The common space of neo-authoritarianism in post-Soviet Eurasia

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abstract

This essay describes the widening common space of neo-authoritarianism, which manifests itself in the synchronic replication of restrictive legislation, authoritarian practices, and legacies in Eurasia. We present preliminary results of our ongoing research that show how Russia and the Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan synchronically introduced similar anti-democratic measures to restrict freedom of academia, civil society, and political participation in response to major social and political events such as popular uprisings, financial crises, and successful successions of state power. Although the process of "authoritarian learning" has attracted substantial attention in the academic literature, we assert that the previous research does not address common root causes of the weakening democratic institutions in varying cultural, political, and social conditions. The goal of this essay is to introduce a theoretical framework for the comparative analysis of various types of hybrid non-democratic regimes not only in post-Soviet Eurasia, but also in other regions that experience democratic backsliding.

KEY WORDS: Authoritarian learning, democratic backsliding, Central Asia, Russia, former Soviet Union, political participation, dissent.

A new community of like-minded autocratic regimes is being born. Despite their economic, cultural, and political differences, the goal of these regimes is not to create an "axis of evil" and subvert democracy per se, but rather to establish a loose alliance of "imitated/fake democracies", whose international recognition, legitimacy, common authoritarian practices, and shared interests unconstrained by external judicial scrutiny, human rights, and freedoms would make authoritarianism more normatively acceptable and legitimate in the international community. To paraphrase the words of Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, if democracy becomes "the only game in town",[1] the current issue is whether residents of the "town" are ready to recognize, legitimize, and tolerate other "games" that merely imitate democracy.

It would be entertaining to assume that there is an "academy of authoritarianism" that trains new dictators, organizes "authoritarian exchange programs", and nominates the "best autocrat of the year". The reality is, however, more complex than that. Authoritarianism appears to be a result of comprehensive internal and external factors that coincide at a certain point in time and subvert the democratic course of development in a given country or region.[2] It is well established[3] that civic activists of *Kmara* (Georgian: "*Enough!*") and *Pora* (Ukranian: "*It is time*") learned from *Otpor* (Serbian: "*Resistance!*") and its experi-ences of overthrowing the Milošević regime. Trained activists then participated in the organization of the *Rose Revolution* in Georgia in 2003 and the *Orange Revolution* in Ukraine in 2004. The key question is whether authoritarian regimes also draw lessons from successes and failures of other autocrats. The global spread of non-democratic practices[4] is no longer the "curse" of developing countries, where authoritarian traditions are often considered to be "business-as-usual". For example, recent developments in the US have led to discussions about a constitutional failure in one of the oldest democracies in the world.[5] Our essay offers the concept of the *common neo-authoritarian space* as a way of understanding the nature of ongoing democratic backsliding throughout the world.

Difficulties related to conducting research in authoritarian settings

There are several significant challenges related to any research on authoritarian learning and common anti-democratic practices in Eurasia. First, it is difficult to conduct conventional field research to collect the necessary quantitative and qualitative data on the ground. For instance, authorities in Uzbekistan barred Sergei Abashin, anthropologist from the European University in St. Petersburg, the Russian Federation, from entering the country when Abashin published an article about "national government", "post-colonialism", and "post-Sovietness" in Uzbekistan.[6] Alexander Sodiqov, a University of Toronto researcher, was arrested in 2014 in Tajikistan while carrying out academic fieldwork on civil society and conflict resolution in Central Asia.[7] Sodiqov, who was detained by the secret service of Tajikistan, the GKNB, faced charges of "subversion and espionage".[8] Furthermore, the local population often perceives international researchers as foreign agents and spies whose job is to interfere in domestic politics.[9] Therefore, conventional field research on the subject might compromise the safety of the field researchers and local participants.

Second, the countries selected for this research are notorious for their lack of transparency and obscure decision-making processes, back-room deals, and absence of clear rules of governance.[10] Under such conditions, it is almost impossible to identify an original source of any policy, legislation, or practice from the selected jurisdictions. Thus, it is hard to measure or detect the transfer of antidemocratic policies and to differentiate between a "national" practice and one adopted from abroad. Third, one cannot easily equate countries that have varying degrees of economic and political development as well as different potential in terms of their natural and human resources. It is also difficult to compare a multitude of hybrid/non-democratic regimes and to predict a possible course for their development. Thus, there is always the possibility that similar laws and practices have originated independently from each other under the influence of country-specific conditions. Our research seeks to overcome these difficulties by demonstrating a *common authoritarian fingerprint* of similar laws and interests of ruling elites in the post-Soviet Eurasian countries.

Focus on four Eurasian countries with common trajectories

Our prospective research will cover the following **four countries:** the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The selection of the four Eurasian countries is based on their geographical position, common history and culture, and their current strong economic, trade, military, and security cooperation in the region. Each of the above-mentioned former Soviet republics has substantial national minorities whose ethnicities and languages are those of the majority populations in the other countries selected for this research. The three Central Asian states joined the Russian Empire (1860s–1917), in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, they were incorporated into the Soviet Union (1917–1991). Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan were selected from among the Central Asian states because they have common borders with each other. Furthermore, these three Central Asian republics share the Fergana Valley, which has become an amalgamation of common traditions, religion, and cultural identity.[11] This research will also demonstrate that the selected four countries have the same trajectory of post-Soviet transition and potentially approximate each other in terms of their practices of governance, their policies, and their legislation. While Russia, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan remain entrenched autocracies,[12] nowadays one can also observe a recent democratic backsliding in Kyrgyzstan, which used to be

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

Putin takes the oath in 2000.

PHOTO: KREMLIN.RU

May 2000 – Russia: Putin's fist presidential term.

September-October 2000 – Serbia: The overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic (the Bulldozer Revolution).

November 2003 – Georgia: the Rose Revolution.

May 2004 – Russia: Putin's second presidential term.

The Rose revolution, Tbilisi 2003.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

November 2004 – January 2005 – Ukraine: The Orange Revolution.

March-April 2005 – Kyrgyzstan: The first Tulip Revolution.

May 2005 – Uzbekistan: Andijan protests.

December 2005 – Uzbekistan: Amendments to restrict the freedom of assembly.

The Orange revolution in Ukraine, depicted in a stamp from 2004.

2008 – Russia: Financial Crisis.

May 2008 – Russia: Putin's appointment as the Prime Minister.

August 2008 – Kyrgyzstan: Amendments to restrict the freedom of assembly.

April 2010 – Kyrgyzstan: The second Tulip Revolution.

President Medvedev and Prime minister Putin in 2008.

an "Island of Democracy" in Central Asia.[13] The recent political changes in Uzbekistan after the death of President Islam Karimov have created certain expectations that the new leadership of the country will improve the situation in terms of democracy and human rights.[14] Thus, with this geographic focus in mind our research will elaborate on the recent developments in the region of post-Soviet Eurasia.

Previous research on inter-state learning

In general, the academic literature on the "common antidemocratic toolkit"[15] and inter-state learning can be divided into three strains of research. The first cohort of authors emphasizes the unintentional diffusion of practices, policies, and ideas across state borders without direct participation of governments or other actors in the process.[16] Proponents of this approach emphasize the importance of certain conditions such as similarities of culture, geographical proximity, interdependencies, common networks, trade,[17] security, and other linkages that can facilitate the process of diffusion.[18] This strain of research often employs natural sciences terms such as "pandemic", "contagious", and "infectious", while opponents of democratization, in the same vein, talk about the "orange plague" or the "orange virus" to describe the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004 and other "color revolutions".[19] Therefore, proponents of diffusion emphasize indirect and unintentional exchange of policies, legislative measures, and practices.

The second group of researchers studies the deliberate "negative transfer" of authoritarian policies and practices from one country to another,[20] the "positive direct transfer" of the best legal practices (known as legal transplants),[21] and the EU legal approximation.[22] A good example of the "negative transfer" would be the transfer of repressive practices from the Soviet Union to other countries of the communist bloc during the Cold War.[23]

The third strain of research emphasizes the deliberate promotion of authoritarian practices and policies by powerful states or international organizations on weaker or dependent countries.[24] The most expressive manifestation of such intentional authoritarian promotion would be the concept of the Dark Knight or a country that uses diplomatic, economic, and sometimes even military means to assert its interests, to promote itself as a role model for other states, and to support neighboring authoritarian regimes.[25] Our project will seek to reconcile all three strains of research by offering a concept that can help identify and analyze common causes of authoritarian learning in Eurasia.

Novelty of our concept and its potential contribution

Our theoretical framework of the "Common Space of Neo-Authoritarianism" makes a threefold contribution to the growing research on "authoritarian learning" and "democratic backsliding". First, the concept of the "Common Space" does not reject the previous theories of authoritarian learning that essentially focus on direct or indirect inter-state learning via diffusion, transfer, and promotion. The research framework proposed by us emphasizes instead the importance of common interests, needs, totalitarian legacies, learning points, and perceptions of threat after significant social and political events that can trigger multiple forms of both deliberate and unintentional "authoritarian learning". Second, the idea of the "Common Space" is very timely because it describes the modern phenomenon of hybrid political regimes that imitate democracy by using a variety of common practices, policies, and laws that, despite their formal "democratic appearance", are in fact aimed at restricting political dissent and participation.[26] Furthermore, the proposed concept of the "Common Space" of anti-democratic practices goes beyond state borders and overcomes cultural, political, and social differences. Our research seeks to demonstrate that hybrid regimes, despite their varying domestic conditions such as weakness or strength of state apparatus, tend to apply similar authoritarian tactics that have already proven to be effective in preserving past and present autocracies in the region of post-Soviet Eurasia. Our analysis of national legislation and its practical application also demonstrates *an ongoing approximation* of the situation with political participation and dissent in Russia and the Central Asian republics, whose "imitated democracies" draw lessons from the successes and failures of other authoritarian regimes.

Third, the idea of the "Common Space" helps us reassess the role of past totalitarian legacies in the modern world. We call the "Common Space" of anti-democratic practices Neo-Authoritarian because it reinvents old tools of authoritarianism and makes them more acceptable nowadays by camouflaging autocratic regimes with fake or powerless democratic institutions and by giving authoritarian leaders the necessary legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Taking into account that the "Common Space" of authoritarian practices has cross-generational, inter-cultural, and multidisciplinary dimensions, it can be an effective theoretical model for the comparative analysis of various types of non-democratic regimes as well as conditions that either facilitate or hinder the spread of authoritarianism in post-Soviet Eurasia and in other regions.

Soviet legacies

Our research confirms the presence of common authoritarian legacies inherited from the Soviet Union in the four selected countries. In this essay we would like to present three legacies that, in our opinion, play a crucial role in restricting political participation and dissent: **a)** *Elimination of non-conformity*; **b)** *A tradition of pro-regime organizations*; and **c)** *Soviet-like politically motivated show trials against dissidents*. Our prospective research will demonstrate that all of the above-mentioned communist totalitarian practices have been successfully reanimated to varying degrees in the former Soviet republics selected for our research. For instance, one can observe the deliberate elimination of non-conformity in all areas of life such as academia, mass media, and civil society. In Russia, the government has put a label of "foreign agents" on independent scholars. The most recent examples would be Professor of Political Science Mikhail Savva[27] and Professor of Economics Sergei Guriev[28] who were forced to leave Russia due to persecutions.[29] Russia proceeded with eliminating any independent scientific research by designating as a "foreign agent" its first private sponsor of science, the "Dynasty Foundation" which led to the liquidation of the organization.[30] There are similar restrictive measures against non-conformity in Central Asia.

In particular, Tajikistan restricted academic mobility by issuing a decree to prevent students and scholars from participating in scientific conferences or taking part in other academic programs without special ministerial permission. In a recent attack

Euromaidan, December 1, 2013.

on the independent media in Tajikistan, investigative journalist Khayrullo Mirsaidov faced persecution and deprivation of liberty after he exposed the corruption of local authorities.[31] The Government of Uzbekistan tried to rewrite the history of the Andijan protests of May 2005 by producing doctored "public confessions" about the events on state television.[32] In 2015, the Ministry of Education of Uzbekistan introduced an unprecedented restriction of academic freedom by abolishing the teaching of political science in all universities of the country.[33] In a similar measure aimed at restricting independent civil society organizations, Kyrgyz authorities prosecuted Azimzhan Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek and human rights defender, who documented inter-ethnic violence in the Jalal-Abad region in June 2010.[34] Post-communist elites also rely on Soviet-like "quasi-civic initiatives" to show the "popular support" of the regime.

In Russia, the pro-government youth movement Our People (Russian: *"Nashi"*) has essentially become the successor of the Soviet Komsomol, the youth branch of the Communist Party.[35] Valentina Matvienko, the head of the upper house of the Russian Parliament (Federation Council) and the former Komsomol leader, has recently emphasized the importance of using the experience of Komsomol in Russia.[36] One can find Komsomol-like organizations in Tajikistan with its Homeland Builders (Tajik:

Moscow rally, December 24, 2011.

June 2010 – Osh ethnic conflict.

June and August 2011 – Tajikistan: Amendments to restrict the freedom of assembly.

December 2011 – July 2013 – Russia: 'Bolotnaya Protests'.

May 2012 – Russia: Putin's third presidential term.

May 2012 – Kyrgyzstan: Abolishment of the previous restrictive law on the freedom of assembly.

The "green men" from Russia. Military base at Perevalne during the 2014 Crimean crisis.

June 2012 – Russia: Amendments to restrict the freedom of assembly.

November 2013 – March 2014 – Ukraine: Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan), Annexation of Crimea by Russia.

July 2014 – Tajikistan: Amendments to restrict the freedom of assembly.

July 2014 – Russia: Amendments to restrict the freedom of assembly.

Demonstration in support of the Mejlis in Kyiv, September 2016.

October 2014 – Kyrgyzstan: Amendments to the law on peaceful assembly.

September 2015 – Tajikistan: Ban of the Party of Islamic Renaissance.

December 2015 – Kyrgyzstan: A Bill proposed to restrict the freedom of assembly.

September 2016 – Russia: Ban of Crimean Tatar Mejlis in Russia and in Russian-occupied Crimea.

December 2018 – Russia: Further restrictions on the freedom of assembly.

"*Sozandagoni Vatan*"), which is a youth wing of the ruling party.[37] Uzbekistan has its Youth Union (Uzbek: "*O'zbekiston Yoshlar Ittifoqi*")[38] and the Committee of Women and Girls.[39] In Kyrgyzstan, police detained the leader of the youth wing of the ruling party after he criticized the party leadership and complained about a "'communications specialist' from Russia 'trying to manage (the party's) internal processes.'"[40] Politicized show trials against the opposition have further limited opportunities for political dissent and participation in post-Soviet Eurasia.

From the four countries selected for our research, only Russia is a member of the Council of Europe and, thus, has to comply with the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights. The Court in Strasbourg has already reviewed complaints about politically motivated justice in the former Soviet Union.[41] Most recently the Grand Chamber of the Court delivered a landmark decision in the case of the Russian opposition activist Aleksey Navalnyy. In particular, the Court held that Navalnyy's criminal prosecution and repeated arrests "had actually aimed at suppressing political pluralism[,]…pursued an ulterior purpose…in the context of a general move to bring the opposition under control [in Russia]."[42] Similar politically motivated proceedings took place in Tajikistan against opposition politician Zayd Saidov[43] and human rights lawyer Buzurgmehr Yorov.[44] In September 2015, the Tajik Supreme Court banned the opposition Party of Islamic Renaissance as a terrorist and extremist organization. [45] One year later, in September 2016, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation supported a decision to declare Mejlis, a Crimean Tatar elected representative body, an extremist organization and to ban its activities in Russia and in Russian-occupied occupied Crimea.[46] Authorities of Uzbekistan prosecuted opposition leader Sanjar Umarov, who was allowed to leave the country after receiving amnesty in 2009.[47] In Kyrgyzstan, international observers criticized trials against representatives of the opposition Omurbek Tekebaev and Duishonkul Chotonov[48] as well as the former Member of Parliament Sadyr Japarov, the ex-Finance Minister Marat Sultanov and others.[49] These and other common authoritarian practices demonstrate that the old totalitarian legacies continue to play a crucial role in subverting post-Soviet transformations and in undermining democratic institutions in the hybrid regimes of post-Soviet Eurasia.

Synchronic replication of restrictive laws – peaceful assembly

The main premise of our research is that hybrid authoritarian regimes in post-Soviet Eurasia have synchronically replicated restrictive laws after significant social and political events. This section presents how Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan introduced similar legislative measures to restrict freedom of assembly shortly after the first "color revolutions", the "Bolotnaya protests" in Russia, and "Euromaidan" in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. We argue that such events can serve as common learning points for non-democratic countries that draw lessons from the successes and failures of other autocrats' attempts to ensure the survival, legitimacy, and longevity of their regimes. Furthermore, we assert that the financial crisis


The Tulip revolution, Kyrgyzstan, 2005.

of 2008 in Russia might have accelerated the proliferation of measures restricting the freedom of assembly in post-Soviet hybrid regimes that were already concerned with the prospect of imminent "color revolutions" overthrowing them one day. We agree with the "politics of fear" concept proposed by Vladimir Gel'man, Przeworski's "authoritarian equilibrium", and the recent research by Guriev and Treisman that connects a lack of economic growth with increased levels of repression.[50] Our research corroborates these findings by demonstrating the assault on peaceful assembly after popular uprisings and the 2008 financial crisis in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Shortly after the end of the Ukrainian "Orange Revolution" in January 2005 and protests in the Uzbek city of Andijan in the Fergana Valley in May 2005,[51] Uzbekistan amended its Code of Administrative Offences in December 2005 to introduce stricter financial and administrative penalties for "non-sanctioned" (without prior state permission) peaceful assemblies, demonstrations, and rallies. Another "color revolution" called "the Tulip Revolution" took place at the same time in Kyrgyzstan in March–April 2005. The new leadership of Kyrgyzstan amended the law on peaceful assembly[52] in August 2008 to require prior state permission for any assembly, to limit assemblies between 9:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m., to prohibit rallies in close vicinity to the offices of the President, the Parliament, the courts, and other state institutions, and to prohibit the erection of tents.[53] Although these restrictions on protest activities did not prevent the second "Tulip Revolution" of April 2010, Kyrgyzstan initiated many additional measures to regulate peaceful assembly three more times in 2012,[54] 2014[55], and 2015.[56]

In June 2011, shortly after the second Kyrgyz revolution, Tajikistan amended its Code of Administrative Offences to introduce greater financial penalties for the violation of existing assembly procedures.[57] Amendments introduced to the Criminal Code of Tajikistan in August 2011 envisaged that persons who repeatedly violated the rules on public events could face punishment of up to two years in prison.[58] While the Osh ethnic conflict of June 2010 and the second "Tulip Revolution" led to the abolishment of the previous restrictive law on peaceful assembly in Kyrgyz-

Graph 1.
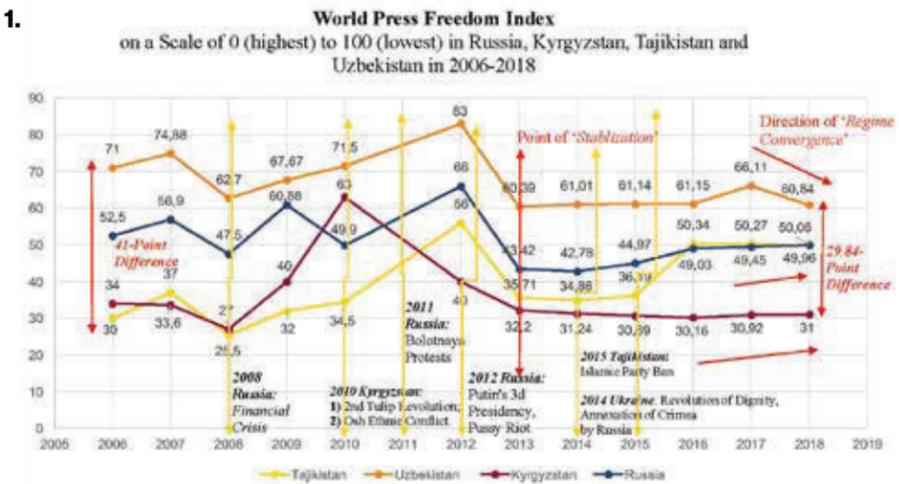
The Press Freedom Index calculated by the Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) measures the degree of freedom available to journalists in 180 countries. It is determined by pooling the responses of experts to a questionnaire devised by RSF.1) Good (From 0 to 15 points); 2) Fairly good (From 15.01 to 25 points); 3) Problematic (From 25.01 to 35 points); 4) Bad (From 35.01 to 55 points); 5) Very bad (From 55.01 to 100 points).

Graph 2.
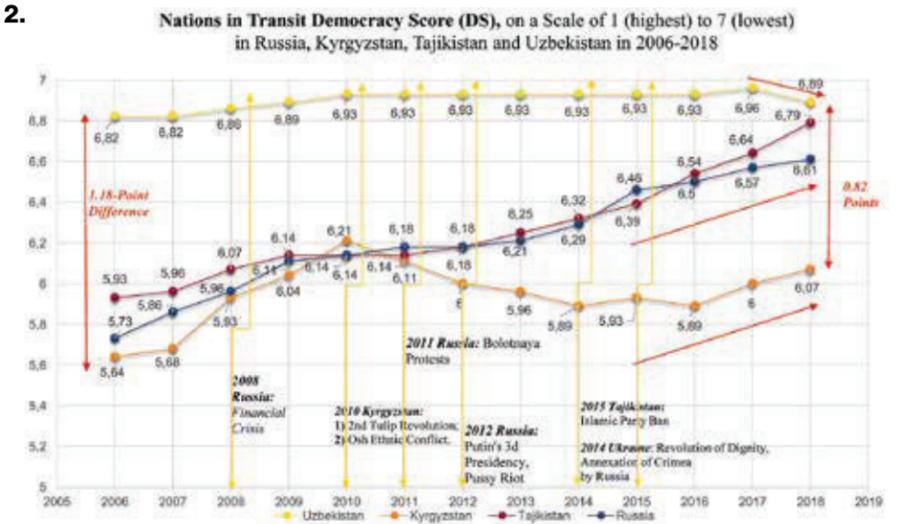
Nations in Transit by the Freedom House. Countries are rated on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest and 7 the lowest level of democratic progress. The average of these ratings is each country's Democracy Score (DS)".

Graph 3.
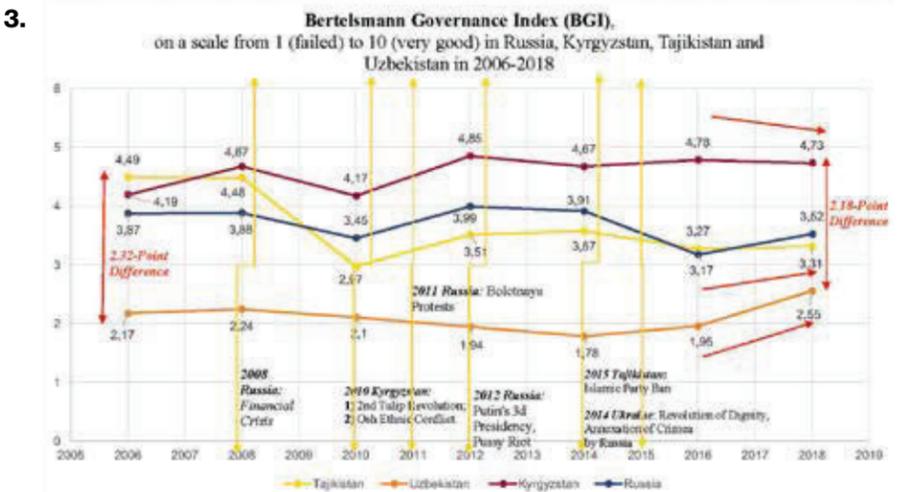
Bertelsmann Governance Index (GI) by the Bertelsmann Foundation ranks the countries according to their leadership's political management performance and their quality of democracy. Results on a scale from 1 (failed) to 10 (very good).

stan in 2012,[59] in the Russian Federation the protest movement has provoked an encroachment on the freedom of assembly.

Allegations about electoral fraud during the parliamentary and presidential elections as well as Putin's third presidency sparked mass protests on Bolotnaya Square in Moscow and across Russia in December 2011–July 2013.[60] In response, in June 2012 the Russian parliament adopted restrictive amendments to the law on public rallies and to the Code of Administrative Offences.[61] Human Rights Watch has concluded in its analysis of the amendments that their goal was to "increase the fines for violating rules for holding public events and impose various other restrictions that will make it more difficult and costly for those opposed to government policies to engage in public protests."[62] This, in combination with repressive practices of the police and courts,[63] makes it difficult, if not entirely impossible, to conduct massive rallies similar to the protests that took place on Bolotnaya Square.

The "Euromaidan" protests, the illegal annexation of Crimea in February–March 2014,[64] and the military conflict in eastern Ukraine[65] coincided with further restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly. Tajikistan amended its law on peaceful assembly[66] in July 2014 to deprive foreign citizens and persons without citizenship of the previously guaranteed right to participate in public rallies.[67] In July 2014, Russia passed a law[68] that introduced criminal liability for persons who repeatedly violated the rules on public events, increased financial penalties, and expanded the scope of application of the existing repressive legislation and its arbitrary interpretation.[69] The trend towards further penalization of protests in Russia continues, and the lower house of the legislative assembly (state Duma) has recently passed a bill[70] to punish the involvement of minors in public events that are not sanctioned by the state.[71] These and other legislative measures and practices demonstrate some common trends with regard to the freedom of assembly in post-Soviet Eurasia. One can observe the synchronic adoption of legislative measures aimed at limiting the freedom of assembly shortly after popular uprisings in the region. Moreover, the adopted national measures look similar to each other in the sense that they restrict peaceful assemblies by requiring prior state permission to hold a rally or a demonstration,[72] by introducing excessive regulations, by punishing those who do not follow them with financial penalties, by criminalizing organizers of rallies, and by targeting social groups that can potentially cause "unrest".

International quantitative rankings

We have selected three international quantitative rankings on press freedom, democratic transition, and governance that, in our opinion, are important indicators of post-Soviet transformations in the four countries selected for our research. The World Press Freedom Index prepared by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) measures the degree of freedom available to journalists in 180 countries.[73] Graph 1[74] demonstrates on a scale from 0 (good) to 100 (very bad) the freedom of the press in Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan between 2006 and 2018. This international index shows that before 2013 the ratings of each country

improved and deteriorated on numerous occasions without a strong correlation between the four selected countries. After 2013, it appears that the rankings of the four countries reached a point of "stabilization" at which the individual scores of each country no longer changed dramatically and stayed close to the scores of the other countries. Furthermore, while in 2006 the maximum difference between the countries was 41 points, the maximum difference had shrunk to 29.84 points in 2018.

The Nations in Transit Democracy Score (DS) compiled by the "Freedom House" evaluates post-Soviet democratic transformations in the 29 formerly communist countries from Central Europe to Central Asia on a scale of 1 (highest score) to 7 (lowest score).[75] Graph 2[76] illustrates that in this quantitative measure the rankings of the four countries are also similar to each other. For instance, Russia and Tajikistan received almost identical rankings every year, and the scores for Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan almost overlapped in 2009, 2010, and 2011. Furthermore, it appears that the four countries are converging, with the rankings of Kyrgyzstan (the most democratic country) and Uzbekistan (the weakest country in terms of its democratic progress) vacillating towards the "middle ground scores" received by Russia and Tajikistan. Like in the previous graph, the difference between the countries shrank from 1.18 points in 2006 to 0.82 points in 2018.

The Bertelsmann Governance Index (BGI) by the "Bertelsmann Foundation"[77] ranks 129 countries on a scale from 1 (failed) to 10 (very good) according to their leadership's political management performance and quality of democracy. Graph 3[78] shows a development trajectory that is almost identical to the rankings displayed in the previous graphs. In particular, Tajikistan and Russia have maintained the "middle ground" with similar scores, while Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have vacillated towards a hypothetical point of convergence with Russia and Tajikistan. The BGI shows a similar trend of approximation between the four countries that have moved from a 2.32-point difference in 2006 to a 2.18-point difference in 2018.

The international quantitative rankings reveal three common trends in post-Soviet Eurasia. First, the four selected countries have very similar scores that remain in the same range of poor rankings indicating the democratic backsliding in the region. Second, the recent rankings illustrate that the selected countries have followed a similar trajectory/vector of development. Despite the "ups and downs" of their own rankings, the three Central Asian states remain in the "orbit" of Russia[79] without being able to set their own course in the region. Third, all three indexes show a clear trend of ongoing approximation between the four countries, whose rankings have moved closer and closer towards each other and, hypothetically, might meet at a common point of "convergence" in the future.

Conclusions

While the principle task of our essay is to provoke discussion and attract academic attention to the phenomenon of "authoritarian learning" in Eurasia, we expect that there might be several criticisms of the "Common space of Neo-Authoritarianism" as described here. One possible critique could be that the similarity

of laws, old legacies, and practices is just a coincidence and the result of a global diffusion of ideas without the major involvement of state actors. While some similarity might be attributed to the Soviet history and common challenges in the region and in the world nowadays, our response to this criticism is that even if the "authoritarian similarities" discovered by us are "accidental", a "coincidence" of such proportions at the level of national laws, policies, and practices deserves special consideration and explanation. Although ideas and practices indeed spread faster in the globalized world, it would be useful to explain what factors facilitate democratic as well as authoritarian diffusion across countries and regions.

Another possible criticism might be that similar practices, policies, and laws have no single place of origin and operate not only in Eurasia, but also everywhere else in the world. The response to this criticism would be that our task is not to find the place where the common practices originated. On the contrary, our goal is to demonstrate the ongoing process of authoritarian replication and synchronization as well as to motivate further academic research and discussion on this topic. Furthermore, instead of looking for a single country where a practice originated, our research demonstrates the *common authoritarian fingerprint* of similar quantitative rankings, legal terminology, practices, policies, and timeframes of their adoption. The last and the most "appealing" criticism might be that the similarity of laws and practices has always functioned like this in this part of the world. One can argue that the ruling elites of Central Asian states have often borrowed practices from abroad and have depended on more powerful states like Russia, with whom they have synchronized their domestic and foreign policies. Even if this criticism is true, we still need to understand the driving force behind such "business-as-usual" and what can be done to stop the spread of authoritarianism to other countries and regions.

The main preliminary finding of our research is the synchronic replication of anti-democratic practices and the potential approximation of transitional regimes in post-Soviet Eurasia. Given the ongoing proliferation of non-democratic hybrid regimes in the world, the concept of the "Common Space of Neo-Authoritarianism" can offer a useful theoretical model for the comparative analysis of such regimes. Most importantly, it provides an insight into the most recent anti-democratic developments and conditions that have triggered the spread and improved the resilience of authoritarian ideologies and non-democratic regimes worldwide. ≥

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