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Leadership and Democratization in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Comparative Analysis of Political Systems of Post-Soviet States

Kazakistan ve Kırgızistan'da Liderlik ve Demokratikleşme: Post-Sovyet Ülkelerin Siyasi Sistemlerinin Karşılaştırmalı Analizi

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the prospects of democratization in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan by comparing their political systems. The primary objective is to identify the factors influencing the varying degrees of democratic development between these two Central Asian states, despite their similar socio-cultural and historical backgrounds. The methodology employed involves a systems analysis approach, examining both "input" and "output" functions of the political systems. Key variables include the levels of democracy as the independent variable, and political parties, leaders, resource distribution, and opposition suppression as dependent variables. Results indicate that Kazakhstan, under Nazarbayev, maintained a more controlled political environment through patronage networks and resource allocation, effectively limiting opposition and preserving stability. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan exhibited a more dynamic political landscape with multiple power shifts, driven by competitive party politics and less centralized control over resources. However, both states face significant challenges, including regional fragmentation, corruption, and the influence of Islamist movements, which complicate their democratic trajectories. The findings suggest that while Kyrgyzstan shows potential for democratic development due to its parliamentary system and active civil society, Kazakhstan's path is hindered by entrenched authoritarian practices and elite control.

Keywords: Political system, democratization, leadership, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, system analysis.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Kazakistan ve Kırgızistan'ın siyasi sistemlerini karşılaştırarak bu iki Orta Asya ülkesinde demokratikleşme perspektiflerini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Ana hedef, benzer sosyo-kültürel ve tarihsel geçmişlerine rağmen bu iki devlet arasındaki farklı demokratik gelişim seviyelerini etkileyen faktörleri belirlemektir. Kullanılan metodoloji, siyasi sistemlerin hem "giriş" hem de "çıkış" işlevlerini inceleyen bir sistem analizi yaklaşımını içermektedir. Anahtar değişkenler, bağımsız değişken olarak demokrasi seviyeleri ve bağımlı değişkenler olarak siyasi partiler, liderler, kaynak dağılımı ve muhalefet baskısıdır. Sonuçlar, Nazarbayev yönetimindeki Kazakistan'ın, patronaj ağı ve kaynak dağılımı yoluyla daha kontrollü bir siyasi ortamı koruyarak muhalefeti etkili bir şekilde sınırladığını ve istikrarı sağladığını göstermektedir. Buna karşılık, Kırgızistan daha dinamik bir siyasi manzara sergilemekte, rekabetçi parti politikaları ve kaynaklar üzerindeki daha az merkezileşmiş kontrol ile birçok güç değişimi yaşamaktadır. Ancak her iki devlet de bölgesel parçalanma, yolsuzluk ve İslamcı hareketlerin etkisi gibi önemli zorluklarla karşı karşıyadır ve bu durum demokratik gelişim süreçlerini zorlaştırmaktadır. Bulgular, Kırgızistan'ın parlamenter sistemi ve aktif sivil toplumu nedeniyle demokratik gelişim için potansiyel gösterdiğini, ancak Kazakistan'ın yolunun kökleşmiş otoriter uygulamalar ve elit kontrolü tarafından engellendiğini öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyasi sistem, demokratikleşme, liderlik, Kırgızistan, Kazakistan, sistem analizi.

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Introduction

Over the past 33 years, the states of Central Asia have not been able to get rid of the authoritarian style of government. The problem of the formation and development of political systems in these countries lies in the fact that the concept of transitology, created within the framework of understanding the Western experience of global democratization and revealing the sequence of events and the general logic of a systematic transition to democracy, does not fully work when analyzing the political processes taking place in the post-Soviet space. This is explained by the peculiarities of social specifics, the lack of liberal democratic traditions, as well as the difficulties of the still unfinished transition period, which previously required and continues to require the adoption of unpopular ideas on the part of the executive branch.

Authoritarianism has taken root in the post-Soviet countries for a number of reasons related to historical, political, economic and social factors. First, the legacy of the Soviet regime has left a deep imprint on the political culture and governance structure in these countries. The Soviet system was based on centralized control and suppression of political opposition, which led to the absence of traditions of democracy and civil society (Hale, 2015). Second, many post-Soviet countries faced serious economic and social challenges during the period of transformation. Economic crises, high unemployment and declining living standards created conditions for increasing political instability. In such conditions, authoritarian leaders could position themselves as guarantors of order and stability, which contributed to their popularity among the population (Åslund, 2007). In addition, the weakness of institutions and the lack of effective checks and balances create favorable conditions for the concentration of power in the hands of a narrow circle of people. Corruption, clannishness and patronage networks become the basis of the political system, which hinders the development of democratic processes (Hale, 2005: 145). Finally, cultural and historical features also play a role in the stability of authoritarianism. Some countries have long-standing traditions of strong central government and limited citizen participation in political life. These traditions can increase public tolerance for authoritarian practices and resistance to democratic change (Radnitz, 2020).

However, despite this trend, not all states in this region are moving strictly in this direction. If a hard form of authoritarianism has been established in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, and a softer version has been established in Kazakhstan, then Kyrgyzstan can safely be called a state where there are tendencies towards a more hybrid regime. And yet, if you refer to Freedom House statistics, all states of Central Asia do not fit the classification of hybrid regimes - Uzbekistan (12), Turkmenistan (2), Tajikistan (7), Kazakhstan (23), Kyrgyzstan (27) (Freedom House, 2023). But even here, in comparison with its neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan stand out for its relatively better freedom indicators. The main objective of this work is to identify the causes of this phenomenon using the example of a comparative analysis of the political systems of Kazakhstan, a neighbor of Kyrgyzstan.

This choice is not a coincidence, since they both had similar starting points. Culturally, both have a nominally Muslim majority states with close ethnic ties, although levels of religiosity were low, and behavior was often infused with pre-Islamic rituals and practices, as well as Soviet-era practices. In both cases, the dominant culture was historically nomadic. This means that peoples lived in decentralized, egalitarian and often anti-state conditions. Both states emerged in 1991, having experienced essentially the same political and demographic changes during the Soviet period (Schatz 2009: 204).

Both faced problematic physical and human geography. Kazakhstan is a vast, sparsely populated area that is particularly difficult to effectively project state power, and Kyrgyzstan is divided into north and south by a mountain range that is only passable seasonally. In short, there is no reason to believe that Kyrgyzstan is guaranteed to be more democratic than its neighbor. However, Kyrgyzstan was the only parliamentary republic in the region where there is a change of power, albeit with a high degree of corruption. As the study progresses, in post-Soviet studies, starting indicators are not a decisive factor for further democratization. In this case, in the main part of the paper, we find that it is precisely the differences between certain variables that were caused by the processes mentioned above in both states determined different trajectories of democratization, which significantly outweigh the starting similarities.

This study aims to investigate the prospects of democratization in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan by comparing their political systems. Despite their similar socio-cultural and historical backgrounds, these two Central Asian states have experienced varying degrees of democratic development. The primary objective is to identify the factors influencing these differences.

The methodology employed in this study involves a systems analysis approach, which examines both "input" and "output" functions of the political systems. Key variables include the levels of democracy as the independent variable, and political parties, leaders, resource distribution, and opposition suppression as dependent variables. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics at play in each state.

This study contributes to the literature on post-Soviet democratization by providing a comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It highlights how similar starting conditions can lead to different political trajectories due to varying political strategies, leadership styles, and structural conditions. The findings offer insights into the complexities of democratization processes in Central Asia, contributing to broader discussions on political development and stability in post-Soviet states.

The scope of this study includes an in-depth analysis of the political systems of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from their independence in 1991 to the present. It considers the historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors that have influenced their political development. Through this comprehensive analysis, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder democratization in these states.

1. Main Variables

According to system analysis, any system, including political: 1) consists of many parts; 2) the parts make up a whole; 3) all this is constantly functioning. Therefore, the political system is considered as a functioning system, that is, there is a relatively stable relationship between the diverse aspects of politics and political phenomena. Modern political science argues that all systems perform two basic sets of functions: 1) "input" functions and 2) "output" functions. According to Almond and Powel (1966), the inputs and outputs of a political system should be analyzed in terms of the functions inherent in the system. The question is raised: who? (i.e. what structures), what functions does it perform? and how? Using this methodology, we identify the main political roles and structures of systems and subsystems, and then consider the degree of their functionality.

The independent variable will be the level of democracy in the states - that is, the type of political system itself. But in the role of dependent variables, let's take the subjects who

articulate (introduce) interests into the system - political parties and political leaders. In other words, we can also label it as elites. In more democratic societies, free associations, interest groups and various NGOs also participate in this process, but in the states of this research, despite their active work, they face harassment from the government when they try to address politically sensitive issues. There are extensive legal restrictions on the formation and operation of NGOs, including onerous financial regulations and severe penalties for non-compliance (Freedom House 2023). Therefore, their influence is negligible in this context.

As for the “output” mechanisms, the dependent variables will be the distribution of economic resources and the suppression of political opposition and effective regulation of institutions during challenges to the function of the entire system. As the study will show, the degree of control and application of these norms may vary in both cases.

In addition to the analysis of “input” and “output” mechanisms, it would also be appropriate to examine the influence of such factors as geographic location, religion and national minorities, which in turn, being components of the functional system, directly influence the above-mentioned mechanisms. An analysis of these factors will help to gain a deeper understanding of the main challenges to democracy in the region.

As a rule, in democratic states, because of the spread of the “spirit of participation”, “input” processes, articulated with minimal participation of the state. In authoritarian regimes, this process is the prerogative of the state. By making connections and comparing them, we can answer our research question.

2.Comparative Analyses

Articulation of interests is the first functional step in the course of political conversion, which is carried out by interest groups. In the political system of post-Soviet states before 1985, the articulation of interests had a specific character. People could not express interests that were not adequate to the interests of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union). It was assumed that the CPSU was the only exponent of all social interests. In this regard, it can be stated that there were no true interest groups in the states of Central Asia, and the articulation of interests was actually carried out by the ruling party.

As noted earlier, in the early period of independence, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, like many other post-Soviet states, created strong executive institutions, where presidents acted as the main regulator of the system. And here you can immediately see a noticeable difference between the leadership approaches of the first two presidents.

Starting from the first days, the agenda that was given to the people differed. Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akayev, was committed to relatively liberal policies and a free market economy. Political reforms in Kyrgyzstan have gone so far that Western analysts considered it almost an “island of democracy” in Central Asia (Anderson 1999: 40). Askar Akayev was a scientist and engineer educated in the Soviet Union. He had a PhD and was familiar with economic theories, including concepts of a market economy. As an intellectual, Akayev sought to modernize Kyrgyzstan and believed that liberal economic reforms could provide the necessary impetus for development and integration into the global economic system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many post-Soviet states, including Kyrgyzstan, faced economic crises and the need to reform their economies. International financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank actively promoted liberal reforms, including privatization, deregulation, and

market opening. Akayev, seeking financial assistance and support, accepted the recommendations of these organizations. Akayev sought to integrate Kyrgyzstan into the international community and establish close ties with Western countries. Adherence to a liberal economic model was part of this strategy, as it was consistent with the economic models of developed democratic countries and could contribute to improved relations with the West (Collins, 2006: 224-230). A striking example of this is the accession of Kyrgyzstan to the World Trade Organization in 1998. Thus, Kyrgyzstan became the first post-Soviet state to join the WTO. Obviously, the regime staked its legitimacy on liberalism. This rate was also motivated by ethnic conflicts, to prevent the sad experience of violence in 1990 (Huskey 2002: 78-82). Economic hardship and social problems such as poverty and unemployment fueled ethnic tensions as ethnic groups competed for scarce resources and jobs. Akayev hoped to effectively address these challenges precisely with the support of Western financial institutions.

However, all this was accompanied by ineffective governance and rampant corruption, and Akayev became a hostage to his own populism. The political leader who at one time introduced liberal ideas into the new emerging society set a precedent. Thus, this connection acquired a functional character. As a result, Akayev lost the core of his ardent supporters. Akayev's liberal reforms, although aimed at creating a market economy, did not lead to immediate economic growth. Economic difficulties, rising poverty and inequality caused discontent among the population and elites, who began to see Akayev as the source of the problems rather than the solution. This undermined his support among business elites and national minorities. Akayev sought to pursue a policy of national reconciliation, balancing Kyrgyz nationalism with the need to accommodate the interests of ethnic minorities, particularly Uzbeks and Russians (Megoran, 2013). However, these policies were often incoherent and contradictory, leading to mistrust among various ethnic groups. His attempts to simultaneously satisfy nationalist demands and maintain interethnic peace were not always successful. The state institutions that were supposed to implement the national policy proved weak and ineffective. As a result, decisions and laws concerning ethnic issues were often not properly implemented, which contributed to increased interethnic tensions (Engvall, 2011). The situation was particularly difficult in southern Kyrgyzstan, where a significant Uzbek population lives. Serious ethnic clashes had occurred there in 1990, before Akayev came to power, and problems in the region continued to mount during his presidency. Despite Akayev's efforts to stabilize the situation, the conflicts in the south were never finally resolved, which testified to the failure of his policy on the national issue. Over time, Akayev's legitimacy among the elites was undermined by his inability to address socio-economic problems and govern in the face of growing political instability. Elites began to look for alternative avenues of influence and support, which further weakened Akayev's position (Huskey, 2011: 251). By 2001, only his immediate family continued to provide him with unconditional support. Even those in his immediate circle had questionable loyalties (Levitin 2004: 200-201). Accusations of corruption and nepotism against Akayev and his family undermined his credibility not only among the general public, but also among elites who believed that resources and opportunities were being distributed unfairly. This led to growing discontent and worsening relations with key elite groups. It turns out that at the "output" level, the leader did not satisfy the needs of those groups (elites, ordinary citizens) who did not receive dividends from the reforms, which also signals that institutions were not built that could satisfy at least the clan elite. While Nazarbayev was expanding his patronage base in Kazakhstan, Akayev was narrowing it. Akayev's

successors were not particularly different from the first president and followed in his footsteps, for which they lost their power.

In contrast to Akayev, the first president of Kazakhstan cemented his power more effectively, as he articulated a slightly different message to society. The political system of the Republic of Kazakhstan is determined by patronal-client relations, which are realized during the struggle for power among representatives of three tribal associations: Senior (South and South-Eastern Kazakhstan), Middle (Northern, Central and Eastern Kazakhstan) and Younger (Western Kazakhstan) zhuz (representatives of the clan of Genghis Khan). These associations arose at the beginning of the 17th century, but the contradictions between them were deeply rooted among the inhabitants of the republic (Seidumanov 2018: 181-190). N. Nazarbayev competently built relationships between zhuzes (clans). Nazarbayev used a strategy of political maneuvering to maintain a balance between the different zhuzes. He sought to prevent one zhuz from dominating the others, which could destabilize the state. For example, key positions in the government and in state-owned companies were distributed among representatives of different zhuzes, which helped to avoid conflict between them (Yermukanov, 2020). Nazarbayev worked actively to create strong state institutions that were able to keep any manifestations of separatism or ethnic confrontation under control. This included the creation of a vertical power structure that ensured control over regional elites and prevented the concentration of power in the hands of one zhuz. Nazarbayev actively promoted ideas of national unity and Kazakh identity in order to weaken the importance of traditional zhuzes and tribal ties. He initiated a policy of strengthening Kazakh national identity through education, culture, and language, which helped to reduce inter-clan contradictions (Kassenova, 2021: 336). This allows one to avoid unnecessary ethnic tensions and limit their influence on the political system of the republic. His political course was in vague outlines but was moving forward at an active pace. The power vacuum that arose after the collapse of the USSR was filled by the president, who promoted reforms more competently and measuredly. He successfully mobilized key supporters who credited him with promoting economic growth, preventing ethnic conflicts, and managing the complex geopolitical situation in the region (Schatz 2009: 213). This system was able to function for a long time, since its leader at the response level provided the “output” of the appropriate policy, responding to the diverse demands emanating from various groups. Unlike Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan managed to build strong institutions that, by centralizing power, skillfully dealt with challenges at the “output” level. For example, in the national issue, one of the most important steps of Nazarbayev was the creation in 1995 of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (APK) - a consultative and advisory body representing the interests of various ethnic groups. This institution played a key role in strengthening interethnic dialogue, promoting the ideas of tolerance and national accord. The Assembly also received the right to nominate representatives to parliament, which contributed to the inclusion of ethnic minorities in the political process. Nazarbayev paid special attention to supporting the cultural autonomies of ethnic minorities, which was expressed in the creation and financing of national cultural centers, the preservation and development of cultural traditions, language and customs of various ethnic groups (Satpayev, 2016: 117-120). This contributed to the strengthening of ethnocultural identity without creating a threat to national security. An important aspect of Nazarbayev's ethnic policy was the language policy aimed at preserving and developing the Kazakh language as the state language, while the Russian language retained the status of the language of interethnic

communication (Laruelle, 2015: 70-73). This approach contributed to the preservation of cultural diversity and the prevention of ethnic conflicts based on language issues.

Even though at the beginning both republics were predominantly presidential, as reforms progressed, political parties also began to actively participate in the political process and received their role in the system. Kyrgyzstan completely switched to a parliamentary form of government and after the overthrow of another authoritarian president, Bakiyev, political parties filled the vacuum (OSCE/ODIHR 2010). Formally, the idea of a multi-party system in Kazakhstan was realized. In practice, parliament has been controlled for many years by the Nur-Otan party (renamed Amanat in 2022), created by Nazarbayev himself.

Considering the party system of Kazakhstan, one can draw the obvious conclusion that it has been simplified to purely formal functions. The ruling party itself is not directly associated with ideology but is determined by the personality of the party leader. The level of trust in President N. Nazarbayev in the Republic of Kazakhstan has always been extremely high. The Constitution also removed the provision that during the period of his powers the president suspends activities in a political party. Thus, the position of Head of State acquired a touch of "partisanship" (Buluktaev 2018). In such conditions, the only pro-presidential party created from above is simply doomed to political success. The remaining political forces are severely marginalized, not without the help of the introduction of a 7% barrier for political parties (Buluktaev 2018). As a result, out of 6 officially registered parties, three parties operate. Political movements are not developed, there is no desire of the state to enter dialogue with parties and society. At the same time, the absence of representatives of other parties, including opposition parties, in parliament reduced not only the level of representation of the interests of various social groups, but also reduced the efficiency of the system's functionality. In such conditions, the articulation of interests by political parties (and their voters) is very limited and reduced to a formality. As was said earlier, the influence of "introductory" processes in authoritarian regimes is realized by the state itself (in this case, the pro-government party).

The party system of Kyrgyzstan has become quite functional and has become part of the state's political culture. Attempts by presidents to create their own centralized pro-government parties were unsuccessful. After Akayev's overthrow, not a single group or individual was able to claim complete control over the state. The elite, whose main background could be attributed to politics, business or crime, formed several parties. There is little cooperation between these groups, but the balance of power resulting from their inability to neutralize each other is the source of some degree of democracy (Engvall 2007: 40). The Constitution adopted in 2010, which introduced a parliamentary form of government, came as a shock to the classical presidential model of Central Asian states. Under the new formal rules, political parties became the main actors with the power to form coalition governments and make appointments. However, instead of fighting corruption, increased competition between political parties has led to increased competition for proceeds (Engvall 2018: 275). Unlike parties in the West, political parties in Kyrgyzstan do not express the interests of their electorate, but the interests of the local oligarchy, which are strong enough to mobilize a certain part of the population's votes, but too weak to take a leading position (Marat 2015: 358). From a functional point of view, this political system can generate more political requests to society. At the "output", subjects are forced to conduct their work more "transparently" and "publicly", since there is always a risk that the closest competitors will be able to take advantage of the government's first puncture. In comparison, in Kazakhstan there is no other political force

that has exercised control over the government at the official level, and in this regard, the case of Kyrgyzstan is more competitive.

At the level of “output” functions, the differences in both cases quickly become apparent. Obviously, to maintain stability and loyalty of the people, the distribution of natural resources matters. Resources, of course, matter, but their effect depends primarily on prices. Oil production in Kazakhstan coincides with a period of sharp price increases. In the late 1990s, Nazarbayev strengthened his regime as he used oil revenues to further his political ambitions (Cummings 2002: 60-63). If the market situation had been different, Nazarbayev's decline in income would have reduced his ability to buy the loyalty of potential opponents.

Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan does not have such rich oil reserves. Despite this, the Akayev regime was still content with a monopoly over the available resources. Akayev, however, was less able to convert material dividends into buying loyalty. Unlike other post-communist republics, the Kyrgyz state was not initially captured by powerful foreign firms and other external actors. Instead, resource capture was largely carried out by the state actors itself (Karklins 2002: 25-28). As a result, a class of new oligarchs emerged, who soon questioned the president's monopoly on power. In the case of Kazakhstan, this would be impossible, since transnational companies are more interested in the stable transit of wealth into their pockets, where the government does not compete with hostile factions, but plays the role of a vigilant overseer. In addition, as noted earlier, Akayev was a hostage to his populism. He legitimized his power more through a liberal agenda and reforms than through the exploitation of natural resources (Schatz 2009: 218).

And finally, the attitude towards the opposition is very different in both states. In Kazakhstan, the regime controlled the opposition by persecuting and sometimes using outright violence against irreconcilables. The political murders of Zamanbek Nurkadilov and Altynbek Sarsynbaev became a signal that the regime, although rarely, does not disdain such methods (Olcott, 2010: 356). Yet the more typical methods were less lethal approaches such as arrests and blackmail. All the punishments to which irreconcilable people were subjected had a restraining effect on political society. The state apparatus successfully used violence in this area, punishing anyone who challenged the generally established rules of the system. Any violation of the structure was considered as its further destruction.

Neutralizing opponents - through litigation, blackmail, contract killings or other extra-legal pressure - was a card that Akayev and his followers played poorly. Such attempts were often crude and obvious, and therefore exposed a regime that publicly clung to the slogans of liberalism. Unlike Kyrgyz leaders, Nazarbayev never so vehemently pursued such an agenda, and there was no need to accuse him of hypocrisy. The more Akayev resorted to violent measures, the more he contradicted himself and his agenda. Moreover, without sufficiently bribing the loyalty of his subjects, he failed to prevent his former diplomat opponents from participating in the 2005 parliamentary elections. Thus, a Constitutional Court judge stated that former diplomats cannot be excluded from participating in parliamentary elections (Radio Free Europe 2004). Nazarbayev maintained fairly tight control over his judicial system. All this once again shows that in society “output” functions depend on the “input” demands of groups. If the articulation of interests was initially based on a liberal agenda, then society most likely expected the state to respond identically to these demands. Corrupt elites are trapped in their own self-

created functional system. As a result, the system swallowed up the elite, and not vice versa.

3. Prospects of Democratization

Despite the obvious progress of Kyrgyzstan in building relevant democratic institutions in 2010–2016, one cannot help but note the fact that in retrospect they were objectively unable to become a panacea serving as a solution to the problems and challenges that the state has faced throughout its history as a sovereign state. First of all, we are talking about those of them that question the very existence of statehood in Kyrgyzstan and allow its transformation into a failed state (Laruelle & Engvall 2015: 5-8).

Regionalization and territorial fragmentation of the state, which nature itself divided into the highland North and lowland South, remain indispensable conditions for the persisting conflict and internal disunity in Kyrgyz society. In addition to the general polarization along the North-South line, the rich traditional culture of rural areas and the clan political culture it produces fuels the territorial demarcation of areas of compact residence of representatives of the titular nation. This force of tradition, which maintains its dominance in the socio-political space and the system of informal norms and rules of social behavior at the state level, serves as an insurmountable obstacle to the further integration of representatives of national minorities into the political system. Among the latter, the Uzbek community occupies a special position, the number of which reaches more than 800 thousand people, which is about 14% of the population (Minority Rights Group International, 2023). Economic difficulties and uneven distribution of resources exacerbate interethnic tensions. The southern regions of the state, where a significant number of Uzbeks live, often face more serious economic problems, which increases conflict sentiments. During periods of political instability, nationalist sentiments can increase, which often leads to an increase in interethnic tensions. Examples of such outbreaks of conflict were observed after the revolution in 2010 (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Insufficient law enforcement and high levels of corruption contribute to impunity and unfair distribution of justice, which increases discontent among ethnic minorities. Until national minorities are fully included in the “input” mechanisms for articulating interests in the state, and do not receive their share of economic dividends, the democratic project in Kyrgyzstan will be seriously threatened.

Against this background, during this period, the socio-political and economic situation in Kyrgyzstan remained a favorable environment for the spread of radical ideas and the activities of organized Islamist movements among Muslim youth. Southern regions such as Osh and Jalal-Abad have significant ethnic diversity, with many Uzbeks who have historically been associated with Islamic culture. These regions are also closer to the borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where the influence of radical Islamic movements is higher. (Montgomery, 2016: 45-46). The southern regions of Kyrgyzstan have traditionally been less economically developed than the northern regions. High unemployment, poverty, and a lack of educational opportunities create fertile ground for the spread of radical ideologies. In such conditions, radical groups can exploit popular discontent to recruit new members. Southern Kyrgyzstan borders the Fergana Valley, a region known for its high levels of religious conservatism and the activity of Islamic radical groups. For example, organizations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have historically used this territory for their activities, increasing the risk of radicalization in neighboring areas. (Kilcullen, 2015). These events have increased the sense of mistrust and tension between different ethnic groups, making young people more susceptible to

radical propaganda. However, the state is looking with concern at the development of the situation and there is a consensus among all key political forces on the issue of fighting Islamic radicalism, however, as in the case of interethnic tensions, without resolving socio-economic problems and building functional strong institutions, this risk will always be on the agenda.

At the same time, problems arose related to the so-called “irresponsibility” of parliament, when decision-making was often hampered due to the disunity of political elites in the highest legislative body. Corruption processes, just as at the previous stage, continued to remain a significant social problem. All this caused justified discontent among part of the public. Against this background, a request for the so-called began to arise in the state. a “strong hand”, which, according to some segments of the population, was needed to restore order in the state. After a long period of the Covid-19 epidemic and related restrictions (2019–2020), as well as violations in the autumn parliamentary elections, social tension arose in the state in October 2020, resulting in public protests and an extraordinary change of power. S. Japarov, who came to power, proclaimed another constitutional reform with a transition to a new form of government - a presidential republic. This transition created a new reality with an increase in the concentration of power in the hands of the president, a decrease in the role of parliament in forming the government and, in general, in determining and implementing the political agenda in the state (Ibraimov 2022). Today it is fashionable to argue that with the adoption of the new Constitution, Kyrgyzstan is sliding into authoritarianism. After all, the form of government has formally changed. From a conditionally mixed one, the Kyrgyz Republic moved to a presidential form. However, support of this narrative mistakenly or purposefully ignores the identity factor. An important moderating factor is a multi-component identity. It is typical for most states where there are democratic transitions: Ukraine or for example Moldova. It is also true for Kyrgyzstan, which is politically, economically and culturally divided into North and South, where they have their own powerful regional identities (Aziz 2022). Consequently, the political culture of voters will always restrain the descent into sustainable authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan. Paradoxically, the factors that seem to threaten democratization and slow down the normal functioning of government, at the same time create conditions for diverse representation. Now when one political force begins to claim the usurpation of political space, the agents of the "input" mechanisms unite to try to balance the system. Since these processes have acquired a functional character, it is very likely that the slide towards authoritarianism will always be controlled.

It is quite possible that the new Kassym-Jomart Tokayev President of Kazakhstan is really not lying when he says that he would like to transform the political system. However, further circumstances both within the state and around it may develop in such a way that democratization will have to be postponed each time, and instead the presidential position will be strengthened. Moreover, during his time in power, Tokayev himself has demonstrated more than once that he is ready to do a lot to preserve it: order to shoot to kill, use external forces and rewrite the constitution.

Kazakhstan’s geographical fragmentation, including vast distances between cities and regions, as well as the diversity of ethnic and cultural groups, has an impact on democratization processes in the state. Kazakhstan is characterized by sharp contrasts in economic development between different regions. For example, the southern and western regions, where the main oil and gas resources are located, have a concentration of wealth, while the northern and eastern regions remain less developed. This economic inequality

increases social stratification, making it difficult to form a unified political space and making democratic governance difficult. (Olcott, 2010). Kazakhstan's geographic fragmentation can be seen as one factor that contributed to the January 2022 pogroms, although it is not the only or primary cause. Those regions that are more distant from the political center in Astana often feel economically marginalized. The rise in fuel prices that immediately triggered the protests hit regions where populations were already experiencing economic hardship particularly hard (BBC News, 2022). Geographic fragmentation exacerbated these inequalities and contributed to growing discontent among the population.

The immediate question that may arise is how it happened that the events of 2022 did not occur during Nazarbayev's rule. The answer to this question must be found, again, in a systems analysis. Nazarbayev, in power for more than 28 years, established a strict authoritarian regime that allowed him to control political and social life in the state. Under his leadership, any manifestations of opposition or discontent were suppressed at an early stage, which prevented the escalation of conflicts. During most of Nazarbayev's rule, Kazakhstan demonstrated economic growth, especially due to oil and gas exports. This allowed the government to implement various social programs, maintain a relatively high standard of living, and mitigate social tensions. Although economic inequality existed, the overall level of economic stability contributed to the maintenance of order. After Nazarbayev stepped down as president and transferred power to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in 2019, many of these factors weakened. The new leadership faces growing economic difficulties, falling oil prices, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and a worsening social situation (Pannier, 2020). Thus, the decline in oil prices and the easing of control, which previously allowed for the efficient distribution of economic resources, posed a challenge to the system. The system, which had previously managed such challenges in their infancy, under the new president failed to effectively utilize the available resources, resulting in a general breakdown. Authoritarianism and skillful manipulation of the "input" and "output" processes concealed chronic problems; when just one variable fails in this system, similar events occur.

Tokayev responded to the protests with the use of force, declaring a state of emergency and calling in military forces to suppress the unrest. As a result, hundreds of people died during the protests, and thousands were arrested. This harsh suppression created an atmosphere of fear and stifled opportunities for peaceful protest and activism, negatively affecting the level of democracy in the state. After the suppression of the protests, Tokayev d the need for reforms, including improving the political system and expanding citizens' rights. He proposed a number of reforms, such as the creation of new political parties, the possibility of participation in elections, and changes to electoral legislation. However, many critics believe that these measures are merely cosmetic and do not lead to real changes in the political system. (The Guardian, 2022). Despite promises of reform, Tokayev has also taken steps to strengthen authoritarian control. He continued to restrict freedom of speech and control independent media. This created conditions for further suppression of the opposition and hindered the formation of a fully democratic society. As a result, the system resorted to old and tested methods of maintaining power. Tokayev only needs to change the composition of the elite to distance himself and his allies from Nazarbayev, which will allow him to gain the support of a portion of the population eager for change. In the end, the sum will not change as a result of rearranging the components.

Following the events of 2022, Tokayev's government faced criticism from the Russian-speaking population, who expressed discontent over restrictions on freedom of speech

and the suppression of protests. This led to growing discontent among the Russian-speaking population, who may perceive these actions as an attempt to marginalize their interests. During the protests in January 2022, clashes occurred that affected different ethnic groups. For example, in Almaty, ethnic Russians were the target of violence by protesters. This shows how ethnic differences can exacerbate conflicts and make peaceful resolutions more difficult. (Quincy Institute for Responsible craft, 2022). Tokayev's government has not changed its policy towards ethnic minorities. Tokayev has proposed improving conditions for studying Kazakh and supported programs aimed at raising the status of Russian as a language of interethnic communication. The government has tightened control over the media and the internet to prevent the spread of disinformation and incitement of ethnic hatred. (Myrzaliyeva, 2023). This included the prosecution of those who exploit ethnic differences for political manipulation. Despite these steps, many experts and activists remain skeptical about real change and the ability of the Tokayev government to effectively address ethnic issues and ensure inclusivity in the political process. The real results of these actions will depend on the political will and ability of the authorities to carry out real reforms. Will the authorities undertake these reforms? It is unlikely, given the tendencies towards an authoritarian style of governance.

In recent years, there has also been a trend towards radicalization of young people, especially in the context of economic instability and lack of prospects. Kazakhstan has seen several terrorist attacks linked to Islamic radicalism. For example, in 2011, a terrorist attack occurred in Zhanaozen, in which several people were killed, and more than 20 people were injured. In 2016, attacks on police officers and civilians were carried out in Almaty by Islamists. (Holland, 2017: 189-210). These events have demonstrated the growing influence of radical groups and created a climate of fear that has hampered democratization processes. For example, in 2020, Kazakhstan detained dozens of young people suspected of trying to travel to Syria to fight for terrorist groups. This highlights the vulnerability of young people to radical ideas, which poses serious challenges to stability and democracy. In response to the threat of radicalism, Kazakhstan created the Counter-Extremism Agency, which aims to prevent radicalization and counter terrorist activity. However, critics argue that such measures often result in excessive control and repression, which limits civil rights and freedoms. In 2021, the Kazakh government tightened controls over religious organizations and banned the distribution of certain religious materials associated with radical ideologies (Kuanyshbaev, 2021: 50-53). While such measures aim to prevent radicalization, they also raise concerns about religious freedom and could undermine trust in the government. These examples highlight how Islamic radicalism is affecting democratization in Kazakhstan, posing challenges to political stability, social cohesion, and the protection of civil rights. The government must balance security with human rights to successfully counter this threat. In authoritarian countries, such a balance is impossible because human rights concerns are not properly fed into the system and, accordingly, responses to these concerns remain unaddressed.

It cannot be said that Tokayev's democratization initiatives are limited only to rhetoric. Its constitutional amendments are very different from how Russia and Belarus recently changed their basic laws or attempted in Uzbekistan. The death penalty has been abolished in Kazakhstan; banned close relatives of the president from participating in politics and holding leadership positions in regions and corporations; the law on the first president was removed, and so on (Umarov 2022). The current changes, although they increase the presidential term, ensure replacement every seven years, if, of course, they are followed. However, the political system of Kazakhstan has not changed because of this.

Unlike Kyrgyzstan, the president retained full control over all branches of government. Full-scale political transformation so far exists only in Tokayev's promises. In principle, Nazarbayev also regularly promised not to stay in power, but ended up ruling for three decades (Caron 2021). And Tokayev himself has already broken his promise not to "remake the laws, much less the constitution." Perhaps Tokayev is really waiting for the right moment to launch real political reforms, but where are the guarantees that such a moment will ever come? It is much more likely that reforms will be constantly postponed: first there were the January riots, then the war in Ukraine, then something else will arise. The Kazakh political regime does not guarantee its leaders a safe exit from the system. Nazarbayev tried, but, by and large, the attempt failed. Tokayev would hardly want to repeat the fate of his predecessor. Only access to power and personal control can guarantee his security. Democratic reforms will inevitably mean a reduction in presidential powers, and with them, Tokayev's ability to defend himself against his opponents (Dellecker & Nixey 2022: 130-131). And he has already acquired a lot of them - from the humiliated entourage of Nazarbayev to the new generation of the political elite, for whom Tokayev is the same relic of the Soviet past as his predecessor.

Conclusion

In recent decades, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, former Soviet republics, have gone through complex processes of establishing independence and hood. A study aimed at comparing the leaders and processes of democratization in these states, shows that although both began their independent existence under similar conditions, their political development followed different paths, largely due to different approaches to leadership and domestic policies.

Since gaining independence, Kazakhstan, under the leadership of Nursultan Nazarbayev, has chosen the path of authoritarian governance, characterized by strong centralized power and the absence of significant democratic reforms. Nazarbayev, in power for nearly three decades, created a political system based on personal loyalty and control over all branches of government. Economic reforms carried out by his administration contributed to significant economic growth, but democratic processes remained on the periphery of the 's political life. Nazarbayev's strong authoritarian leadership ensured political stability but also suppressed political opposition and independent media, limiting the space for democratic change. This approach allowed Kazakhstan to avoid political instability and economic collapse but left the with human rights problems and limited civil liberties.

Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan has chosen a more democratic path of development, accompanied by frequent changes of power and political instability. Since independence, the has had several presidents, accompanied by mass protests and revolutions, the most notable of which were the 2005 Tulip Revolution and the 2010 Revolution. These developments indicate a more dynamic and open political process in the , where civil society plays a significant role. However, frequent changes in power and political instability have negatively affected the economic development of Kyrgyzstan. The faces serious economic difficulties and high levels of corruption. However, the presence of political competition and an active civil society creates the potential for democratic development in the long term.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan represent two different examples of post-Soviet development, demonstrating the pros and cons of both authoritarian and democratic approaches to governance. Broadly speaking, the independent states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union can be divided into three political categories: systems based on the rule of law, (2) systems governed by a "godfather", and (3) decentralized systems characterized by balancing alliances between competing parties (Engvall 2007: 30-35). Conceptually, Kazakhstan belongs to the second system, and Kyrgyzstan to the third. Kazakhstan is a classic example of a vertically hierarchical system, where the so-called "godfather" makes decisions from above and sends signals downwards. From the point of view of the systemic approach, the key political role here is assigned to the leader and his loyal elite, which usurps all the "input" functions of the system, thereby leaving no space for civil initiative. A distinctive feature of Kazakhstan is that its leader wisely used his power and resources and competently set an agenda for the people. Almost all political forces swore allegiance to the supreme power, and any violators were harshly suppressed. Kyrgyzstan chose the third path, and although at first glance the liberal traditions that were served from the first days of independence took root in the Kyrgyz society, in practice it turns out to be a horizontal system characterized by competing bandits. A state does not necessarily appear to be failing as it persists for a long time, but it can be a delicate balance. Competition between alliances in practice created the opportunity for citizens to function within the system and exercise their rights. However, the difference is that this is still being done in conditions of severe corruption and in the name of maintaining power, and not the well-being of its own people. Answering the key question of this study, namely why a freer regime was formed in Kyrgyzstan, we conclude that political roles and structures, despite many similarities with Kazakhstan, are different. Initially, the people here, although to a lesser extent, could participate in the process of articulating interests, and after the 2010 constitution this process intensified significantly. The leaders of Kyrgyzstan have always found themselves hostage to their popular agenda, for which they paid with color revolutions. And as a result, instead of correctly administering the resources that they had been pumping out of the for years, they lost allies in the political system. From a methodological point of view, Kyrgyzstan gave more space for people to "input" their interests but suffered greatly at the level of "output", due to the inept distribution of economic resources, weak functionality of institutions. In Kazakhstan, on the contrary, the opposite situation was observed, where democracy suffered, but there was stability. The problem is that from the point of view of system analysis, the elements of the system stop functioning harmoniously with each other when there is a violation or substitution of variables. For example, this happened during the fall in oil prices and the general emergence of a new figure in the presidential chair of Kazakhstan. All this eventually escalated into protests in 2022, where the government again had to strengthen control over the population. The case of Kyrgyzstan shows that people still have a choice, and they are adapted to drastic changes in the system. Of course, in standard democratic countries, during such upheavals, people simply change their government during elections, but in Kyrgyzstan so far this ends in revolutions. However, there is no doubt that the system in Kyrgyzstan is more flexible than in Kazakhstan, because: firstly, it has changed; secondly, people have a choice, although it does not fully meet their interests later; thirdly, the people as a whole are not afraid to protest and the struggle for their rights has become chronic, since there are still places in the system for "input" of their interests. In conclusion, neither of these paths is ideal. Kazakhstan's authoritarian stability ensured economic development but limited political freedoms and democracy. Kyrgyzstan's democratic path has led to frequent

political crises but has retained the potential for democratic growth. In the long term, both countries will be forced to seek a balance between stability and democratic reforms to ensure sustainable development and the well-being of their citizens.

Despite some progress in creating democratic institutions in Kyrgyzstan in 2010–2016, the faces challenges that hinder further progress. Regionalization, territorial fragmentation and traditional culture contribute to internal divisions, preventing the integration of national minorities. Economic and political instability create fertile ground for the spread of radical ideas, especially among young people. In 2020, another change of power occurred in Kyrgyzstan, and the new administration under the leadership of Sadyr Japarov carried out a constitutional reform, moving to a presidential form of government. This has raised fears of the slipping into authoritarianism, despite strong regional identities that can resist it.

In Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has also promised political reforms but faces the need to strengthen presidential power in the face of economic, ethnic and religious challenges. Despite some changes, such as the abolition of the death penalty and the ban on the participation of close relatives of the president in politics, the system remains highly centralized. The prospects for democratization remain uncertain as reforms may be constantly delayed due to various crises and challenges. Thus, the text emphasizes that the democratization processes in both countries face serious obstacles related to historical, cultural and political characteristics, as well as the need to balance between stability and democratic transition.

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