

External Pressures on  
Kyrgyzstani Regime Trajectories  
Philip Dennison  
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After two forced regime changes in five years, the peaceful, relatively competitive election of President Almazbek Atambaev in 2011 left many observers cautiously optimistic that democracy would finally take hold in Kyrgyzstan. As late as 2014, then US ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic Pamela Spratlen, described the Atambaev regime as democratic, or at least democratizing.<sup>1</sup> While a fractured elite and feeble patronage-coercion mechanisms have prevented any leader from fully consolidating power, the absence of key democratic prerequisites and the persistence of late and post-Soviet era political and social structures that tend to favor corrupt patron-client arrangements and “non-civil” society, virtually preclude democratization. Instead, the concomitance of both competitive elections and frequent abuses of the democratic process by the incumbent party have caused scholars like Lucan A. Way to classify the current regime as competitive authoritarian.<sup>2</sup> Lacking the natural resource wealth of neighboring Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or nearby Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan’s dependency on foreign aid renders it more sensitive to competing foreign policies, even as it leverages this competition toward the pursuit of its own interests. Furthermore, as a competitive authoritarian system, Kyrgyzstan is potentially vulnerable to the influence of external actors, who may wish to promote democracy or suppress it. This paper will examine the impact of external pressures on Kyrgyzstani regime trajectories in the context of the “New Great Game” between the United States, Russia, and China.

### **Competitive Authoritarianism: Domestic tension and vulnerability**

Eric McGlinchey explains the emergence of Kyrgyzstan’s relatively liberal regime by comparing it to the development of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan after the collapse of the Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Spratlen, “Democracy in Central Asia: Supporting Kyrgyzstan’s ‘Island of Democracy,’” *Council of American Ambassadors*, Fall 2014, accessed April 30, 2017, <https://www.americanambassadors.org/publications/ambassadors-review/fall-2014/democracy-in-central-asia-supporting-kyrgyzstan-s-island-of-democracy>.

<sup>2</sup> Lucan A. Way, “The Limits of Autocracy Promotion: The Case of Russia in the ‘Near Abroad,’” *European Journal of Political Research* 54 (2015): 696, accessed March 5, 2017, doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12092.

Union (2011). McGlinchey focuses on the Soviet legacy in each country—the degree to which Moscow intervened in internal disputes, and the level of consolidation within the party at the moment of independence—as well elite access to and control over resources. According to his perestroika model, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan entered independence with a unified power structure, and have used their natural resources to secure stability through patronage or coercion. Due to their inability to consolidate economic resources and maintain winning coalitions, Kyrgyz executives have thus far achieved only limited success in stifling opposition challenges and other democratizing forces, resulting in an unstable competitive authoritarian regime.

Levitsky and Way define competitive authoritarianism as a system in which “formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy.”<sup>3</sup> In contrast with full authoritarianism, where opposition groups are restricted in some way from competing for power via legally viable channels, democratic procedures in competitive authoritarian regimes are “sufficiently meaningful for opposition groups to take them seriously as arenas through which to contest for power.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, competitive authoritarian systems cannot be fully democratic due to violations of at least one of three defining attributes of democracy: “free elections, broad protection of civil liberties, and a reasonably level playing field.”<sup>5</sup>

The concept of a level playing field may be encompassed within “civil liberties” and “free and fair elections”, but it also plays a significant role outside of elections, where it can be overlooked by “electoralist” evaluations, and actions that skew the playing field do not necessarily

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 52, accessed January 26, 2017, doi:10.1353/jod.2002.0026.

<sup>4</sup> Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Levitsky and Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism”, 54.

equate to a violation of civil liberties. An *uneven* playing field exists when incumbents enjoy disproportionate access to resources, media, and the law, resulting in a sizeable advantage over potential challengers. Despite these advantages, an inherent tension exists in competitive authoritarian systems: “the existence of multiparty elections, nominally independent legislatures, judiciaries, and media creates opportunities for periodic challenges.”<sup>6</sup> If the incumbent lacks public support, these challenges may threaten the regime, creating a serious dilemma for the ruling party. If, on the one hand, incumbents refuse to yield to legitimate opposition, they are forced to violate democratic rules at the cost of isolation from the international community and potential domestic conflict. On the other hand, if incumbents allow such challenges to proceed, they risk losing not only their position, but access to patronage networks and other valuable resources. Faced with mounting opposition, an incumbent’s decision to either repress legitimate challengers or liberalize may result in one of three outcomes: full authoritarianism, where the playing field becomes more skewed or ceases to exist altogether; unstable authoritarianism, where transition occurs but does not result in democratization; or democracy, indicated by “the establishment of free and fair elections, broad protection of civil liberties, and a level playing field.”<sup>7</sup>

Focusing on democratic transition, Levitsky and Way cite two primary factors that impact authoritarian incumbents’ capacity to withstand challenges and the fate of competitive authoritarian regimes in general: *linkage* to the West, or “the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organizational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information) between particular countries and the United States and EU”<sup>8</sup>; and incumbents’ *organizational power*, or “the scope and cohesion of state and governing-party

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<sup>6</sup> Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-22

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

structures.”<sup>9</sup> They argue that extensive linkage to the West, as in the case of Eastern Europe and the Americas, can raise the cost of building and sustaining authoritarian rule by “heightening the international salience of autocratic abuse, increasing the likelihood of Western response, expanding the number of domestic actors with a stake in avoiding international isolation, and shifting the balance of resources and prestige in favor of the opposition.”<sup>10</sup> High linkage incentivizes autocratic rulers to step down rather than become increasingly repressive in response to opposition challenges; it also encourages successors to rule more democratically. In cases where linkage with the West is high, Levitsky and Way theorize that democratic transition can occur despite unfavorable domestic conditions. When linkage with the West is low, rulers face no external pressure to democratize and domestic conditions—such as party cohesion and incumbents’ organizational power—become the only driving factor in regime outcomes. In cases where states and/or governing parties are highly organized and enjoy high cohesion, incumbents may resist even serious opposition challenges to maintain their hold on power.

Where governing structures are unorganized or lack cohesion, rulers do not possess the organizational and coercive tools necessary to prevent elite defection, rig elections, or silence protestors, making them vulnerable to even relatively weak opposition challenges.<sup>11</sup> These regimes tend to be less stable and a third factor, vulnerability to Western democratizing pressure, or *leverage*, can therefore play a decisive role. Assistance from counter-hegemonic powers may blunt external democratizing pressure however, and even vulnerable regimes may not experience sufficient pressure to democratize if democratization is subordinated to the pursuit of strategic or economic interests. In the absence of Western leverage or linkage, or favorable domestic

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

conditions, transitions from competitive authoritarian regimes tend to result in new authoritarian governments. In cases of low linkage and low organizational power therefore, states tend to experience unstable competitive authoritarianism.

In short, the coexistence of electoral processes and autocratic rule in competitive authoritarian regimes tends to create tension that may even result in regime change. Regime outcomes may follow one of three trajectories: democratization, unstable authoritarianism, or full authoritarianism. Depending on the degree of linkage and the vulnerability of such regimes to external leverage, external factors can shape or even determine regime outcomes.

### **Democracy promotion versus suppression**

Levels of linkage and leverage may dictate external actors' capacities to promote democratic or authoritarian regime outcomes, but diverging strategic interests naturally cause significant variance in how democracy promoters apply these pressures compared to its suppressors. For Western democracies such as the United States and the EU, democracy promotion represents a strategic goal in itself, stemming from both idealist and realist perspectives.<sup>12</sup> Democracy promotion satisfies the ethical and moral imperative at the foundation of US foreign policy to spread human rights and democratic norms across the world; it is also informed by Kant's "democratic peace" hypothesis, which essentially assumes that democratic states do not make war against one another. Democracy promotion therefore takes on an active, normatively-loaded quality that differentiates it from the far more self-serving nature of authoritarian collaboration.<sup>13</sup>

Democracy promotion seeks to facilitate the political liberalization and ultimate democratization of authoritarian regimes in specific countries. Democracy promoters use linkage

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<sup>12</sup> Hakan Yilmaz, "The International Context", in *Democratization*, ed. by Christian W. Haerpfer et. al (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96.

<sup>13</sup> Christian von Soest, "Democracy prevention: The international collaboration of authoritarian regimes," *European Journal of Political Research* (2015):10, accessed January 25, 2017, doi:10.1111/1475-6765.12100.

and leverage mechanisms to induce regimes to undertake institutional and legal reforms, using diplomatic pressure, sanctions, aid conditionality and advice.<sup>14</sup> In extreme cases, often when a regime has violently broken international norms, military intervention can also be a tool of democracy promotion. To encourage the spread of democratic values within a given country, democratizers also promote those sectors of civil society conducive to democratization by providing specific groups with financial and material aid, as well as access to training. Work to promote respect for human rights, the establishment of universal civic norms, and the transfer of electoral systems and other institutional models also constitute part of the democracy promoter's playbook.<sup>15</sup>

Von Soest observes that deliberate forms of authoritarian promotion are not driven by “an ideological commitment to fostering an ‘authoritarian international’, but by their geopolitical interests in securing spheres of influence and supporting acquiescent partners, along with gaining access to energy and natural resources to strengthen their development model.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the collaboration of authoritarian states to promote autocracy and prevent democratization is fundamentally self-serving, and limited to regional neighbors with similar regimes, whose fall may threaten the survival of its own regime, as well as its developmental and geostrategic interests.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, they do not pursue policies that promote their form of governance as such, unless they perceive external changes as a threat to domestic stability.

Unlike regimes that engage in active democracy promotion, “authoritarian rulers are less inclined to enter into legally binding forms of cooperation in which they would forego national

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<sup>14</sup> Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Yilmaz, Hakan, “The International Context,” in *Democratization*, ed. Christian W. Haerpfer et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

sovereignty, and...they are less prepared to create symmetrical forms of policy coordination.”<sup>18</sup> Consequently, authoritarian collaboration through regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), is generally confined to security or economic cooperation. Nevertheless, their policy of mutual non-intervention in domestic affairs means they are far more tolerant of autocratic rule than their Western counterparts. Arguably, they promote patron-clientelistic networks that are inherently anti-democratic and legitimize states’ repression of individuals and groups perceived as a threat to the regime in the name of security and stability.

While Western countries view the global diffusion of democracy as a moral, ethical, and strategic imperative to be pursued in its own right (even when this runs counter to other strategic interests), authoritarian leaders are generally driven by simple self-preservation. Democracy suppression is a defensive impulse, exercised only in response to perceived threats to domestic stability. Thus, the limited efforts of authoritarian regimes to suppress democratization should not be regarded as a “mirror” of democracy promotion but as a reactive measure designed to preserve the status quo.<sup>19</sup>

## **Methodology**

This paper will examine how external factors influence regime trajectories in Kyrgyzstan, in the context of the regional competition between Russia, China, and the United States. While I had originally planned to apply Stoner and McFaul’s framework for analyzing transitional moments<sup>20</sup> to the 2010 ouster of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, I believe it is inadequate in this case for two

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<sup>18</sup> von Soest, “Democracy Prevention,” 6.

<sup>19</sup> Laurence Whitehead, “International Democracy Promotion as a Political Ideology: Upsurge and Retreat,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 20, no. 1 (2015): 24, accessed April 10, 2016, doi: 10.1080/13569317.2015.991510.

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn Stoner et. al, “Transitional Successes and Failures: The International-Domestic Nexus,” in *Transitions to Democracy: a Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 6-8.



reasons: first, Kyrgyzstan has arguably never faced a genuine transitional moment—both the Tulip Revolution and Bakiyev’s 2010 ouster simply resulted in a reshuffling of elites into a new set of incumbents and opposition leaders, driven by groups mobilized on the basis of regional and clan-based loyalties rather than the democratic emancipative values manifested in other color revolutions;<sup>21</sup> second, I do not believe that an analysis of such limited scope would produce a complete picture of the effect of external factors. I will therefore analyze foreign influence over time, beginning with three stages of Western engagement: democracy promotion during the 1990s, military cooperation during the 2000s, and renewed democracy promotion since 2010 despite declining Kyrgyz-US relations since 2014. Given the defensive nature of democracy suppression, I will then analyze the responses of Russia and China to democracy promotion and US military presence.

## **I. US Democracy Promotion: Unfocused priorities and “virtual” politics**

Unable to consolidate power through the coercion and patronage mechanisms enjoyed by his counterparts in Astana and Tashkent, Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev struggled to achieve political consensus. Faced with deadlock from day one, Akaev’s relationship with opposition leaders further deteriorated after parliamentary investigations uncovered evidence of massive corruption involving the executive and several of his closest associates in 1994.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Akaev’s pronouncements of liberalization and a plan to transform Kyrgyzstan into an “oasis of democracy” caught the attention of Western donors. Western assistance, aimed at promoting

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<sup>21</sup> Shairbek Juraev, “Kyrgyz Democracy? Situating the Tulip Revolution and beyond,” in *Domestic and International Perspectives on Kyrgyzstan’s ‘Tulip Revolution’: Motives, Mobilizations and Meanings*, ed. Sally N. Cummings, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 36.

<sup>22</sup> Eric McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence and Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 85.

political and economic transition in the region, actually proved Akaev's saving grace, a stopgap that briefly stabilized his hold on power.

During the 1990s, American policy toward Kyrgyzstan, largely through financial assistance, training, and advice, aimed to accomplish several goals: promote democracy and civil society, facilitate privatization and the transition to a free market economy, and ultimately assist in Kyrgyzstan's integration within the region and with the international community at large.<sup>23</sup> This assistance was generally channeled to USAID and World Bank partners in government ministries, parliament, and nonprofit organizations. According to World Bank estimates, net official development assistance to Kyrgyzstan increased more than tenfold between 1992 and 1995, from \$21,000 to \$285,000—more than triple that of any other Central Asian country.<sup>24</sup> Thanks largely to this international funding and capacity building, NGOs “sprouted like mushrooms” across Kyrgyzstan as “civil society became aware of itself as a ‘sector.’”<sup>25</sup> In the mid-1990s, NGOs successfully lobbied on multiple occasions for an array of interests. For example, NGOs offered substantial input during the drafting of the Comprehensive Development Framework (Kyrgyzstan's overall development plan through the year 2010), as well as the National Strategy of Poverty Reduction, 2003-2005. Only a handful of NGOs had real access to policy makers, however—usually those headquartered in Bishkek or the oblast centers, and whose leaders enjoyed close contacts with government officials. Unfortunately, lack of political will, insufficient technical assistance and resources, and the complications of the programs themselves, meant that

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Ziegler, “Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and American Foreign Policy: From Indifference to Engagement.” *Asian Survey* 53, no. 3 (May/June 2013): 487. Accessed September 17, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2013.53.3.484>

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[http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ODAT.CD?end=2014&locations=KG&name\\_desc=true&start=1990](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ODAT.CD?end=2014&locations=KG&name_desc=true&start=1990), Accessed 15 April 2017

<sup>25</sup> Charles Buxton, “In Good Times and Hard Times: Civil Society Roles in Kyrgyzstan Today,” in *Civil Society and Politics in Central Asia*, ed. Charles Ziegler (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015) 225.

any successes achieved in consultation rarely translated into success during the implementation or monitoring phases. NGOs enjoyed perhaps more success at the local government level, but any positive impact on political culture at the local level has generally failed to “scale up” to the national arena.<sup>26</sup>

The conditionality of Western aid forced Akaev to disburse these funds rather than hoard them in state coffers, and to engage in a certain level of elite pacting and compromise. Nevertheless, Akaev managed to use this aid to rebuild Soviet-era patronage networks, placing loyal officials in charge of ministries where they could oversee the allocation of targeted funds. These patronage networks enabled Akaev to restructure parliament and effectively tie its new upper house, the Assembly of the People’s Representatives, to the executive.<sup>27</sup> Strategic use of the courts allowed Akaev to control not only which state appointees benefited from foreign aid, he could also determine who among Kyrgyzstan’s media and NGO elite had access. Ironically, despite promoting relatively liberal political and economic policies, foreign aid to Kyrgyzstan actually helped stabilize Akaev’s rule and inhibited full democratization.

Following the 9/11 terror attacks, the Manas airbase just outside Bishkek became a central transit hub for American troops deploying to Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup> Although foreign aid-dependent patronage structures persisted, access to no-strings-attached rents from the US Department of Defense (DOD) for use of the Manas airfield, as well as revenue from fueling subcontracts<sup>29</sup> allowed the executive to transition from “foreign aid-wealth redistribution to rent-seeking behavior.”<sup>30</sup> The misuse of these direct payments would prove Akaev’s undoing: “members of

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<sup>26</sup> Buxton, “In Good Times and Hard Times”, 240.

<sup>27</sup> Eric McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, and Dynasty*, 89-92.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Note: according to one estimate, fuel subcontracts with the US DOD netted the Akaev family an average of forty million dollars per annum between 2002 and 2005. McGlinchey, 98.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

Akaev's winning coalition, perceiving they were not receiving their fair cut of the Manas wealth, began defecting and agitating for Akaev's overthrow."<sup>31</sup>

The Tulip Revolution began as a series of protests in Kyrgyzstan's provincial capitals over alleged vote irregularities following the first round of parliamentary elections in late February 2005. Disaffected political elites from five major party blocs, including Roza Otunbaeva (who would head the 2010 transitional government), and future president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, seized this opportunity, fomenting the local rallies into a nationwide uprising.<sup>32</sup> On March 22, protestors joined in Bishkek to seize the White House, where Kurmanbek Bakiyev would commence his five-year residency just two days later.

Lewis has argued that the Tulip Revolution depicted by Western media, in which a robust Civil Society sector led a democratic uprising against a corrupt post-Soviet authoritarian regime reflected a parallel, virtual political world.<sup>33</sup> Most Western engagement at this time occurred through a small group of NGOs, youth groups and other organizations located primarily in Bishkek with lesser presences in Osh and other large cities. This virtual political sphere depended almost entirely on foreign assistance, and consisted of mostly urbanites, with an unusually high proportion of English-speakers and young people that spoke "a language of political liberalism and reform which is largely (although not completely) at odds with internal discourse within the political elite."<sup>34</sup> It is often oblivious to the chasm between the democratic vision promoted by Western actors and Central Asian social, political and economic realities.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>33</sup> David Lewis, "The Dynamics of Regime Change: Domestic and International Factors in the 'Tulip Revolution,'" in *Domestic and International Perspectives on Kyrgyzstan's 'Tulip Revolution': Motives, Mobilizations and Meanings*, ed. Sally N. Cummings (New York: Routledge, 2010), 48.

<sup>34</sup> Lewis, "The Dynamics of Regime Change", 46.

In actuality, Western-funded CSOs played only a limited role in removing Akaev from power. These organizations did achieve some success in anti-corruption campaigns thanks to an independent printing press, but without access to government-run TV stations, their readership was restricted primarily to Bishkek.<sup>35</sup> NGOs also struggled with low mobilization capacity: in (month) 2005, just (x months) before parliamentary elections, NGO groups could only muster a force of 20 for anti-corruption protests in the capital.<sup>36</sup> Rather than a democratic revolution driven by CSOs, Akaev's ouster was the product of elite and local competition, where protest groups mobilized in support of "local heroes" on the basis of regional and kinship bonds.

Once in office, Kurmanbek Bakiyev engaged in the same rent-seeking behavior that proved Akaev's undoing, with little evidence of the elite pacting that helped stabilize his predecessor's government during the 1990s. In September 2005, the FBI furnished Kyrgyz prosecutors with a report detailing how Akaev and his sons had used shell companies and banks in the US and Europe to conceal and launder the profits from their stake in fueling subcontracts at the Manas airbase.<sup>37</sup> Despite the exchange's stated purpose of preventing graft and money laundering in the new Kyrgyz government, Bakiyev used this report as a blueprint for personal enrichment from the airbase. To avoid any charges of malfeasance, Bakiyev put the fuel supply contracts under his son, Maksim Bakiev's care. In 2009, after promising during his re-election campaign to terminate American access to the airbase, it became apparent that Bakiyev simply wished to use US-Russian competition to secure an even more lucrative deal on the base. Between 2005 and 2010, an estimated 1.8 million tons of fuel was delivered to Manas, netting Maksim Bakiyev approximately eight million dollars a month.<sup>38</sup> In many ways, Kurmanbek Bakiyev simply picked up where his

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>37</sup> McGlinchey, 101.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

predecessor left off; enabled by access to direct, unconditional rents from the US Department of Defense, the corrupt, nepotistic nature of his regime caused an almost immediate backlash from former supporters, who defected *en masse*.

After the Tulip Revolution, Kyrgyzstani civil society faced growing internal divisions and declining financial support from international donors. In summer 2007, a national forum of NGOs revealed an increasing divide in Kyrgyzstan's CS sector between reformers and radicals.<sup>39</sup> The latter split off to form a "people's parliament", which met regularly until the coup in April 2010. Western assistance to NGOs in Kyrgyzstan declined significantly during this time, as donors were hesitant to support overt political action, particularly given the possibility for activists to criticize not only the regime, but donor policies and the lack of support for democratic reforms. In one example, the director of the Coalition of NGOs, Edil Baisalov, was forced to resign by the US National Democratic Institute (NDI) for becoming "too political".<sup>40</sup> The NDI, which had provided Baisalov's organization with approximately \$800,000 in grants, threatened to cut funding if Baisalov continued to organize protests against the Bakiyev regime. The reduction in external support for the CS sector severely diminished the operational capacity of NGOs, while internal divisions further undermined efforts to achieve a peaceful solution to mounting anti-Bakiyev sentiments.

Aware from the outset that Bakiyev was stripping the Kyrgyz state of its most lucrative assets, many Kyrgyz elites—including former members and supporters of the Bakiyev government—actively rallied street protests in an effort to force Bakiyev out of office. By November of 2006, Rosa Otunbaeva, Almazbek Atambaev, Edil Baisalov, and ministers of parliament Melis Eshimkanov and Kubatbek Baibolov, were leading protests of twenty thousand

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<sup>39</sup> Buxton, "In Good Times and Hard Times", 229.

<sup>40</sup> McGlinchey, 104.

strong in Bishkek's Ala-Too square.<sup>41</sup> These protests, although not always in such numbers, would be a regular fixture of Bakiev's tenure.

Aside from alienating key allies from the Tulip Revolution, Bakiev's use of Kyrgyzstan as a "personal fiefdom"<sup>42</sup> contributed to a legitimacy crisis of his own making, based in poor governance and compounded by the 2008 global economic crisis. During the winter of 2008-2009, the Kyrgyz government simply lacked the resources to provide essential goods, such as heating and power, to parts of the country. Fears of shortages the following winter gave way to mounting tensions when Bakiev raised tariffs on electricity, heat, and water in early 2010 not long after privatizing strategic energy assets and selling them to close friends and associates.<sup>43</sup> Local protests over utility prices, poor governance, and Bakiev's nepotistic, criminal abuse of office would set the stage for the second coup in five years.

Similar to the revolution of 2005, Western actors contributed only marginally to Bakiev's ouster in April 2010. NGOs did however fulfill several important roles in the following months. First, backed by foreign aid workers, they contributed to relief efforts in the aftermath of violent clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks around the Southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad. Second, the interim government, led by Roza Otunbaeva, actively consulted with Western NGOs while developing the new constitution. Finally, NGOs offered input substantial input on drafting the new constitution and the new electoral commission; the new government's laws and policies reflected a number of their suggestions.<sup>44</sup> NGO consultation with elites in Bishkek and cooperation

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.rferl.org/a/Kyrgyzstan\\_Nominates\\_President\\_For\\_Reelection/1619653.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/Kyrgyzstan_Nominates_President_For_Reelection/1619653.html)

<sup>43</sup> David Gullette, "Institutionalized Instability: Factors Leading to the April 2010 Uprising in Kyrgyzstan", *Eurasian Review* 3 (November 2010): 100.

<sup>44</sup> Buxton, "In Good Times and Hard Times," 234.

on the ground during the violence helped stabilize the crisis, redraft Kyrgyzstan's constitution, and facilitate the first peaceful, relatively democratic transition in Kyrgyz history.

Since 2010, Kyrgyzstani elections have become relatively more free and open, and civil society organizations enjoy more freedom in Kyrgyzstan than in any other Central Asian country.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, with his control of state media and coercive apparatuses, the Atambaev regime still maintains a significant advantage over political challengers. At the time of writing, Atambaev has also recently detained several opposition leaders on dubious charges, including four members of the Ata-Meken party—one of whom, Omurbek Tekebaev has since been nominated as his party's candidate in the upcoming elections in November 2017.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, US influence in the region has declined sharply since the withdrawal of American forces from Manas in July of 2014.<sup>47</sup> In June of the following year, the US Department of State sparked a diplomatic row when it awarded Uzbek rights activist Azimjan Askarov the 2014 Human Rights Defender Award.<sup>48</sup> Bishkek viewed the selection of Askarov, who had been sentenced to life in prison for his alleged role in the ethnic violence of 2010, as “an attempt to destabilize the country and sow interethnic tension.”<sup>49</sup> Furious, Atambaev responded by canceling a 1993 treaty that exempted all Americans and non-Kyrgyz involved in US government or private aid programs from income and social security taxes and waived tariffs on all goods brought into the country as part of these programs. In its efforts to promote human rights in Kyrgyzstan, the State Department's failure to observe “local rules” may have cost more than any gains made by awarding Askarov.

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<sup>45</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: Nations in Transit 2016,” Freedom House, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2016/kyrgyzstan>.

<sup>46</sup> Putz, Catherine, “Kyrgyz Presidential Politics: Scaling a Mountain of Rumors,” *The Diplomat*, thediplomat.com, March 9, 2017, accessed April 28, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> “Kyrgyz Parliament Sets Date for Manas Closure,” *Eurasianet.org*, June 20, 2014, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67152>.

<sup>48</sup> “Kyrgyzstan Ditches Key Treaty with the US,” *Eurasianet.org*, July 21, 2015, accessed April 26, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74331>.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*



## **Authoritarian Response: Intervention and Counternorms**

Because Russia and China do not generally pursue democracy suppression as a strategic goal in its own right, measuring the impact of their respective foreign policies on Kyrgyzstani regime trajectories is more difficult than gauging that of American influence. In fact, the most prominent case of Russian intervention, which contributed to the 2010 ouster of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, resulted in an arguably more democratic regime. Despite the limited, contradictory evidence for active democracy suppression,<sup>50</sup> some authors have suggested that Russian and Chinese engagement in regional organizations, bilateral economic cooperation, and—in Russia’s case—historic cultural and military ties,<sup>51</sup> promote counternorms<sup>52</sup> which undermine democracy while legitimizing and enabling autocratic rule.

Moscow’s role in the ouster of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010 represents the strongest evidence for direct Russian influence in Kyrgyzstani regime outcomes. Kyrgyz-Russian relations declined rapidly after Bakiyev reneged on his promise to expel U.S. troops from the Manas airbase.<sup>53</sup> The mood soured further in February 2010 when reports emerged that the Bakiyev family was reselling cheap gas from Russia to American forces at much higher international rates. In retaliation, Moscow postponed the second installment of an aid package destined to help construct much-needed energy infrastructure, and on April 1, just six days before the first protests in Talas, Moscow announced new duties on refined gas and petroleum exports to Kyrgyzstan, which threatened to cause up to a thirty percent spike in refined energy prices. In the weeks

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<sup>50</sup> Lucan A. Way, “The Limits of Autocracy Promotion,” 698.

<sup>51</sup> Inna Melnykovska, et. al, “Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?” *Asia Europe Journal* 10, no. 1 (May 2012): 76, accessed April 1, 2017. doi:10.1007/s10308-012-0315-5.

<sup>52</sup> Alexander Cooley, “Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (July 2015), accessed April 30, 2017, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/authoritarianism-goes-global-countering-democratic-norms>.

<sup>53</sup> Trilling, David and Chinghiz Umetov. “Kyrgyzstan: Is Putin Punishing Bakiyev?”. *EurasiaNet.org*, April 5, 2010. Accessed April 28, 2017. <http://eurasianet.org>.

preceding the violent protests that sparked the revolution, Russian newspapers and TV programs ran highly critical stories on the Bakiyev family, exposing the regime's corruption and nepotism, including connections to the controversial privatization of strategic energy assets, the murder of journalist Gennady Pavluk, and Maksim Bakiyev's connections to the Manas airbase.<sup>54</sup> Russia picked up these stories from Western outlets such as RFE/RL and the BBC, whose broadcasts had been blocked or interrupted, criticizing the Bakiyev regime's repression of independent journalism in the process.<sup>55</sup> Moscow's precise manipulation of linkage and leverage mechanisms (media and economic measures) helped catalyze nationwide unrest into the protest movement that would end Bakiyev's tenure in the Kyrgyz White House.

While pressure from Moscow certainly contributed to Bakiyev's overthrow, this pressure does not support the thesis of Russia as an autocracy exporter. First, Russia's intervention had nothing to do with regime behavior and everything to do with punishing Bakiyev for past transgressions.<sup>56</sup> Second, the Kremlin's decision to abandon Bakiyev in favor of Roza Otunbaeva and Almazbek Atambaev resulted in a considerably more democratic regime. In this case, Moscow's decision to back a more liberal regime represents neither a reversal nor failure of Kremlin policy. Instead, it is perfectly consistent with its interests in both resisting American hegemony in Central Asia and retaining Kyrgyzstan as an economically, politically dependent client state.

Although evidence of deliberate authoritarian promotion is limited, authors have argued that Russian and Chinese interactions with Bishkek in the pursuit of their respective policy goals

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<sup>54</sup> Erica Marat. "Russian Mass Media Attack Bakiyev," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7, no. 63 (April 1, 2010), accessed April 28, 2017. <http://jamestown.org/programs/edm>.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Before Kyrgyz Uprising, Dose of Russian Soft Power," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2010, accessed April 28, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/19/world/asia/19kyrgyz.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Lucan A. Way, "The Limits of Autocracy Promotion," 698.

have indirectly promoted authoritarianism in the Central Asian country. Regional organizations such as the SCO, which includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, bills itself as an alternative to cooperation with the West and embodies China's principle of "civilizational diversity"—the idea that all regime types are equal.<sup>57</sup> The SCO espouses such values as strict observance of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and neutrality on domestic affairs. Sensitive to the possibility of unrest in Central Asia spreading to its own territory as a result of either from Islamic extremism or democratization, the SCO also serves as a vessel for China's policy of combatting the "three evils"— separatism, terrorism, and extremism, which in this context enables the repression of political opposition and dissenters.<sup>58</sup> Although primarily designed as a mechanism to facilitate multilateral relations in the region, the SCO's strict policy of non-intervention means that it is not only tolerant of autocratic regimes, but supportive of counternorms such as civilizational diversity and the subordination of democratic principles and human rights in the interest of regional security and stability.

The Russian-led CSTO embodies Moscow's monopoly on "punitive power" in Central Asia.<sup>59</sup> While it has yet to intervene militarily in any Central Asian country since their independence, the Kremlin occasionally uses this threat to alter the behavior of specific leaders. Of greater interest for its impact on Kyrgyz regime outcomes is actually the CSTO's failure to intervene during the ethnic violence in 2010. Although Russia and Kyrgyzstan's other neighbors must have watched these events closely for fear of unrest spreading across their borders, Moscow did not intervene despite interim president Otunbaeva's formal invitation because it considered the new constitutions "too democratic". By allowing the violence to continue, Russia avoided being

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<sup>57</sup> Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," 51-52.

<sup>58</sup> Melnykovska et. al, "Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?" 77.

<sup>59</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "Assessing Russia's Normative Agenda in Central Asia," Bishkek Project, March 22, 2017, accessed 30 April, 2017, <https://bishkekproject.com/memos/16>.

drawn into a domestic conflict while weakening Kyrgyzstan's new democratic regime.

Russia also uses pseudo-NGOs and fake election monitors to spread counternorms and undermine democratization.<sup>60</sup> Government organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) are often designed to counter the work of truly independent organization. Russian-sponsored youth groups and other representatives of "traditional values" that spread themes of national pride, sovereignty, and the disparagement ethnic and sexual minorities. Fake election monitors, such as Russia's Commonwealth of Independent States-Election Monitoring Organization (CIS-EMO), tend to legitimize faulty elections and frequently produce opinions contradictory to those of international monitors such as ODIHR. Rather than substituting Western democratic watchdogs, these organizations serve to sow confuse, distract, and sow uncertainty, while challenging the credibility of more critical foreign observers.

The nature of Russian and Chinese bilateral relations with Kyrgyzstan also enable authoritarianism and discourage democratization, particularly with regard to economic cooperation. Moscow's recent incorporation of Kyrgyzstan into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) reflects its interest in retaining Kyrgyzstan as a dependent, pliable client state while keeping it isolated from alternative trading partners.<sup>61</sup> Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU under threat of losing the remittances from migrant laborers in Russia that constitute up to a quarter percent of its GDP.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, by joining the EEU and accepting new tariffs on goods imported from non-Union states, Kyrgyz markets have become less appealing to Chinese exporters, who had previously used Kyrgyzstan as a gateway into other Eurasian countries. Just like remittances from Russia, the re-exportation and domestic resale of Chinese goods composed a significant share of

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<sup>60</sup> Alexander Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global," 55-56.

<sup>61</sup> Inna Melnykovska et al., "Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?" 79.

<sup>62</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "Assessing Russia's Normative Agenda in Central Asia."

Kyrgyzstan's GDP, and helped keep prices for essential goods manageable. Russia also encourages loyalty/dependency through the financing trade deficits buying and managing dilapidated infrastructure assets, or by offering incentives such as financial aid, credits, and discounted energy in order to finance tr. Maintaining these economic levers allows Russia to ensure Kyrgyz dependence despite rising Chinese influence.

Economic interests constitute the bulk of Chinese engagement in Kyrgyzstan, which represents both a respectably-sized market for Chinese goods and a gateway into other Eurasian markets.<sup>63</sup> China surpassed Russia in 2008 to become Kyrgyzstan's largest trading partner<sup>64</sup> and invests heavily in development projects, such as building new transportation infrastructure as part of its "One Belt, One Road" initiative. These projects are designed both to develop land-based shipping routes and to promote regional stability through economic development. Melnykovska *et al.* argue that, ruling Chinese elites, similar to Russia's case, encourage and benefit from widespread corruption when conducting official trade deals related to large energy and infrastructure projects, which reinforces negative institutional norms that facilitate external resource exploitation.<sup>65</sup> Access to bribes and other kickbacks from foreign businessmen encourages corruption and creates a disincentive to abdicate one's position or consent to more transparency. On the other hand, small-scale, independent cross border trade, which occurs far more frequently, may actually create democratizing pressures. Chinese traders generally prefer to transport their goods through countries with both the most favorable trade regime, and the least corruption. Thus, even though corruption rents still end up in the pockets of elites, corruption must

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<sup>63</sup> Inna Melnykovska et al., "Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?" 80-81.

<sup>64</sup> Alexander Cooley, *Great Game Local Rules*, 86-87.

<sup>65</sup> Inna Melnykovska et al., "Do Russia and China Promote Autocracy in Central Asia?" 80.

stay below a certain level to attract lower-level Chinese business. At least theoretically then, an increase in trade with China could therefore cause bottom-up pressures for institutional reforms.

Russian political intervention in Kyrgyzstan has yielded limited, even contradictory results on Kyrgyzstani regime trajectories. One reason for this lack of evidence is the nature of each actor's interests in the region. For Russia, maintaining a pliable client state and countering the threats of Islamic extremism and Western expansion supersede the desire to suppress democratization, even to the point of supporting a more liberal regime in order to punish the wayward Kurmanbek Bakiyev. China is even more tolerant, generally preferring to focus on regional economic and security cooperation without interfering in its partners' domestic affairs. Even if Russia and China do not actively engage in democracy suppression as such in Kyrgyzstan, the pursuit of their respective interests has resulted in the enabling and normalizing of autocratic practices.

### **Conclusion:**

Lacking the natural resource wealth of neighboring Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or nearby Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan's dependency on foreign aid renders it more sensitive to external influence. At the same time, the competition of multiple patrons for a single client state allows Bishkek some flexibility in setting the rules of the game, which the regime has leveraged toward the pursuit of its own interests. As a result, the efforts—direct or indirect—of external actors to influence Kyrgyzstan's regime trajectory—such as the United States' (inconsistent) democracy promotion, or Russia and China's resistance to Western interference in favor of a stable, but pliable authoritarian client state—have yielded limited, even contradictory results.

American foreign policy toward Kyrgyzstan has oscillated between democracy promotion and security cooperation depending on overarching security concerns, and has achieved mostly negative results over time in terms of Kyrgyzstani regime trajectories. While conditional aid

programs may have played a central role in developing Kyrgyzstan's civil society sector, it also forced Akaev to engage in pacting with opposition elites, inadvertently helping to produce a temporarily stable authoritarian regime. Executive access to non-conditional rents from the DOD for use of the Manas airbase and revenue from fuel subcontracts caused two successive regimes to abandon elite pacting and pursue personal enrichment, and in both cases precipitated their overthrow within five years. Furthermore, despite some successes in democracy promotion through NGOs, Kyrgyzstan's civil society sector remains largely dependent on foreign aid and operates within a mostly virtual political world, detached from both real decision-makers and average Kyrgyzstanis.

Compared to the moral imperative attached to democracy promotion in US foreign policy democracy suppression abroad should be viewed as a defensive impulse, designed to check the expansion of Western hegemony and prevent domestic instability within similar neighboring regimes from spilling over into the suppressor state. For Russia, the priority of maintaining Kyrgyzstan as a dependent client state within its sphere of influence supersedes the question of regime type. When domestic politics threaten this relationship, Russia is far more likely to intervene, be it to undermine democratic transition or punish a wayward autocrat—as evinced by Moscow's role in the 2010 overthrow of Kurmanbek Bakiyev. China's focus on strictly neutral economic engagement allows it to act as an alternative to Western aid sources, but its focus on regional development as a vehicle for stability may in fact create bottom-up pressures for economic and political reform in the long term.

Perhaps the strongest mechanism of democracy suppression at Russia and China's disposal is the normative capacity of regional organizations and bilateral foreign policies. Designed partially to counter Western influence, Russia and China both enable and legitimize autocratic

practices and promote counternorms that give preference to state security, civilizational diversity, and traditional values over democracy. In the pursuit of regional stability, organizations such as the SCO and CSTO tend to espouse an anti-democratic interpretation of “security” that supports the repression of political activists and dissidents. China’s call for “civilizational diversity” amounts to an endorsement of autocracy. Meanwhile, Russia has created other organizations which spread “traditional” (un-democratic) values, as well as fake watchdogs and others that are designed to undermine the efforts of Western transparency groups.

Following Levitsky and Way’s theory of “competitive authoritarianism”, Kyrgyzstan is unlikely to democratize in the near future unless Western democracy promoters develop much deeper linkages with the dependent state. Even then, any moderate countervailing pressure could check any efforts to promote democratization. At this point, it seems that the most likely source of democratization could actually be Chinese economic investment. Once Kyrgyzstan develops a stronger economy with better transportation infrastructure, emancipative values will theoretically become more democratic, and increased travel between regions will facilitate the breakdown of regional and kinship-based ties. In short term, however, Kyrgyzstan still faces a several challenges on the path to democratization. Given the United States’ declining influence in the region, these changes can only come from within.

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