sets of foreign policies that represent deliberate efforts to advance a particular regime type abroad. Some authors (e.g., Tansey 2015) call on scholars to adhere to a strict definition of

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autocracy promotion implying that it should include both an overarching normative commitment to autocracy and a clear intention on the part of an external actor to support autocracy as a type of political rule in third countries.

Other authors (e.g., Burnell 2010) suggest that a broader and more encompassing definition of autocracy promotion might get closer to contemporary reality. A broadly defined autocracy promotion would allow for a richer and more multifaceted evaluation of the complex interplay between geopolitical considerations and interests, alongside the partially independent influence exerted by authoritarian norms and values. This comprehensive perspective acknowledges that autocracy promotion is not solely a product of calculated strategic interests but is equally influenced by the intrinsic norms and values associated with authoritarian governance.

Autocracy promotion in the area of applied politics has stemmed from the more saturated area of democracy promotion studies. Researchers in democracy promotion saw a real deterioration in liberal democracy throughout the world after several decades of growth in the agents, programs, and activities to promote democracy that took place before and around the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. According to Carothers (2006: 59–62) and Burnell and Schlumberger (2010), this "backlash against democracy" was characterized by the re-establishment of authoritarian regimes, the closing down of democracy promotion agents or a restriction of their activities, and the spreading perception among recipient countries of democracy promotion as a form of Western interventionism or even neoliberal colonialism. Literature that supports autocracies relies on nuanced empirical data from recent decades and is still catching up with the number of scholarly and policy publications on democracy promotion, offering "counter-intuitive" (Börzel 2015: 519) but crucial findings that may help to explain both the opposition to democracy and the inconsistent results of policies intended to promote it.

In particular, researchers have been trying to understand the driving forces underlying autocracy promotion. The motivations may be normative: according to Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse (2012), autocracies need to spread a certain political system in order to gain more legitimacy. A shared economic culture also makes it easier for autocracies to cooperate economically. As an alternative, there are structural considerations within the political economic approach. The issue of stability is crucial, and existing autocracies will only support other autocracies in their region if doing

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so does not jeopardize their own stability, security, or economic interests (Bader et al. 2010).

However, one must note that the reality of democracy and autocracy promotion dynamics are far from being black and white, good versus bad, which is a crucial feature to consider when discussing how they interact with one another. Börzel (2015) found that Western democracies do not consistently commit to promoting democracy; similarly, authoritarian governments' top priorities are stability and security, with the export of norms coming in a distant second. Autocracies are not necessarily promoted by authoritarian governments. To safeguard their political and economic interests, they prefer to pick and choose the precise instances where they feel the need to oppose Western democracy development activities. Research on democratization and democracy promotion, as well as the newly developed subject area of autocracy promotion, has a tendency to overstate democratization's exterior characteristics.

In addition, researchers identify and characterize the mechanisms that are employed to promote autocracy, which can occur either unintentionally or on purpose. These mechanisms are similar to those that promote democracy. Unintentional mechanisms often imply that norms spread by contagion or diffusion, as well as through the influence of good/attractive examples of political governance and economic development (Burnell 2010: 7–8). Authoritarian agents of influence may also dispense autocratic socialization through bilateral and multilateral channels (through international organizations and alliances – more formal leagues of authoritarian gentlemen) in addition to these methods.

Authoritarian diffusion is also interlinked with the ongoing research on *authoritarian legitimation* as a regime security mechanism. For example, Mariya Omelicheva (2016) argues that the extent to which authoritarian legitimation is efficient plays a vital role in the survival of authoritarian regimes. Analyzing the discourses of the Central Asian authoritarian gentlemen in power, she assesses the impact of these presidential discourses on the perception of government legitimacy among the respective populations. The ultimate aim of the carefully crafted rhetoric of autocrats is to ensure that their regimes are perceived and accepted as being morally and politically "right" or "proper." Omelicheva emphasizes the significance of discourse in the cultivation of legitimacy and offers valuable insights into the ways in which authoritarian governments can shape a particular mindset among their populations, fostering acceptance of their rule as inherently justifiable and aligned with prevailing notions of legitimate power.

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Central Asian authoritarianism

In the last 30 years, the republics of Central Asia have undergone a drastic political, social, and economic transformation with the participation of both internal and external actors. Fifteen former Soviet republics embarked on their unique transformation paths back in 1991, and 30 years later they could not have been more different. One does indeed wonder why "the once seemingly monolithic Soviet bloc generated such complex patterns of democracy, quasi democracy, and autocracy" (Hanson 2003: 143).

Nevertheless, there are some shared features that make Central Asia not only a geographic unit, but also a socio-political one. For some time, Kyrgyzstan has stood out thanks to its vibrant civil society, regular changes of power, and relatively free political environment. However, under the current leadership of President Japarov, Kyrgyzstan seems to have finally and completely joined the club: the Central Asian region presents a stable authoritarian environment with a strong democratic deficit, presidential regimes, and unfair elections.

Central Asia has been a subject of a reasonably rich academic attention. Responding to the necessity to reassess the transition era, scholars have examined variables that may have hampered and skewed the political transition process. The transition was hampered by Soviet structural legacies and economic variables, the majority of which were rooted in the breakup of the Soviet economy or in the early post-Soviet setting. Lack of national unity (Kubicek 2010: 41–43) caused by the multi-ethnic composition of former Soviet state-nations (as opposed to Western nation-states, which evolved from ethnic nations to civic nations; Glenn 1999), as well as sub-ethnic identities and loyalties, such as membership of clans and tribes (Collins 2006), were viewed as detrimental to initial state consolidation and democracy building.

Early post-Soviet survival, as well as regime and people survival, was a structural issue. Thus, Radnitz (2010) explains how the survival needs of both elites and masses led to the consolidation of subversive clientelism, in which traditional reliance on the state was replaced by interest-based obligations to independent elites, who began acting as a surrogate state providing social support and employment opportunities to local communities. Under these conditions, there was no room for governmental institutions or democratic practices. The unequal and turbulent economic development during the early years of independence was linked to survival discourses:

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the economic environment at the start of the transition was unsuitable for a successful political transition.

Some scholars, on the other hand, have emphasized actor-oriented aspects. During the transition phase, ruling elites and significant political personalities faced uncertainty and used nondemocratic politics to stabilize their individual nations (see Isaacs 2010; Nourzhanov 2010 on Nazarbayev, first president of Kazakhstan; Anderson 1999 on Akayev, the first Kyrgyz President). Given "the highly personalistic context of Central Asian politics" (Perlman and Gleason 2005, 104), which remains a fundamental hurdle to successful democratization in the area (Warkotsch 2011), the influence of Central Asian leaders cannot be overstated.

In this regard, the personalities of Presidents and their reluctance "to give up their power and actually abide by 'rule of law' principles" are seen as key challenges to a successful democratization process (Kangas 2004: 82). Below them, non-ruling business elites are not interested in democracy as it does not serve their immediate survival strategies. They are either interested in protection by the state (Radnitz 2010), or in investment in the state (either directly or indirectly) to rip benefits through corruption or administrative power (Engvall 2016). The role of the masses is ambiguous in this regard. Western mass media and some political observers saw the people as the key drivers of democratic change during the Kyrgyz revolutions in 2005 and 2010. However, some researchers have delved deep enough into Kyrgyz political soil to distinguish between true democratic mobilization and elite-led mobilization in which the masses behave as "weapons of the wealthy" (Hale 2015; Radnitz 2010:.15–27).

The labels "benevolent authoritarianism" (Anderson 1999: 55), "Central Asian hybrids" (Matveeva 1999), "patrimonial regimes" (Collins 2006), "imitation democracies" (Furman and Weiler 2008) and, more recently, "patronal political regimes" (Hale 2015) and "imagined democracies" (Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan 2015) were developed in an attempt to explain the peculiarities of Central Asian political regimes. While these characterizations have some conceptual parallels, Henry Hale's patronal politics theory (and, to a lesser extent, Isaacs (2010) neopatrimonial regimes) better meet the research needs of this work. Hale rethinks traditional patron–client networks in the Central Asian setting and offers a broader analytical framework for a more thorough knowledge of the domestic backdrop in the target nations. Furman's imitation democracy concept and Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan's imagined democracy concept are instrumental for explaining the ability of Central Asian political regimes to mimic democratic institutions

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and practices without actually applying them. Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan (2015) addressed the coordination and co-optation strategies that Central Asian nondemocratic polities use to mimic democracy in the eyes of the international community and the part of the domestic population, who care about democracy.

Political context in Central Asia

As the previous section demonstrates, Central Asian political regimes represent different varieties of hybrid regimes with strong authoritarian inclinations. In this section, I would like to touch upon potential underlying reasons why the contemporary republics of Central Asia might be inherently authoritarian. In addition, one cannot ignore the elephant in the room – the regional trend-setter Russia. While Russia's influence might be subsiding against the background of its ongoing invasion of Ukraine, one cannot ignore its importance as a norm entrepreneur and political trend-setter in the region and beyond.

Why are Central Asian regimes autocratic?

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution in the early 1990s, the five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan found themselves facing similar challenges. The arrival of independence was rather unexpected. Given the scale of transformation, one cannot imagine them having been ready for such a significant change. All five republics had been integral parts of the Soviet Union. Through decades of assimilation and control, they had inherited and internalized various aspects of their borders, political institutions, governing elites, and other critical social and political attributes from the Soviet period. Each of these states had its own titular nationality, although none of them were ethnically homogeneous thanks to the Soviet ethnic melting pot and the early 20th century's deportations of entire ethnic groups. Notably, Kazakhstan faced a unique challenge in this regard, as Kazakhs did not constitute an overall majority within their own borders. In the early independence years, all five Central Asian states drew, to varying degrees, from a shared Soviet political culture and economic development. However, this has changed due to the

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differing economic and political reform paths chosen by the respective Central Asian ruling elites.

More recently, the nations of Central Asia have grappled with a succession of substantial political and economic challenges. Within this tumultuous landscape, issues of inequality and poverty have been steadily on the rise, owing in part to the perceived lack of commitment on the part of their respective governments to fostering a more equitable redistribution of economic resources. In response to these disparities, the population has resorted to large-scale protests as a means of expression, although these gatherings are often met with forceful and suppressive measures by the governments in power. Regrettably, these responses by the authorities frequently arise out of non-functional or inadequate solutions to the underlying issues. The Armed Conflict Location Event Data Project (ACLED)[2] regularly updates data on violence against civilians and protests, and both seem to be steadily increasing. However, regular protests and even government coups in Kyrgyzstan do not seem to have resulted in a less authoritarian or more democratic governance.

One of the reasons might be that Central Asia has not been democratic in the conventional sense. It transitioned from largely autocratic monarchies to being under the rule of an even more autocratic empire to being part of a nondemocratic mammoth of a polity. There has simply not been any consistent lasting and internally developed experience of democratic governance—but there has been plenty of authoritarian experience, which is the regional normal.

Another reason might be a vicious circle of nondemocratic governance and public frustration. The cumulative effect of these developments has had a discernible impact on the authoritarian character of the political regimes in Central Asia. This has manifested in a growing sense of crisis surrounding the legitimacy of these regimes, as the populace increasingly perceives them as being unresponsive to their socio-economic needs and grievances. In essence, the confluence of economic challenges, social unrest, and the authoritative suppression of dissent has exacerbated the legitimacy crisis faced by these political regimes, further consolidating their authoritarian tendencies.

Finally, if one steps away from normative considerations when analyzing the peculiarities and the human toll of authoritarian regimes, one can probably try to see things from the perspective of an authoritarian leader or rul-

2 See https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard for more information.

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ing elite. In autocratic political environments irrespective of geographic location, transitions that take place within the established power hierarchies often represent an inherently uncertain and potentially dangerous phase. Such transitions create conditions that might undermine the very fabric of the political system making it susceptible to instability and disintegration. The absence of functioning institutionalized mechanisms for the routine transfer of power amplifies the challenges inherent to these transitions (Vasilache 2017: 25–26).

Transitions (especially unexpected ones) in autocratic political systems are riddled with uncertainty and fragility, which are detrimental to the general public's and the country's economic development. In a certain way, the establishment of a tightly controlled autocracy creates a vicious circle, where the fear of instability leads to further constriction of political freedoms and civic rights. To an extent, this is what took place in the Central Asian republics in the initial period of independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Russia as a trend-setter in the region

Russia's influence in Central Asia can hardly be overestimated. However, in order to understand the extent of this influence, one needs to dig deeper into the shared past of Russia and Central Asia. Russia, having once held colonial influence in the region, is frequently characterized as a strategic ally and is even colloquially referred to as the "elder brother" in the discourse of Central Asian governing authorities. The dynamics of Central Asia–Russia relations are shaped by a combination of historical legacies, economic and security collaboration, and the varying levels of political and economic dependency of Central Asian nations on Russia.

Over several centuries, the Russian Empire engaged in sporadic socioeconomic and military interactions with the tribes and states of Central Asia. However, between 1855 and 1876, a series of negotiations, alliances, conflicts, and military conquests led to the Russian Empire extending its dominion over the territories that would eventually become the contemporary Central Asian republics (Keller 2020: 21–109). This period of Russian imperial rule was marked by a typical colonial governance approach, where the colonial power assumed control over administrative, financial, and tax matters, while delegating other affairs to local administrations. This laid

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the groundwork for a pattern that persists to this day: significant political decision-making for Central Asia is centred in Russia.

The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) established strategies for integrating sedentary, nomadic, and semi-nomadic Central Asian communities into a common cultural, linguistic, social, and economic Soviet identity throughout the Soviet era (1917–1991). Many generations of the USSR's social and ethnic groups, especially those in Central Asia, went through complete Soviet educational and socialization cycles. The Soviet Union aggressively and successfully implemented policies that encouraged shared language, culture, values, and social norms in order to integrate Russian language, culture, values, and social norms into Central Asian communities. This process resulted in a number of significant parallels between Russian and Central Asian countries, including the use of Russian as a common language and shared values and systems of governance.

In addition to this, there is another way in which Russia has become a trend setter in the region. In the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's approach to the former Soviet republics primarily aimed at facilitating a peaceful disentanglement from Soviet-era ties. However, this initial phase of relative inaction evolved into a more assertive Russian policy directed at what it termed its "Near Abroad." During this shift, Russia's perspective on the region underwent a transformation: from viewing it through the lens of "oriental despotism" to emphasizing a normative solidarity with it (Lo 2015: 9). This shift in perception, characterized by the emphasis on normative solidarity, assumes significance because it underscored the traditional conservative values that hold substantial importance for the nondemocratic political systems of both Russia and Central Asia.

As an autocracy with strong presidential power, Russia feels comfortable when dealing with the Central Asian "league of authoritarian gentlemen" (Cooley 2013). Autocracy promotion research has not kept up with the speed of these processes and has not yet investigated the promotional instruments that have been created in the last decade or so. This is partly due to linguistic and logistical difficulties. Understanding state autocracy promotion agents, such as Russia, their policies and modes of operation is extremely important for the development, implementation, and success of democracy promotion policies, which constitute an integral part of the international development agenda. Autocracy promotion significantly impedes democracy promotion efforts and affects the state of democracy both globally and in specific countries.

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However, one way to monitor contemporary developments in the policy field is to follow Russia's activities in other countries closely and to be aware of newly established public diplomacy and soft power institutions and trace their work and the impact it is having in third countries. Existing research offers some relevant "counterintuitive" arguments, for example, that autocratic actors are capable of unintentionally empowering liberal reform (Börzel 2015: 519). However, the autocracy promotion area of study lags behind democracy promotion studies despite emerging concern regarding the impact of autocratic powers on external democracy promotion. While this area is underresearched, there have been efforts to identify autocracy promotion agents and their specific policies, but these efforts have focused on particular aspects or arguments related to autocracy promotion. For example, a recent book by Anastassia Obydenkova and Alexander Libman (2015) explores how international organizations created by nondemocratic powers consolidate authoritarian regimes in their member states.

Russia still sets political trends in Central Asia—it has to compete with other external actors, of course. Central Asian regimes are also capable of producing unique combinations of polity elements. However, the historical path dependence, the economic and security cooperation, and the relative compatibility of Russian governance elements with Central Asian political structures make it all too easy for Russian to diffuse authoritarian practices and norms in the region. Whether this is an intentional process or not is difficult to confirm and validate. Nevertheless, the next section will hopefully demonstrate some of the mechanisms of autocratic diffusion, including the diffusion of Russian polity norms and values, in Central Asia.

Polity diffusion and regime security in Central Asia

This section examines the common characteristics of authoritarian political systems in Central Asia with an emphasis on replication and reciprocal learning. It is important to note, however, that there are no overt authoritarian exchanges or training programs designed to strengthen the capacity of these regional regimes to suppress dissent and impose restrictions on freedom and rights. Additionally, it is doubtful whether these actions are taken with the deliberate intention of making people's lives miserable. Instead, the difficulties of constructing a workable political system without compromising human rights and civil freedoms and the fears aroused by doing so are to blame for the authoritarian tendencies of regional elites.

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In other words, what could be happening in Central Asia is not precisely the advancement of authoritarianism in the literal sense. All the data point to autocratic diffusion as the most effective method for spreading and consolidating dictatorship. Based on the limited study done for this contribution, it is conceivable to pinpoint at least three different routes through which authoritarian polities spread over the area.

The first is the obvious and blatant method of legislative copy-and-paste. In Central Asian legislation, bills against foreign agents, propaganda, misinformation, and other subjects are becoming very widespread and are frequently used to further restrict political and human rights. The second umbrella mechanism relates to security collaboration. The national security agencies of Central Asian republics exhibit a pattern of persistent and tight coordination when it comes to finding and extraditing independent journalists and civil society activists, even though other areas of regional cooperation may be trailing behind. Transnational repression extends beyond regional borders because nations like Turkey and Belarus are connected to both formal and unofficial security exchange networks. Finally, authoritarian polities have adopted disruptive technology and entered the digital age, just like the rest of the world as they employ digital surveillance to ensure the survival of their respective regimes.

This list of autocratic polity diffusion mechanisms is far from being exhaustive. Indeed, research on a larger scale is required to identify and map the many ways in which autocratic polities cooperate to survive and thrive. Nevertheless, this might be a good starting point to inspire further research and deeper analysis of how authoritarian regimes increase and multiply.

Legislative copy-paste

Since its adoption in 2012, the Russian law on foreign agents has become an international gold standard as a tool for shutting down non-state mass media and civil society organizations (*Coda* 2021). The Russian law was probably inspired by the American Foreign Agents Registration Act, but has been transformed to be more restrictive. Belarus started building up its toolkit against media and civil society organizations back in 2011 and has managed to create one of the most comprehensive sets of legislation targeting freedom of speech, civic and political rights so far. Egypt's President

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Abdel Fattah El Sisi introduced a similar law in 2017.[3] Hungary followed suit also in 2017.[4] Nicaragua adopted a similar piece of legislation in 2020, and in the same year Poland started a campaign to introduce one too. While the Polish bill only requires mass media and non-commercial organizations to declare their sources of funding, it seems to be following a similar logic and path as the Russian law[5].

In Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is probably the nation that uses Russia's legislative best practices most frequently (Bayizbekov and Ulukbek uulu 2020). In 2020 a member of the Kyrgyz parliament, Gulshat Asylbaeva, introduced a bill on information manipulation. A large portion of the bill had been copy-pasted from Russian Federal Law "On information, information technologies, and information security."[6] If it had been an academic piece of writing, no anti-plagiarism checker would have let it go through to publication owing to the volume of borrowed text. Plagiarism issues aside, though, this bill creates a framework to detain and prosecute any person or organization engaged in the production and broadcasting of content. Given that even individual bloggers are now considered media outlets, it could potentially induce self-censorship and further reduce freedom of speech in Kyrgyzstan. More recently, the Kyrgyz Parliament passed the Law "On foreign representatives" initiated by MP Nadira Narmatova. The Law has already caused concerns of international organizations and associations as it uses a similar Russian law and could be used to further limit political and civic freedoms and rights[7].

Kazakhstan is also engaged in this legislative learning exercise: its foreign agents law is already in force. In 2023 the state started publishing lists of

3 The UN's Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights raised the issue with this law at https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2017/05/repressive-new-ngo-law-deeply-damaging-human-rights-egypt-zeid?LangID=E&NewsID=21678, last accessed on September 8, 2023.

4 See a BBC report on the adoption of the law in Hungary at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40258922, last accessed on September 8, 2023.

5 See more at Reuters https://www.reuters.com/article/poland-ngos-idUSL8N2CT53C, last accessed on September 8, 2023.

6 The Russian version of the law can be accessed at the Unified Register of Roskomnadzor at https://eais.rkn.gov.ru/docs.eng/149.pdf, last accessed on September 10, 2023.

7 The UN special rapporteurs expressed their concerns about the draft law here https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/en/248422-un-special-rapporteurs-have-urged-government-kyrgyz-republic-reconsider-and-withdraw-draft; the Committee to Protect Journalist spoke against the law here https://cpj.org/2023/10/cpj-calls-on-kyrgyzstan-parliament-to-reject-russian-style-foreign-agents-bill/.

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non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with foreign funding. The fact that there are largely two types of NGO in the country—government-organized ones and genuine ones funded by a variety of donors—makes it more difficult for independent NGOs to apply for funding for fear of potential repercussions (Sadvakassov 2023).[8] Another piece of legislation that might have been inspired by Russian legislative know-how is the law on disinformation. Article 274 of the Criminal Code was amended by the Kazakhstani government in 2014 to address the intentional spreading of misleading information. The law was intended to combat false and misleading material, but it is frequently exploited by the government to target any content it deems objectionable. This legislative amendment has already resulted in several civil society activists receiving prison terms.[9]

Tajikistan follows the pattern too: A similar piece of legislation has been discussed for over a decade.[10] However, given the already oppressive nature of the government in Tajikistan and years of political repression, the potential suspects are probably largely non-existent. Uzbekistan adopted the same restrictive legislation in 2022 and is currently implementing it too (Niyasova and Schweisfurth, 2022).

Learning best practices from the political, legal, and economic development experience of other nations is a sign of healthy government that is learning from others' failures and successes. However, in the case of polity diffusion and legislative know-how exchange in the larger region of Eurasia, this practice has turned into knowledge exchange on political oppression.

Security cooperation

Transnational cooperation is another potentially benign practice, which might have taken a different turn in the Central Asian neighbourhood. If you find yourself in trouble with any ruling elite in Central Asia for criticizing your government, it can be quite difficult to find a safe location nearby—one has to travel far to escape the long arm of political oppression.

8 See more in Sadvakassov 2023.

9 Read more about these cases and the overall context around this legislative amendment at the Global Voice's piece by Sofya Du Bulay at https://advox.globalvoices.org/2023/05/09/in-kazakhstan-political-dissidents-accused-of-spreading-disinformation/.

10 See more in the Institute for War and Peace Reporting's coverage of the bill in Tajikistan at https://iwpr.net/global-voices/restrictive-ngo-law-way-tajikistan.

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Transnational oppression is an efficient and quick mechanism for national governments to locate and return their opponents for persecution. The geography of transnational oppression stretches far beyond Central Asian borders. In the last five years, Turkey has become particularly active in this regard as the ruling elite chases after affiliates of Fetullah Gulen.[11] In 2022 Turkish security services abducted Orhan Inandi, a former Turkish citizen with a Kyrgyz passport.[12] More recently, a similar practice was used to bring a Turkish citizen back from Tajikistan.[13] Surprisingly enough, even democratic countries like Germany can become involved in the persecution of Central Asian civil society activists. There are several cases of deported activists getting prison sentences for expressing their opinions or criticizing their governments after being brought back from democratic countries.[14]

Another way in which security services and other state agencies collaborate to punish foreign and their own citizens is by the weaponization of passports. A passport defines and affects its holder's rights, obligations, mobility, and, generally, his or her existence on any territory governed by some kind of authority. States hold a monopoly on the issue of this very crucial document. Belonging to a state or passport citizenship is an integral part of the contemporary nation-state-based global political order. The importance of this document for the individual and the state's ability to issue and remove it can make it into a weapon for use by states against individuals (and, sometimes, even against another state). The weaponization of passports (sometimes referred to as "weaponization of nationality") can be a powerful oppressive mechanism as it effectively implies legal annihilation of a citizen.

Citizenship deprivation and passport removal represent a fairly universal (yet highly controversial) practice around the world. In former colonial powers such as the United Kingdom, it sometimes reflects on the inequality of former colonial subjects as this process may be used in pursuit of the goal of unmaking citizens of non-white descent (Kapoor and Narkowicz 2019). In countries like China, passport removals can affect a whole ethnic group.

11 More on the background of Fetullah Gulen is available at https://www.dw.com/en/from-ally-to-scapegoat-fethullah-gulen-the-man-behind-the-myth/a-37055485.

12 More about this case is available at https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-inandi-abducted-turkey-prison-gulen/32462396.html.

13 More about this case is available here https://stockholmcf.org/turkish-intelligence-allegedly-abducted-turkish-businessman-from-tajikistan/.

14 One of these cases is covered here https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-activist-deported-by-germany-gets-seven-years-in-prison.

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China's weaponization of passports has targeted Uyghurs, who have either been coerced into cultural assimilation through "re-education camps," disappeared,[15] or made stateless.[16]

The weaponization of passports does not always target citizens or involve the removal of travel documents. Russia has been using passportization for the de facto annexation of the territory of its neighbours over the last ten years (Artman 2013). Mass distribution of Russian passports and citizenship in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and more recently in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine has served a dual purpose (Hyde 2023). On the one hand, it has created a *casus belli*—a reason to go to war with Georgia and Ukraine (to protect the newly minted Russian citizens). On the other, passportization produced territorial pockets in Georgia and Ukraine, where the substantial number of passport-carrying Russian citizens called Georgia and Ukraine's authority over those territories into question.

Some countries target individuals rather than groups of individuals. Russia, as well as Belarus have long used removal of passports or creating additional hurdles to renew expired passports in order to both punish and capture their dissenting citizens (Liubakova 2023).[17] For example, Belarus removed the option of receiving or renewing passports from its diplomatic missions abroad leaving thousands of Belarusians with no choice but to return to Belarus when their passports expired. Given that a large number of opposition leaders and civil society activists left the country after the pro-democracy protests in 2020, this effectively means they will either have to become stateless people or face persecution in Belarus. In Central Asia there are plenty of similar cases. Most notably, a Kyrgyz investigative

15 BBC 2022. "Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide?", BBC World News, available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22278037, last accessed on September 10, 2023.

16 See more in the 2020 report "Weaponized passports: The crisis of Uyghur statelessness" published by the Uyghur Human Rights Project, available at https://uhrp.org/statement/weaponized-passports-the-crisis-of-uyghur-statelessness/, last accessed on September 10, 2023.

17 Liubakova, H. 2023. "Belarus dictator weaponizes passports in new attach on exiled opposition", Atlantic Council's Ukraine Alert, available at https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/belarus-dictator-weaponizes-passports-in-new-attack-on-exiled-opposition/, last accessed on 10.09.2023.

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journalist, Bolot Temirov, was quickly indicted and deported to Russia on a weekend evening.[18]

Finally, it should also be noted that autocratic polities are employing the best available digital technologies to consolidate control over their populations. While digital surveillance has become an omnipresent issue across many countries in the world, in Central Asia, it is used by the ruling regimes to identify dissent (Dall'Agnola 2023: 231–232). Interestingly, this area of expertise was dominated by Russia for some time, but China has replaced Russia at the moment. Thanks to a shared market and language, Russian businesses had better opportunities to introduce their equipment in the area. However, they were unable to compete with Chinese businesses because they lacked the necessary technological skills. The fact that Russian Vega company, for example, which completed the first stage of traffic monitoring in Bishkek, was unsuccessful in winning the auction for the second, more extensive stage, is an example of the technological unpreparedness of Russian businesses.[19] Chinese surveillance technologies certainly entail a big leap for the autocratic polities of Central Asia as they facilitate further consolidation of their political regimes.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to continue the ongoing political and academic conversation on the authoritarian backlash, or the increasingly authoritarian environment in certain parts of the world. For several decades, academic research focused on the interconnection between democracy and development, and the aspects of democracy promotion by various actors. The rise of authoritarianism in the last decade or so has prompted both academia and policy-making communities in the Western democracies to turn their gaze towards the rich variety of autocratic polities and hybrid regimes. As a result of the ongoing scholarly and political attention being paid to authoritarianism, we have the privilege of engaging in a fascinating exploration of what autocracies are and how they survive, learn, and multiply.

18 More about this journalist's case can be found at the Human Rights Watch at https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/25/kyrgyzstan-expelled-journalist-should-be-allowed-return-russia.

19 This source provides a detailed and technically more advanced account of the state of digital surveillance in Central Asia https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/digital-surveillance-solutions-in-central-asian-states/.

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I have focused on the region of Central Asia. Hemmed in by two such strong authoritarian powers as China and Russia, the region has had limited to no experience of efficient and long-standing democratic systems. At the same time, after 30 years in transition, Central Asian political systems have transformed into unique hybrid regimes with strong authoritarian inclinations. Through this rather limited analytical exercise, I have attempted to explore their nature and track how they diffuse authoritarian norms and practices. Within the scope of this contribution, I have managed to identify and touch upon two key means of autocratic diffusion—legislative know-how and security cooperation, including digital surveillance. While it is quite difficult to provide an exhaustive list of the many ways in which autocracies learn from each other and support each other's survival and legitimacy, it is important to continue this inquiry. Understanding how autocracies operate is crucial for policy decision making in democracies, as well as for populations in authoritarian countries to be able to understand their governments and manage their expectations and actions.

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