Governance and order-making in Central Asia: From illiberalism to post-liberalism?

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Introduction

Recent research on political and social change in Central Asia has offered systematic and critical perspectives on the evolving nature of political regimes and forms of governance in the region (see e.g. Isaacs and Frigerio 2019, Owen et al. 2018). This has provided new potential for conceptualising various forms of governance and order-making, as well as their implications and manifestations within societies, beyond established conceptions of 'top-down', 'authoritarian' or 'hybrid' rule, and further, for critically questioning the explanatory value of terms such as 'corruption', 'clan politics' and 'patrimonialism'. Furthermore, anthropological and ethnographic perspectives on the everyday practices, interpretations and understandings of the sources, forms and preconditions for sustainable and peaceful social order (e.g. Beyer and Finke 2019) have inspired a more context-embedded perspective. However, open questions remain as to how to analyse, critique and engage with regressive and authoritarian tendencies in Central Asian politics. Most importantly, what are the implications of the complex and nuanced pictures painted by anthropological and ethnographic research and the critiques they offer to political science frameworks using the terminology, and sometimes even methodological and epistemological assumptions going back to the early 'transition' literature? As argued by Isaacs and Frigerio (2019: 5), the existing literature at the intersection of political science and other social science approaches still has to be developed further to 'elucidate how Central Asian regimes can advance our understanding of … [various] concepts' ranging from legitimacy and legitimation to 'ideology, neoliberalism, nationbuilding and the state'. Beyond this idea of further improving and refining concepts, some authors have gone as far as suggesting that 'authoritarian' and 'illiberal' framings are part of an Orientalist and western-centric worldview that distracts attention from the discontents and violence inherent in capitalist modernity (Koch 2019, see also Cunliffe 2020). Such interventions pose a rather fundamental challenge which could and probably should preoccupy political and social science in the near future, but they also offer a vantage point for the discussion at hand.

This forum is intended to forge ahead in the critical reflection and re-consideration of analytical concepts and frameworks of governance and order-making in Central Asia and beyond. It focuses on the particular question, as to whether and how political regimes and forms of order-making can and should be researched through the concept of 'illiberalism'. The discussion engages critically with this and associated concepts such as 'illiberal peace' and 'authoritarian conflict management'. These have been developed out of the Central Asian/Eurasian context and discussed in their wider

global ramifications by Lewis, Megoran and Heathershaw (Lewis et al. 2018) and, within the framing of 'illiberal peace', explored in various contexts in and beyond Central Asia in a volume edited by Catherine Owen and colleagues (Owen et al. 2018). While further assessing the relevance and implications of this approach, this forum also attempts to think beyond 'illiberalism' by introducing and discussing the idea of post-liberalism (see Lottholz 2019). The forum brings together five different angles which, based on the authors' previous work, probe both concepts to determine their strengths and limitations when it comes to analysing and understanding politics and societal processes in Central Asia.

As argued in more detail below, the alternative developed and juxtaposed to the illiberal lens, a post-liberal approach, conceives of political, economic and societal processes in Central Asia (but also other regions) as necessarily evolving on a trajectory beyond transition towards liberal-democratic order as envisaged by policy-makers, scholars and thinkers in the corresponding traditions. That is, rather than building up liberal democracies after a Western or international blue-print, advocates of post-liberalism would hold that that semi-peripheral countries emerging from state socialist or dictatorial rule are necessarily embarking on a path towards political and developmental models that are somehow differently, if not less, liberal, free and compliant to the standards of Western democratic countries. This discussion cannot fully explore, let alone provide any final answers to the partly deep-reaching, epistemological differences between this approach and those espousing liberal norms, but aims to map out this debate in its practical, methodological and empirical dimensions. Similar to earlier contributions (e.g. Rogers 2010, Rasanayagam et al. 2014), this forum will thus be of value for interdisciplinary debates on political and social change both in Central Asia, other post-socialist regions beyond, but also for critical conversations about the nature of supposedly liberal-democratic regimes of the industrialised world.

The discussion continues with an overview of how illiberal forms of politics have evolved across three generations of scholarship on Central Asia (Heathershaw & Moldalieva), and, subsequently, presents the idea of a post-liberal lens towards such processes (Lottholz). Thereafter, Owen demonstrates how newly emerging practices of civic participation in 'authoritarian' states complicate efforts to locate the respective polities in a spectrum between liberal and illiberal regimes. McGlinchey extends this perspective into other aspects of empirical fieldwork in political science, including the designing and conducting of surveys, interviews and other qualitative research instruments. Finally, Ismailbekova's contribution shows how kinship and patronage-based practices, which have so far largely been portrayed as detrimental to good democratic practice, constitute a core element of electoral and everyday politics in Kyrgyzstan and thus force political and social scientists to re-consider the suitability and relevance of concepts and ideas in the tool box of Western-dominated/centric analytical approaches.

Liberalism, illiberalism and their entwinement in practice
John Heathershaw & Janyl Moldalieva

In the post-Soviet Central Asian region, certain generations of political analysis may be observed. An initial focus on liberal transition in the 1990s was succeeded in the 2000s by attention to hybrid regimes and neopatrimonialism and new interest in authoritarianism and kleptocracy (Dawisha 2014, Hale 2014). Famously, in the first generation of liberal transition theory (e.g., O'Donnell

and Schmitter,1986), politics was assessed according to three precepts: the extent to which (1) formal institutions, conformed to the (2) standard of liberal democracy, at (3) the national scale. In the second generation of hybrid regimes and neopatrimonialism, the assessment shifted to (1) combinations of formal and informal institutions, comprising (2) largely illiberal or neopatrimonial features, at (3) the national scale (Ledeneva 2006, Levitsky and Way 2010).

Thus, while the first two precepts of the so-called transition paradigm in political science were challenged, the third precept was not. This second generation of post-Soviet analysis has set the terms of the debate for more than a decade. Scholars of Central Asia characterised political regimes in the region as being shaped by co-existing informal and formal rules, elite power, personalised relations and patronage networks, often referred to as neopatrimonialism or patronal politics (Collins 2009, Cummings 2004, Ilkhamov 2007, Isaacs 2010, Ishiyama 2002, Laruelle 2012, Lewis 2012, Jones-Luong 2002, McGlinchey 2009, Radnitz 2010). The purpose of this contribution is to identify the contours of this move to the 'illiberal' as an object of analysis, specify its weaknesses and principal lacuna, and point to an emerging third generation of scholarship that offers advancement on illiberalism by exploring the full extent of political space and practice.

These second-generation studies advanced considerably the study of politics in the post-Soviet and Central Asian regions by drawing attention to the informal, the patronal and the authoritarian, and how these elements may intertwine with formally democratic constitutions. While the earlier work on informal institutions in Central Asia focused on clans (Schatz 2004, Collins 2006), scholars consider contemporary politics to be rather driven by "influence groups" (Isaacs 2010) and elite networks established across tribal and clan identities (Radnitz 2010). The significance of informal institutions was highlighted in a number of instances related, but not limited to negotiations and elites' attempts to buy off public support (Engvall 2015, Laruelle 2012, Markowitz 2013).

However, despite these considerable contributions, the limitations of these approaches are found in that third precept of first-generation transition scholarship which remains unchallenged by the second: the fixation with the national level of analysis and, by extension, state elites. Perhaps, as a by-product of methodological nationalism, political scientists' spatial imaginary remained caught in the 'territorial trap' (Agnew 1994, Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). According to this precept, the politics that matters is that of the central state and political regime with sovereignty accruing to this state and society too demarcated by the boundaries of the national. Even research which begins at the margins is ultimately forced to come back to the centre. Radnitz (2010), for example, working within this second generation of research and connoting Hale (2005), argued that 'subversive clientelism' may emerge from within the regime and such counter-hegemonic elites may mobilise opposition to the national elites from the margins. Kyrgyzstan's status as a hybrid regime is, by this understanding, due to its smaller, more fragmented distribution of wealth among competing elites (Laruelle 2012: 311). Moreover, elites are defined as relevant due to their formal and informal power in the national context.

What we identify as a third generation of analysis is made distinctive by new theoretical moves on the third dimension – that of space. We argue that a spatio-hierarchical mode of analysis centred on the nation-state is increasingly difficult to justify in a context in which material and symbolic linkages between the global and local are more common and the speed of the interactions along these vectors is accelerated. It is not that the state disappears in this global context but that it is

only one of many arbiters of the flows, goods and norms from one place to the next, either across its borders or within its territory. New spaces emerge as conduits for political interaction and objects of contestation. By opening up the study of the politics of Central Asia to marginal local and 'external' global spaces we come to see how both liberal and illiberal practices arise in unexpected locales and intertwine with one another to create political order. For example, broadly liberal activist practices may emerge from supposedly 'illiberal' Central Asian locales but face resistance from the illiberal practices of putatively liberal and Western Multinational Corporations.

A great deal of the work of this third generation has been led by anthropologists and/or is the product of political ethnography. What this work shares is the ethnographer's refusal to frame the political in terms of the central political regime; rather, politics is found, and remains, in spaces at the margins. These margins include Reeves' (2014) Ferghana Valley borders, Beyer's (2016) Kyrgyz customary law, Liu's (2012) urban governance in Osh, Ismailbekova's (2017) local politics, and Rasanayagam, Reeves and Beyer's (2014) inherently multiple and decentred state performances. But this marginal politics which lies beyond centred state space is not merely local. The margins of politics may also be transnational and include offshore companies and extraterritorial jurisdictions (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017), spaces of migration (Reeves 2012), practices of conflict management (Lewis et al 2018), moral economies opposing neoliberalism (Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2012, Spector 2017), and social movements against extractive industries (Doolotkeldieva 2015, Wooden 2013).

Elements of both the liberal and illiberal are found in these spaces. As Spector notes, in her study of the politics of the *bazaar* (market) in Kyrgyzstan, the patronal politics of the *bazaar* may also be read 'as confirmation of a global trend in which individuals increasingly rely on themselves as governments have become discredited as social welfare providers' (2017: 31-2). None of these works makes their object of analysis the political regime; each analyses politics spatially from the local and transnational margins of the state. In each, practices which are either liberal or illiberal combine with one another to produce political order. In such Central Asian spaces, both market dynamics and patronal politics matter. In this practice-based approach, it remains reasonable to say, for example, 'Tajikistan has become more illiberal in the last ten years' as an observation of its aggregate state practices; however, most everyday political life of non-elites in post-conflict Tajikistan is be described as neither liberal or illiberal but in terms of the specific lifeworlds of the participants themselves (Heathershaw 2009, Kluczewska 2020).

Therefore, the third generation is not bound by a singular framework: liberal transition (the first generation); various hybrid, neopatrimonial, illiberal or authoritarian modes (the second generation); or even the post-liberal (Lottholz's contribution here). The sophisticated analyses of Owen and Ismailbekova (this forum) are compelling because they identify how elements of the liberal and illiberal entwine, rather than abandoning the language of il/liberal merely because an entirely consistent regime of power cannot be identified. The politics of these spaces does not conform to any grand narrative or singular logic but specific liberal, illiberal and authoritarian practices may be found (Glasius 2018). In order to understand this complexity, analytical heterodoxy rather than new theoretical orthodoxy is required. A heterodox approach does not jettison the 'liberal', 'illiberal' and 'authoritarian', and is wary of a new grand narrative such as post-liberalism. Rather, it expands our understanding of the liberal, illiberal and authoritarian by

studying their practices and charting the interaction of these practices with one another in the new and old spaces of politics.

Political change in post-socialist Central Asia: Towards a post-liberal approach?
Philipp Lottholz

The global resurgence of authoritarian and anti-democratic forces, coupled with the austerity crisis of the past decade, have posed significant strain on liberal-democratic regimes, pointing to the need to reconsider widespread assumptions about liberal democracy and the capitalist economic system. In this light, I argue that recent debates on 'illiberal' and 'authoritarian' forms of governance in Central Asian states need to be considered through the lens of post-liberalism. A post-liberal lens transcends the liberal-illiberal spectrum in which much scholarship has been and still is conceiving of politics in Central Asia (see Heathershaw and Moldalieva's contribution to this forum and e.g. Lewis et al. 2018). It would thus seem a fruitful alternative approach that helps to accommodate the different cultural contexts, standpoints and life-worlds of people in Central Asia (as well as other regions and countries regarded less or non-liberal). In order to offer a short and simplified argument on the basis of more comprehensive analyses (Lottholz 2018, 2019), this contribution is focused on the conceptual contribution of post-liberalism and its link to critiques of imaginaries of Western liberalism.

Conceptually, the key point of the post-liberal approach is that national paths of development, reform and policy-making, as well as political participation and collective decision-making, are not – and have rarely ever been – determined by free and collective decision-making as envisaged in liberal political and economic theories. Rather, these developments are determined by international policy standards, economic wisdoms and conditionality regimes that enshrine principles such as free, deregulated commodity and financial markets. This global regime, which international relations scholar David Chandler (2010) has called 'post-liberal governance', renders the adoption of neo-liberal policies and liberal-democratic rhetoric less a political choice than a logical consequence of integration into the international community. This is especially the case for Central Asian and other "young" states emerging from socialist or authoritarian regimes, which have seen fundamental changes brought by (democratic) transition processes and the new, disembedded forms of collective decision-making and economic management the latter have created. One variant of the post-liberal argument is thus that the forms of statehood, legal standards and frameworks of international integration and policy standardisation effectively cultivate technocratic and top-down approaches to such an extent that attempts to promote democratic and participatory decision-making are doomed to be insufficient in trying to bring about genuine inclusivity.

As various authors have demonstrated (e.g. Darden 2009), there have certainly been variations in the degrees and forms of the adoption of neoliberal policies and institutions, wherein economic ideas and particular state ideologies – and notably, Soviet-era *nomenklatura*, new political elites and their advisors and consultants benefitting from reforms – have played a role and also led to resistance to and rejection of neoliberalism. Furthermore, as Owen's and Ismailbekova's contributions to this forum and wider anthropological literature indicates (see Ismailbekova 2017), a number of meaningful practices and understandings of decision-making and participation have

persisted and evolved on the sub-state level, out of reach of top-down and technocratic governance. Yet, as the long-standing legacy of violent conflicts and forms of repression in Central Asia and other post-Soviet states indicate, the way in which liberal-democratic reforms were combined with Soviet-era practices of policy-making and contextually specific, e.g. kinship-based, forms of social ordering has arguably led to forms of political ordering situated beyond a trajectory of liberalism, rather than on it. The fact that people engage in kinship and patronage politics, including transgressions of democratic rules (see Ismailbekova 2017), thus illustrates the profound mismatch between political institutions in Central Asia and the kind of functions one would like to imagine for them.

Another, related, iteration of the argument for a post-liberal approach is that what have been imagined as ideal-type liberal polities, institutions, practices and values in the largely Western, industrialised world, are to a significant extent built upon and still maintained by coercive, exclusionary and violent processes. This iteration points to a grounding of post-liberalism in a critique of capitalism as espoused by the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (see Chandler 2010: 77 ff.) or by decolonial thought (see Lottholz 2018a: 10) and its intellectual precursors (e.g. Williams 1944). According to this logic, the international economic, cooperation and aid architecture that especially 'Western' states built up and continue to run is in itself only be able to promote 'post-liberal' forms of politics and policy, which are only liberal in their stated intentions. This is most clearly demonstrated in what Bigo and colleagues have called "illiberal practices of liberal regimes" (2006), for instance, in Western humanitarian interventionism and border regimes, especially since 9/11. EU border policies in the context of the recent refugee crisis have further indicated the degree and scale of brutality which member states are ready to accept when it comes to policing borders, whether by allowing violent abuse and "push backs" on the Croatian border (Davies et al. 2018) or the drowning of people fleeing through the Mediterranean. The populist and xenophobic tones dominating public discourses in Western states, as well as their tendencies towards control and violence, bear further testimony to the inherent authoritarian and nationalist potential of Western capitalist societies. An alternative political lens is needed to account for this inbuilt regressive and illiberal potential. A post-liberal approach brings this trajectory of contemporary late-modern "liberalism" – and of the Central Asian region's place in it – to the fore.

Taking together the two above iterations, the key interest of a post-liberal approach would be to inquire the co-production of non-Western non-liberal regimes via foreign policies and international regulatory frameworks, as it is well-documented in recent analyses of the networked character of Central Asian authoritarian regimes. Employing a range of methods from political economy and network analysis to process-tracing and discourse analysis of foreign policy international organizations and diplomatic relations, this research has yielded important insights that should complicate the binary between the 'liberal West' and its 'illiberal others'. Perhaps most importantly, a 2015 Central Asian Survey special issue detailed how tax havens and offshore financial centres – spaces and arrangements that came into being and keep operating thanks to the support and interests of Western countries – help Central Asian elites to siphon off illicit or illegal revenues and to thus maintain coercive capacities. From a perspective on the international politics around the more visible and known cases of liberal-illiberal entanglements, the contradictory position of the West vis-à-vis illiberal regimes was made especially obvious in cases where Western states have either failed to effectively challenge autocracies, or even actually supported and enhanced them (Börzel 2015: 520). The reluctant reactions to human rights abuses in countries

like Saudi Arabia or Turkey (along with reliable weapons deliveries to them by the US, UK, France and Germany, see Stavrianakis 2019) are a case in point. Analogous cases of Western helplessness or dividedness in sanctioning human rights abuses and repression by Central Asian regimes are the large-scale violent clashes in Andijan, Uzbekistan (2005), Osh, Kyrgyzstan (2010), Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan (2011) or the recent (2019) political protests in Kazakhstan. It is of course true that strong condemnations and even sanctions have followed each of the above. Yet, as the upholding of flawed court decisions and repressive policing practices demonstrates, such measures are often circumvented and rendered ineffective as affected countries resort to other trade, cooperation and diplomatic relations.

The above discussion has explored the key idea behind post-liberal governance, which holds that the liberal character of particular states in the capitalist system has been either exhausted – given resource scarcity and intensified economic competition – or was a mirage all along, as the forms of exploitation and coercion on which liberal economies were built have simply remained hidden so far. In this sense, using the category of 'illiberal' in talking about Central Asian or other post-socialist regimes would serve to understate or distract from the illiberal nature of the contemporary capitalist system as a whole, and specifically that of Western states, which are routinely categorised as less illiberal and better capacitated for sustaining liberal-democratic principles and values. A way to avoid such a Eurocentric and one-sided approach would be to reconsider the suitability of the term illiberalism for such inquiry and to pursue research with a post-liberal approach. As I have already argued elsewhere (Lottholz 2019) and contra Heathershaw and Moldalieva's point, this framing might also be more appropriate to grapple with the uncomfortable and at times contradictory occurrence of 'liberal' practices and ideas in otherwise seemingly 'illiberal' contexts which Owen and Ismailbekova discuss in further detail below.

Civic participation in authoritarian states: Beyond the liberal/illiberal divide?
Catherine Owen

It is often assumed that civic participation in local governance, where citizens may voluntarily engage with local authorities in order to shape policy processes, is the preserve of liberal democracies. Policy-making in authoritarian states is thought to occur in a closed, centralised environment, and citizens' consent is generally seen to be manufactured through methods of either co-optation ('carrots') or coercion ('sticks') (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010, Svolik 2012). It has even been argued that 'autocratic rulers create and apply legal norms governing the social order from above *without any participation by the persons subject to them*' (Barros 2016: 954-955 [emphasis added]). However, these conceptions are missing the myriad innovations in participatory governance occurring in non-democratic states, whose existence suggests that liberal practices of participation and illiberal practices of arbitrary control may exist simultaneously, and even be co-dependent on one another.

In Central Asia, innovations in participatory mechanisms have tended to be overlooked by Western observers who have focused their attention of the plight of non-governmental organisations, which have been increasingly targeted by repressive legislation following the Colour Revolutions (Buxton 2011; Ziegler 2016). Channels of civic participation in the region that fall outside the Eurocentric category of 'civil society' can be broadly divided into three types: those that are built

on long-standing local traditions, those built on the Soviet legacy and the on-going ideological influence of Russia, and those that make use of innovations in technology and global trends towards open government. For instance, in the first category, Uzbekistani mahallas form the local institutional basis for welfare distribution, mutual assistance and problem solving (Urinboyev 2011), and in Kyrgyzstan, 'self-help groups' based on the traditional Kyrgyz concept of 'ashar' assist cash-strapped local authorities by installing public utilities such as water pipes and play grounds in shanty town settlements on city outskirts (Nasritdinov et al. 2015, Owen 2020a). In the second category, a network of 'public consultative bodies' (obshestvennye konsul'tativnye struktury), comprising public chambers and public councils and other fora, based on a Russian model (itself reminiscent of Soviet practices), has expanded across Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and enable citizens to give feedback to officials on policy proposals (Knox and Janenova 2018, Liebert and Tiulegenov 2013). In the third category, the Uzbek government has instigated an online complaints system for citizens and has published draft legislation online for feedback (Schiek 2018: 97).

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and neither are these mechanisms without their functional shortcomings.[1] Indeed, participatory mechanisms in non-democratic states are built into broader non-liberal institutional architecture, and frequently serve illiberal functions, either bypassing and undermining formal democratic mechanisms or guiding civic agency into manageable, non-threatening channels. For instance, in the case of public councils, participants are often pre-selected, decisions are frequently unbinding and the information necessary for informed decision-making is often jealously guarded by elites. In the case of online deliberative fora, research shows that they can be easily ignored by policy-makers (O'Connor et al. 2019). Elsewhere, I have termed this phenomenon 'participatory authoritarianism' (Owen 2020b). This is not to say that participation in such mechanisms does not give citizens a sense of empowerment and civic dignity, nor that local officials do not genuinely wish to create effective public policy with citizens' input. What it suggests is that liberal and illiberal practices often appear to exist in a symbiotic relationship, the one interacting with the other in a continually evolving dynamic.

The co-existence of liberal practices of participation and illiberal practices of manipulation within the polities of Eurasia exposes at least three important problems with current approaches to the study of authoritarianism more broadly. First, it demonstrates that general theories of authoritarianism have become divorced from the empirical realities studied and conceptualised by Area Studies specialists, such as those whose work is discussed above, and indicates the impoverished fashion in which much theorising in Comparative Politics takes place. It emphasises the importance of an inductive approach to theorising and concept-building that begins with citizens' everyday experiences of governing and the state, which must be garnered through sensitively conducted, ethnographically oriented research. Such studies already exist (see for example Wedeen 2009; Cabannes and Ming 2013) and are highly influential in the fields of Anthropology or Urban Planning, but their findings have not penetrated mainstream Comparative Politics, which appears to remain wedded to a mutually exclusive conceptualisation of 'democracy vs authoritarianism'.

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[1] The online project Participedia is collecting evidence of experiments in participatory governance around the world. At the time of writing, the website contains 909 submissions from a wide range of countries, including those that are commonly seen as deeply authoritarian such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Cameroon. See https://participedia.net/ (last accessed 30 June 2020).

Second, it suggests that our understanding of the role of citizens in local authoritarian or non-democratic governance must be fundamentally re-thought. Neither co-opted nor coerced, citizens in many non-democratic states may choose to engage in deliberative or other types of participatory mechanisms. Nearly all cases mentioned above are entirely voluntary: from the public councils to the online forums, citizens may choose not to participate without fear of repercussion. This is what distinguishes current participatory trends in non-democracies from forms of mobilisation common to analogous regimes during the Twentieth Century, where citizens were often forced to devote their energies to various state-led projects (Linz 2000).

Third, it suggests that liberal and illiberal practices should not be seen as binary and mutually exclusive conceptual opposites, but rather as two logics of governing that intertwine and sustain one another across scales, territories and cultures. On the one hand open government suggests transparency and accountability by opening up the inner workings of the authoritarian state; yet in Kazakhstan, it builds on pre-existing authoritarian traditions of obfuscation and arbitrary control to ultimately eviscerate most of its democratic potential.

An important lens through which to observe the co-constitution of liberal and illiberal practices in Central Asia and beyond is the concept of citizenship. By exploring the logics of citizenship, we may understand who are invited to participate as citizens and who are excluded, how governments cultivate and curate the political subjectivities of their citizens, and how these citizens approach the decisions that affect their lives. For these are the foundations upon which everyday governance is built – whether democratic or authoritarian at the regime level. In doing so, we discover that the distinction between liberal practices and illiberal practices is no longer clearly discernible.

Questions of measurement and perception for the study of Central Asian polities
Eric McGlinchey

The vast majority of comparative political scientists adopt positivist approaches to their studies of state and society. We believe an objective reality exists and that we can develop concepts, indicators, and scores for those topics we wish to study (Adcock and Collier 2001). Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are illiberal regimes. Kyrgyzstan tends toward the more liberal side of Central Asian politics. We know this because our indicators—V-Dem, Freedom House, Polity IV—aggregate agreed upon measures of regime type. For anyone who has lived in Central Asia for an extended period of time, however, these indicators, and much of our own work that relies on these indicators, feel suspect. Indicators occasionally are in disagreement. Seva Gunitsky illustrates, for example, that for the first two decades following the Soviet Collapse Polity IV placed Russia as moving steadily toward democracy while Freedom House's measures had Russia as tacking firmly toward autocracy (Gunitsky 2015: 112). These diverging assessments are not merely curiosities for academics. Indicators, as Merry, Davis, and Kingsbury demonstrate, have real-world consequences, ranging from whether or not a country receives international aid or is welcomed into international organizations, or, closer to home, the rankings of educational institutions and the purported productivity of individual scholars (Merry, Davis, Kingsbury 2015: 15). No wonder that, forever gnawing at our positivist leanings, are critiques like Clifford Geertz's, warnings that our "writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot… they are, thus,

9

fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are 'something made,' 'something fashioned.'" (Geertz 1973: 15)

Social scientists make sense of states by "fashioning" indicators that serve our positivist purpose. We care about governance, whether or not rulers are selected through competitive elections and all citizens can vote in these elections. For this a minimalist conception of regime type like Polity IV suits our analysis. We also care about the outcomes regimes produce – government transparency, economic equality, the treatment of minorities. Here Freedom House and V-Dem offer helpful indicators. Reassuringly in the Central Asia case, these indicators often exhibit high degrees of correlation. Perhaps Central Asianists need not stress too much about which index we use. Our procedural and substantive measures of regime type consistently place Central Asian states in the same illiberal and slightly-less-illiberal baskets (Munck and Verkullen 2002).

Political scientists Robert Adcock and David Collier warn, however, that convergence among indicators is not always a good thing: "Let us suppose a proposed indicator is meant to capture a facet of democracy overlooked by existing measures; then a too high correlation is in fact negative evidence regarding validity, for it suggests that nothing new is being captured" (Adcock and Collier 2001: 540). Adcock and Collier's observation captures well the limits applying the major regime type indexes to the study of Central Asian states. While V-Dem, Freedom House, and Polity IV do, in most cases, provide reliable measures of Western understandings of the domestic determinants of democracy, these indexes come up short in two critical areas. First, these measures are largely externally determined, providing Central Asians limited voice in defining the nature of their own regimes. Second, not only are these measures externally determined, they are the products of the West. This positionality of the arbiters of regime type further diminishes Central Asian agency and establishes power hierarchies in which Western institutions are privileged in defining what is liberal and illiberal, what is democratic and not democratic. As Schaffer demonstrates in his critique of public opinion research conducted in the Philippines, concepts like democracy and corruption are often understood locally in ways that differ vastly from the conceptualizations quantitative scholars assume:

> Democracy and its rough equivalents in other languages have intricate grammars. The multivalence, puzzlement, ambivalence, and contradiction that characterize how people understand such terms can be gainfully explored only by providing people expansive opportunities to express their thoughts, and to reflect on the complexity of what they are saying (Schaffer 2014: 328).

Schaffer's critique of public opinion scholarship in the Philippines is instructive for scholars like me studying Central Asia. Rather than assuming uniform conceptualizations of democracy, we would be well-served to prioritize Central Asian voice when studying Central Asian liberalism and illiberalism.

Let me illustrate the limitations of assuming shared conceptualizations through a personal example. I have, on multiple occasions, served as an "expert" and provided assessments of Kyrgyzstan for the democratization indexes. In my own writing I have assessed the Kyrgyz regime as being "chaotic," rather than being "democratic" (McGlinchey 2011). Some Central Asian scholars agree with this categorization. Others, for example Edil Baisalov, a prolific commentator

on Kyrgyz politics, believes my categorization misses the mark (see also Abdymen 2010). Baisalov thinks I have been too quick to dismiss his and other activists' efforts at reform as political chaos. While I believe there is common ground between Baisalov's assessment of the Kyrgyz government and my own, his criticism is instructive in that it illustrates the outsized role Western experts have in determining which non-Western states are and are not democracies.

Baisalov's critique also illustrates the deep and disadvantaged embeddedness of Central Asian states within broader international institutions. Freedom House, V-Dem, Polity IV, the liberalism and illiberalism scores these international rating bodies produce have consequences for Central Asian states. At the very least, these indexes establish lines of power that privilege the West and subordinate the rest. At times, these lines of power are explicit. One of the measures V-Dem uses in establishing its "Varieties of Democracy" index, for example, is "Were there allegations of significant vote-fraud by any Western monitors?" (Coppedge et al. 2019) Built into this question is the idea that Westerners are somehow uniquely endowed to assess what is and what is not vote-fraud. More broadly, however, there is the reality that academics and policy makers the world over rely on indexes of liberalism and illiberalism that are undeniably products of the West.

Baisalov's criticism informs my current research. Marlene Laruelle, Asel Doolotkeldieva, Serik Beissembayev, and I are investigating 'great power' influence in Central Asia. We are particularly interested in the erosion of US soft power, that is Washington's ability to achieve policy objectives absent coercion in the region. One approach to this study is to explore the extent to which Washington indeed has been able to achieve policy objectives and what strategies different US administrations have employed in pursuing these objectives. While this is an approach we will use, it will not be our only line of research. A core part of our research draws on survey analysis, both Gallup's World Polls as well as surveys we ourselves will be commissioning in 2020. The survey instruments we will be using, moreover, will be informed by focus groups we are conducting in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

Surveys and focus groups are no panacea to the potential problems that come with external assessments of Central Asian politics. While surveys and focus groups, much like interviews and participant observation may afford Central Asians much needed voice in social science studies, these data collection techniques come with pitfalls. "Do not know" responses are frequent responses for several Gallup questions. Such responses suggest the Gallup instrument may be struggling with differential item functioning, that is, a disconnect between what Gallup is hoping to measure and what survey respondents perceive the question to be.

Our focus groups, helpfully, allow us to probe areas of potential conceptual disconnect. Focus groups nevertheless present a different challenge – one of generalizability. We may have a clear understanding of the views of the ten ethnic Uzbeks participating in our focus group in Osh, but how representative are these ten participants of the broader ethnic Uzbek population in Kyrgyzstan?

Ultimately, there is no avoiding methodological limits that accompany positivist social science. It is perhaps this observation that led Geertz to contrast his preferred mode of analysis, cultural interpretation, to what many social scientists attempt:

It must be admitted that there are a number of characteristics of cultural interpretation which make the theoretical development of it more than usually difficult. The first is the need for theory to stay rather closer to the ground than tends to be the case in sciences more able to give themselves over to imaginative abstraction. (Geertz 1973: x).

Geertz's critique is one social scientists should revisit regularly. Our research, as Geertz instructs, would do well to "stay rather closer to the ground" and prioritise Central Asian understandings and conceptualizations. As Lisa Wedeen instructs, it is only when we embrace "epistemological commitments to uncertainty, ambiguity, and messiness. (Wedeen 2002: 726)," when we commit to better thick description, that our collective causal analysis will improve.

Neither 'liberal' nor 'illiberal' democracy: The mobilisation of kinship in electoral politics
Aksana Ismailbekova

Recent studies have shown that the role of kinship and patronage networks would lead to the creation of 'authoritarian' and 'illiberal' regimes, which would hinder democratization in the Central Asian countries. However, the situation on the ground is complex, with a combination of both liberal and illiberal practices appearing in unexpected localizations that are interwoven to create new dynamics (Owen this forum). As already mentioned in the Introduction, Heathershaw/Moldalieva and Lottholz, it is time to find alternative approaches to take into account the different life-worlds of people in Central Asia, which go beyond the dichotomy of the 'liberal-illiberal spectrum' (Lottholz, this forum) and begin to understand local politics through the prism of post-liberalism.

This is possible with the help of ethnographically oriented research. My long-term research has shown how kinship systems and practices are deeply rooted in Kyrgyz society and that they are not separated from a manifestation of 'liberal' practices and ideas in a so-called 'illiberal' context. So the empirical reality fits neither liberal nor illiberal framings and interpretations. Such research requires an in-depth study of local culture, everyday experiences and, as Owen suggested (this forum), an inductive approach, constructing concepts from people's everyday experiences; while McGlinchey's (this forum) proposal for a 'thick description' of Geertz points towards a more grounded perspective. This means it is important to closely look at everyday experiences of people and their local conceptualisation and understanding of the ideals of democracy and governance.

Kyrgyz society is a kinship-based society. In the genealogies of Kyrgyz, there are forty lineages that unite all Kyrgyz people as the Kyrgyz nation. Kyrgyz people believe that they stem from these lineages which were headed by their respected elders (*aksakal*). Kyrgyz kinship is both 'real' and 'imagined' which is based on genealogical relatedness, ancestral, territorial, ritual and practical relations (Hardenberg 2009, Gullette 2009, Jacquesson 2012).

During Soviet times the lineages were prohibited and portrayed as backward in public and mass media channels. However, people continued to rely on their kinship networks regardless. Lineage or descent groups were not destroyed during this era; rather, kinship was preserved and incorporated into the Soviet state and economic structures (e.g. in collective farms, named *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz*), like in other parts of Central Asia and Russia (cf. Abashin 2015, Roy 1999, Kamp

2009, Humphrey 1998, Schatz, 2005, Zanca 2000). During Soviet times, the state was not only a source of political power, but had also enormous material resources (Ledeneva 1998, Zanca 2000).

In the post-Soviet context, kinship systems have continued to flourish and function as a result of nation building projects of the elites and because of the absence of a strong welfare state to oppose kinship groups. Moreover, the introduction of new electoral processes under the umbrella of democracy also contributed to the strengthening of kinship networks. As political institutions were weak, a kinship argument was needed for the parties to mobilise people and gain their support (Ismailbekova 2017).

As the Kyrgyz revived and reaffirmed their local, traditional and cultural values, they also began to apply them to institutions of state power (Ismailbekova 2017). Today, kinship is highly valued by politicians as a means of competing for political and economic positions. Those who are not related through kinship-patronage networks are often isolated. Divisions along kinship lines may provoke and exacerbate struggles between political groups and conflicts over positions within the state infrastructure, and over funding for rural development, education and so on.

In times of electoral politics, kinship-based patronage networks have played a particularly important role, especially during election campaigns. Kinship discourse has begun to be used by ordinary people as a way of organising various meetings and maintaining their hopes for a better political future. People in rural areas are particularly involved in politics by heavily relying on well-established kinship practices (i.e. political feasts, mobilised kinsmen during the elections), but urban dwellers also become involved as a means of acquiring political influence or financial capital. During the elections, kinship matters for mobilising people and making sure that people actively participate in the elections. As I have shown in my analysis of an election day in Bulak village (Ismailbekova 2017: ch. 6), the local patron Rahim secured the loyalty of the community by promising both economic security and reinforcing social values (respect, honor, loyalty), which were integrated into the overarching ideology of kinship (*tuugan-dar*). When people are engaged in politics, they feel confident that they can rely on their kinsmen, united as they are by a sense of mutual responsibility and solidarity.

Any politician – even one with presidential ambitions – will rely primarily on the support of his or her kinsmen. The logic behind this is that the politician knows that while he or she is unlikely to win the support of the entire country, they can rely on that of their kinsmen. They are also aware of the need to build alliances with other lineage members who will have recruited their own followers along kinship lines. Even so, alliances between lineage members may be temporary, since all politicians have their own ambitions, which also change over time. And if a politician rejects his or her former allies, he or she will be able to rely, again, only on the kinsmen. There is a mutual interest here: it is no secret that if a leader gains a higher rank, then his kinsmen will also be rewarded with higher positions. And if the leader loses his position, then the whole pyramid will collapse (Ismailbekova 2018).

I argue that it is not some ideal notion of kinship that is at play here (although the discourse invokes 'pride' in the 'native son'). Rather, material interests are manifested in kinship-based patronage networks. Voters support their kin because this is the person who will provide them with security

and protection in times of need. People are aware of the empty promises that politicians often make; as a result, it seemed futile to advertise and promote the names of big politicians in the village because people knew that what they promised is often impossible to realise. Politicians would forget about their promises once the election was over. Thus, the local politicians rooted their politics in the symbol of the native son (Kyrgyz, *oz bala*), mobilised as a means of representing the people and engaging community members in the country's political situation. People wanted to vote for someone who would take care of their needs and provide social security in times of need. The native son is a symbolic form that here is used as an emblem of security and certainty, e.g. by legislation or desired local administrative decisions or investments that he helps to pass once elected, or simply by his securing of jobs and investments as a businessman.

This has consequences for the growing literature on 'clan politics' in Central Asia: rather than a pre-existing frame which corrupts 'pure' democracy, regional or kinship loyalties should perhaps be conceived as in part a product of electoral party politics. My argument is that kinship-based patronage 'constitute[s] the primary mechanism through which "liberal" democracy has become embedded in local cultural and social practices' (Ismailbekova 2017: 7–8).

So far, the results of my ethnographic fieldwork point to a situation where a post-liberal lens (see Lottholz, this forum) is more useful to grasp the complex local reality from below, especially the practices I have observed and the resulting forms of political participation and order that are neither 'liberal' nor 'illiberal'. The post-liberal approach is better suited to understand this complex empirical reality.

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