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**ABSTRACT**
Many countries have securitized their policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by framing it as an existential threat demanding extraordinary security responses. The politics of securitization are particularly advantageous to nondemocratic regimes. Yet, contrary to the expectation that the Central Asian governments would resort to their tried-and-tested method of framing a new policy issue as a national security threat, these governments have used a deliberately constrained representation of the pandemic with some even diminishing the significance of a threat posed by COVID-19. What explains these unexpected patterns of securitization in response to the pandemic? This study argues that autocratic regimes' concerns with legitimacy and their specific legitimization practices shape their choices about securitization of a policy issue. In Kazakhstan, the government's response to the crisis became part of a political struggle between competing claims to presidential legitimacy. In Kyrgyzstan, weak government legitimacy rooted in poor economic performance coupled with the fear of unrest preempted any coherent effort to securitize the crisis. In Uzbekistan, the government's new technocratic self-image limited securitization within its COVID-19 response. In Tajikistan, a strategy of denial and delay emerged, since securitization of COVID-19 promised little additional security aid.

## Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic created a global health crisis, precipitated an economic downturn, and impacted many aspects of day-to-day life across the world. It opened deep-seated divisions in societies, exposing deficiencies within health-care infrastructures and bringing to the fore the critical role of leadership. To contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, governments introduced a variety of health, administrative, and security policies with some resorting to extraordinary emergency measures overriding civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. The considerable differences in governments' responses to COVID-19 both in rhetoric and action have sparked new discussions at the intersection of security, politics, and health (Laruelle et al. 2021).

Focusing on the pandemic as a security crisis is something one might expect among nondemocratic regimes, since framing COVID-19 as a security threat brings a number of advantages to authoritarian regimes. It enables autocrats to externalize the causes of domestic health crises, divert attention away from failed policies that left their countries vulnerable to the crisis, grant ruling elites greater ability to marshal security resources, and help them justify the use of coercive methods of social control. Indeed, as many have observed, the pandemic has generated a spike in repressive measures globally, even though its long-term effects on authoritarianism remain unclear (Carothers and Wong 2020; Evered, McCann, and Schmemann 2021). In a fleeting convergence of health policy and poor governance, autocratic regimes' claims extolling the success of swift authoritarian methods of virus containment seem to coincide with their domestic interests that favor a greater role of security apparatus in extending surveillance and control.

The advantages of framing the pandemic as a security threat are well-known among the five states of Central Asia. The region's governments have a long record of invoking the language of danger when addressing problems such as Islam and religious activism, ethnic relations, and drug trafficking (e.g., Montgomery and Heathershaw 2014; Radnitz 2021; Roberts 2021). In doing so, they have defined these problems as externally imposed security threats, thereby requiring the regime to position itself as the protector of political communities confronting these crises. Yet, Central Asian governments have not blindly cloaked the current pandemic in security terms, and these discourses of danger have not been as prevalent as they have been with other transnational challenges.[1] Contrary to the expectation that Central Asian governments would frame the COVID-19 pandemic as a national security threat, these governments have used a deliberately constrained representation of the health crisis. Indeed, while they differed in their responses to the health crisis itself, none of the regimes in the region drew upon discursive frames or cultural tropes that regularly presented the disease as a security threat.

This raises two puzzles. First, why would autocratic regimes avoid securitizing a health crisis even when such security-oriented discourse could justify expanding their coercive capabilities under the guise of enforcing policy responses (i.e., shutdowns, contact tracing, stay-at-home orders, etc.)? This is particularly curious in Central Asia, where rulers had effectively exploited opportunities to bridge international and domestic politics and shore up regime security in recent years (Cooley 2012). The ability to employ securitizing discourses was an important instrument in the "soft authoritarian toolkits" of the region's leaders and failing to seize upon it left them with one less way to use the crisis for political advantage (Schatz 2009). Second, what explains variation in authoritarian governments' rhetoric and handling of the health crisis? There has been, in fact, considerable divergence across the region. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan introduced emergency measures fairly early, Uzbekistan enforced a lockdown without declaring a state of emergency, while Tajikistan and Turkmenistan denied or downplayed the pandemic's effects.

In Kazakhstan, the government's path of limited securitization was due to a political struggle between competing claims to presidential rule. In Kyrgyzstan, weak government capacity, poor economic performance, and a fear of unrest preempted any coherent effort to securitize the crisis. In Uzbekistan, the government's new technocratic self-image left little room for securitization within its COVID-19 response. In Tajikistan, a strategy of denial and delay emerged, since securitization of COVID-19 promised little additional foreign aid.

To explain these two puzzles, we look to the important role that legitimation plays in shaping government responses to the pandemic (Neblo and Wallace 2021). Deep-seated considerations of legitimacy give regimes strong reasons to avoid framing a health crisis as an existential security threat. First, health crises, such as pandemics, require an effective policy response as well as broad-based public compliance. For nondemocratic regimes that lack the legitimacy to implement and sustain such a response, especially those commanding underfunded healthcare infrastructures, securitization may backfire if governments cannot convincingly deploy security discourse in the eyes of the population. Second, responding to a health crisis, diffused throughout the country, is potentially more challenging than a specific threat (such as an external attack). Indeed, to the extent that an effective response to a health crisis requires public compliance, regime legitimacy becomes an important limitation on using securitizing discourses. As we demonstrate, weakened legitimacy in all four cases in Central Asia undercut a quick resort to full-throated securitization. Indeed, it seems to have predisposed leaders in the region to downplay the threat posed by the virus, a pattern clearly manifested in persistent and implausible denials of the crisis in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

In addition, the specific framing of the COVID-19 pandemic and governments' responses are shaped by the legacy of legitimizing practices used by autocratic regimes. In Kazakhstan, for example, the government's response has borne the mark of governing practices and discourses of the former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, while the response in Kyrgyzstan reflected its leaders' perennial concerns with the consequences of economic collapse for public order.

By flipping the question of securitization on its head and asking "Why do states choose to *not* securitize" and explaining variation in securitization discourses of nondemocratic states, this article seeks to make several contributions. First, it highlights the importance and complexity of legitimation practices and discourse within autocratic regimes, which adds some nuance to the growing literature on authoritarian durability amid crisis. Second, it advances theories of securitization, which have tended to favor cases of successful securitization. Using the cases of Central Asian republics we highlight the limited appeal of securitization in addressing health crises. Third, the article helps explain important aspects of COVID-19 itself. While there has been considerable interest in what the governments have done to cope with the pandemic, much less has focused on how they have talked about the disease. Drawing on the securitization literature, we explore how discourse sets out boundaries for permissible and impermissible behavior by regimes in combating the pandemic. Although we do not test the impact of securitization on the effectiveness of governments' anti-COVID-19 policies, our analysis suggests underlying sources of their success and failure as well as the limits of public compliance. Fourth and lastly, it illuminates the complex politics driving policy responses to COVID-19 within Central Asia itself, where the pace, sequence, and nature of government actions have markedly differed from country to country.

The remainder of the article consists of three sections. First, it theorizes authoritarian legitimacy as a source of governments' decisions about (de-)securitization of COVID-19. Second, it applies the theoretical argument to four countries in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). Third, it concludes with an assessment of state responses to COVID-19 and its implications for the development of the region's political and security institutions.

## Legitimacy and (De)-Securitization of COVID-19 in Autocratic Regimes

Sources of durability within autocratic regimes in the face of crisis are not only rooted in their material resources, such as control over their economy and coercive capacity. Autocratic survival also depends in part on the regimes' ability to use discourse and messaging to influence how citizens perceive them (Dukalkis 2017; Kailitz and Stockemer 2017). As noted above, securitization offers a compelling rhetorical strategy during periods of crisis, by which regimes can frame a crisis in the language of security rather than a public policy issue. Understood as a discursive process by which actors – political elites, activists, or media – define issues that are political, economic or social as existential security threats (Buzan and Weaver 2003; Buzan, Weaver and deWilde 1998), securitization can be particularly effective for regimes confronting acute challenges and seeking to divert attention from policy failures. Introduced in the 1980s within the Copenhagen School of International Relations theory, the concept of securitization has been applied to explore discursive constructions of security threats associated with a range of political issues, including terrorism (Buzan 2006), transnational crime

(Williams 2003), immigration (Dover 2008), identity (Muller 2004), and national disasters (Hyndman 2007), among others. Over the last three decades, security frames have also been used in reference to a range of global health issues, such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, and the Zika virus. This re-framing of health issues as security threats has given rise to analyses exploring the securitization of diseases and pandemics (Abrahamsen 2005; Cook 2010; Elbe 2010; Wishnick 2010).

Yet, there are complications that make securitizing a pandemic potentially fraught with risk and uncertainty. Saddling COVID-19 with security implications may have unpredictable consequences for governments' staying power because the pursuit of security from COVID-19 comes at a considerable cost to economy, fundamental freedoms, public order, and stability. Moreover, in contrast to other challenges that might be securitized (such as transnational terrorism, crime, or migration), a pandemic requires widespread public compliance with government measures and an effective and visible government response. Consequently, we contend that securitization of a pandemic depends in part on a government's legitimacy. Arrests and hefty fines for violations of quarantines, lockdowns, mask wearing, and social distancing measures are not sustainable if citizens do not accept their state leadership and their policies as legitimate. Autocratic regimes that lack deep reservoirs of legitimacy, then, face potentially public revelations of their failure to implement a response and command popular support. Our expectation, therefore, is that the extent to what governing regimes are perceived as legitimate by the people will limit the government's ability to utilize securitization in response to the health crisis.

In addition, specific frames that the governments use in their securitizing and (de)securitizing messages are shaped by legitimizing practices that these regimes had relied on before the onset of the health crisis. The scholarship on authoritarian persistence has demonstrated that questions of legitimacy are not antithetical to authoritarian regimes, both comparatively and in Central Asia (Omelicheva 2016). Autocratic governments have traditionally relied on some mixture of ideology, history, external legitimation, and government performance in delivering economic benefits, public order, and security as the basis of their legitimacy (Mayer 2001). These specific legitimization practices, in turn, beget mechanisms of path dependence that encourage the reproduction of rhetorical choices to justify the autocratic governments' rule (e.g., Yilmaz, Shipoli, and Demir 2021). Our second expectation is that the way an autocratic government had justified its rule before the COVID-19 pandemic will shape the discourse and policies it adopts to deal with the health crisis.

Securitization and de-securitization are discursive processes that can be identified and analyzed from the actual language of verbal and written communications. As a result, we systematically examine the official pronouncements related to COVID-19 by the leadership of the Central Asian republics (presidents, prime ministers, top security and health officials). Although the case studies below focus on "political discourse from above" carried out in real-time by leading powerholders in each state (Fetzer 2013, 9), "functional" actors (media, academic institutions, nongovernmental agencies and think tanks) also help frame storylines about the (non)threatening nature of the COVID-19. Therefore, presentations of COVID-19 in official Central Asian media and publications by nongovernmental think tanks and bloggers were closely monitored and juxtaposed with the public opinion data on the legitimacy of the Central Asian governments. Discursive representations of the novel coronavirus were then traced to legitimization practices adopted by governing regimes before the onset of the pandemic.

The case studies below feature three themes. First, they review the official discourse on COVID-19 to illuminate governments' reluctance to securitize the disease. Second, they demonstrate how government legitimacy concerns constrained their resort to security-laden discourse. Third, they link the discursive frames and policies used in each country to the regimes' specific legitimation practices before the start of the pandemic.

## Securitization and COVID-19 in Central Asia

Securitization of COVID-19 remained relatively limited in Central Asia, even as governments in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan used their security agencies to compel public compliance at various points during the early months of the pandemic. This aversion to the use of security discourse was a surprising shift from Central Asian governments' past use of securitization for a range of domestic and international purposes. Moreover, while there were clear similarities in the nature of restrictions imposed across the region as emergency response protocols and lockdowns took effect, each country defined and addressed the pandemic differently, shaped by its own legitimization practices.

### *Politics of Dual Presidential Legitimacy in Kazakhstan*

Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian state to officially confirm COVID-19 cases on its territory on 13 March 2020 and the first to declare the state of emergency a few days later (President of Kazakhstan 2020). Its rapid response to the coronavirus was led by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who had become President of Kazakhstan less than a year earlier. In the emergency declaration announced by Tokayev's nationally-televised address on March 15, 2020, the Kazakhstani President appealed to citizens, seeking to encourage a duty to comply with the country's broad restrictions in the name of shared national health but fell short of communicating the exigency of the situation (Tokayev 2020a).

The emergency declaration not only imposed "tough quarantine measures,"[2] which were extended to a full lockdown by April 3, 2020, but it also afforded exceptional powers to the newly created State Commission on Ensuring the State of Emergency and well as the police and military. More than 50,000 employees of the Minister of Interior, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Health were sent to work at numerous checkpoints and roadblocks around quarantine zones and medical facilities (Shayakhmetova 2020). The Minister of Defense deployed drones to monitor any unauthorized

crossings in and out of the quarantine zones (Lemon and Antonov 2020; Terra News 2020), while local police departments in Almaty and Nur-Sultan launched cell-phone apps to monitor people's movement and compliance with self-isolation (BaigeNews.kg 2020; Lemon and Antonov 2020). This response to the public health crisis and the heavy presence of the law enforcement personnel conveyed a sense of urgency and elevated the perception of threat associated with COVID-19. Yet, the official discourse throughout this emergency period lacked a strong securitization message and the lockdown was lifted by May 11, despite the spike in new COVID-19 cases.

At the beginning of the summer in 2020, public authorities continued de-securitizing the pandemic, declaring that the novel coronavirus was no longer as dangerous as before and that Kazakhstan was fully prepared to manage its spread (Kumenov and Imanaliyeva 2020). The Health Ministry of Kazakhstan also reportedly changed the methodology of collecting data on new COVID-19 cases to keep the counts of new infections down (Orisbayev 2020). Yet, even without asymptomatic cases, the rate of new infections in Kazakhstan continued to rise. Several public officials and the former president Nursultan Nazarbayev fell ill with COVID-19. In the reversal of the de-securitization trend, Kazakhstan went back into a countrywide lockdown on July 5 when it recorded nearly 48,574 cases of infections and more than 200 deaths (Putz 2020a).

Although President Tokayev stressed the seriousness of the epidemiological situation, his government's securitizing message remained weak and interspersed with its broader de-securitizing agenda. Analysts attest that people's attitudes toward COVID-19 in Kazakhstan have mirrored the government's indecisiveness and inconsistency in enforcing strict epidemiological measures. Many Kazakh citizens did not heed the government's demand to wear a mask, socially distance, or self-isolate, thus undermining the government's effort at containing the spread of infection. By the end of 2020, when Kazakhstan's cumulative infections reached 202,060, many people had long dropped their guard against the COVID-19 emergency. This is despite the fact that by summer 2021, the rate of daily new cases nearly reached that of summer 2020 hovering near or above 3,000 new COVID-19 cases daily (Ritchie et al. 2021).

Kazakhstan's constrained securitization was due to both the Tokayev regime's weakened legitimacy as well as the government's past legitimizing practices. The "anointed" successor to Nazarbayev, Tokayev assumed the presidency through a managed political succession in spring 2019 that enabled Nazarbayev to remain an important political figure. Despite gaining the vast formal powers of the presidency, Tokayev lacked independent political capital beyond the support of the "Father of the Nation" – Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev himself enjoyed high popular legitimacy from decades in power. Capitalizing on the country's natural resource endowments to raise people's living standards, Nazarbayev's legitimacy at home was further buttressed by accolades that he received internationally and the leadership status that Kazakhstan acquired in various regional and international organizations.

In the last years of Nazarbayev's presidency, Kazakhstan faced growing political and economic challenges inherited by Tokayev. The orchestrated presidential election in June 2019 was marked by protests signaling growing public discontent with the country's system of governance. The global economic crises of 2008 and 2014 revealed structural deficiencies of the country's dependence on commodity exports. Since 2014, Kazakhstan's economic growth has slowed, inequality has risen, and corruption has become further entrenched (World Bank Group 2019). Less than a year into his presidency, Tokayev found himself confronting declining legitimacy in the eyes of the population (Haerpfer et al. 2020). The situation was further complicated by Tokayev's difficulty in separating his government's accomplishments from those of Nazarbayev.

Lacking his own "capital" of performance legitimacy at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, Tokayev chose measured securitization discourse mimicking that of the World Health Organization (WHO). Before announcing the state of emergency, for example, he invoked the WHO's declaration that named the new coronavirus a global pandemic and frequently referred to the WHO's "positive assessments" of the measures adopted by his administration in his speeches. Tokayev also stressed that Kazakhstan's extensive financial reserves built up by Nazarbayev served as a guarantee of economic stability and continuity in fulfilling the state's "social obligations" to its people. Attributing Kazakhstan's economic accomplishments to his predecessor indicates that the country's economic performance was an important consideration in his decision to move forward with the COVID-19 limited securitization. The re-securitization of the pandemic (with the re-imposition of lockdown in July 2020) occurred on the backdrop of rising concerns with the impact of pandemic on the investment climate in Kazakhstan – a concern repeatedly expressed by Tokayev. His speeches were heavily tilted toward pledges of assistance to people, especially those who have lost their sources of income and had no economic safety need. He also promised to re-route public funds to support entrepreneurs, create new jobs, boost salaries for frontline medical staff and reform health care (Tokayev 2020b).

As these references to Kazakhstan's well-functioning economy, regional leadership, and international reputation attest, Tokayev's efforts to carve out an independent base of presidential power have been tethered to legitimizing practices of his predecessor. While he undertook some independent initiatives, including a minor "personnel revolution" that included a dismissal of Nazarbayev's powerful daughter Dariga from her role as Senate speaker (Eurasianet 2020b), Tokayev remained tied to the Nazarbayev legacy. At times, Tokayev even appeared to have avoided overshadowing Nazarbayev, who continued influencing decision-making in Kazakhstan in his capacity of Leader of the Nation and lifetime chairman of the Security Council (Lillis 2019). When Nazarbayev's own COVID-19 illness forced him to retreat from the decision-making processes in the country, this brief absence both empowered and raised stakes for the leadership of Tokayev, who continued navigating the precarious epidemiological and socioeconomic situation in the country. In the end,

Tokayev's efforts to build his own performance legitimacy distinct from Nazarbayev faced deep challenges, particularly given his short tenure in office before the pandemic. Facing risks of elite alienation, insubordination, and intra-elite conflict, Tokayev initial sociopolitical reforms and efforts to present himself as a progressive reformer remained rooted in his predecessor's legacy. These constraints continued during the pandemic, undercutting his own legitimacy and preventing an open securitization of the crisis.

### Divided Leadership, Weak Legitimacy and Fear of Public Disorder in Kyrgyzstan

Similar to the governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan's public authorities acknowledged COVID-19 as a health problem early on and created a new body – an inter-agency operational headquarters under the Ministry of Health – to monitor the situation. When the first positive COVID-19 cases were detected in Kyrgyzstan on March 18, 2020, President Sooronbay Jeenbekov delivered a public address declaring his government's primary responsibility was to "defend" public health. Jeenbekov also asserted that public authorities had "full control" over the situation in the country and stressed that the burden of responsibility for containing the spread of the infection was shared by each "Kyrgyz citizen and every parent" (Jeenbekov 2021). Four days later, the government of Kyrgyzstan declared a state of emergency and imposed strict quarantine measures in areas most affected by the spread of the pandemic (The Government of Kyrgyzstan 2020). To enforce the lockdown, the government instituted commandants' offices under the Ministry of Interior and set up police checkpoints across several cities. Initially announced by presidential press service, Jeenbekov later explained these measures in a March 25 televised address as consistent with "the interest of protecting the life and health of citizens, their safety and public order" (Kudryavtseva 2020). Jeenbekov reiterated that public compliance was everyone's civic duty and threatened serious punishment for failing to observe the new orders.

The imposition of lockdowns in Kyrgyzstan was impaired by disorderly and muddled government communications. Quarantine measures were hastily implemented and a lack of guidance from above created legal ambiguities and inconsistencies in how they were applied. A surge of abusive behavior by police and security personnel ensued, at times creating new public health hazards (Khasanova 2020; Zubenko 2020). The public was reportedly frustrated and baffled by what was perceived as an incongruous and, at times, excessive government response.[3] Over the course of the lockdown, citizens received little official communication, most of which restated decisions adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers and the State Committee on National Security (GKNO). Those decisions were dubbed "pseudo-decisions" and "bureaucratic alibies" because of their abstract formulations that raised people's doubt in their purpose and intent. The government's clampdown on public communications about the pandemic created an information vacuum that removed peoples' access to open and reliable information and closed many channels for feedback between state bodies, citizens, and the media (Human Rights Watch 2020).

All in all, Kyrgyzstan's government failed to communicate the threat of COVID-19 in a coherent and persuasive manner. Public officials, including the president, fell flat in their responsibility to model proper behavior by refusing to wear masks themselves or appearing for photo opportunities in large gatherings of people (Khasanova 2020). When the state of emergency and quarantine were lifted on May 11, 2020, many citizens flouted regulations on wearing masks and maintaining social distance, despite the threat of harsh fines for violating these rules (Kumenov and Imanaliyeva 2020). By mid-summer 2020, the number of coronavirus cases nearly doubled to 24,606 due to a spike in infections and following changes to the tracking methodology being used (in which probable cases were re-introduced) (Putz 2020b). In addition, multiple members of Jeenbekov's administration, parliamentarians, and supreme court judges fell sick with COVID-19. President Jeenbekov was forced to cut his trip to Moscow short when several members of his delegation visiting Russia's Victory Day parade on June 24 tested positive for the virus (TASS 2020). Although the government considered re-imposing statewide quarantine when the new daily counts of COVID-19 cases climbed into triple digits, it chose not to follow Kazakhstan's example. Instead, it allowed the local authorities in the major cities and provinces to re-introduce restrictions on the freedom of movement, among other things.

Kyrgyzstan's abortive securitization of COVID-19 is a product of its government's weak legitimacy stemming from its poor political and economic performance of subsequent administrations. Every second respondent of a country-wide public opinion survey conducted between December 2019 and January 2020 (Haerpfer et al. 2020) expressed little or no confidence in the government in Kyrgyzstan, the lowest level across the Central Asian republics. Seventy-five percent of respondents considered economic growth as the top priority for the government. Despite the pledges of improving the socioeconomic plight of the Kyrgyz citizens, subsequent administrations have failed to meaningfully raise living standards of the population.

It comes as no surprise that economic considerations dominated the COVID-related discourse in Kyrgyzstan. When the government imposed the state of emergency, citing the WHO's declaration of global pandemic, it repeatedly stated that Kyrgyzstan lacked resources comparable to those of Kazakhstan and Russia to support the economy and business (Levina 2020). Immediately, the Kyrgyz President appealed to a number of international financial institutions for assistance and asked the major donors of Kyrgyzstan for debt relief.[4] Economic considerations were at the front of the government's debates over the re-imposition of lockdown in Kyrgyzstan. A decision to eschew another state of emergency was dictated by a fear of economic collapse and the widespread public discontent that it would produce.

Thus, the second consideration weighing heavily on the authorities' decisions concerning COVID-19 had to do with an abiding fear of public unrest: the government's statements have been replete with appeals to the public to avoid panic. Spring has been known as a "protest season" in Kyrgyzstan with peaceful rallies twice escalating in unrest that ended in "revolutions" and changes of power (in 2005 and 2010). President Jeenbekov, a former prime minister of Kyrgyzstan, was elected in October 2017 marking a rare peaceful transition of power in the country. Yet, Jeenbekov's political base of support, based on the ruling Social Democratic Party (SDPK) and his predecessor Almazbek Atambayev, was weakened due to a feud between the two men. In August 2019, Atambayev's arrest had once again raised the risk of political instability. Splinter groups from the SDPK formed new opposition parties threatening the SDPK's dominant position in parliament, while public discontent and protests over government corruption and border skirmishes with neighbors were on the rise.

As the pandemic reached Kyrgyzstan, the political elite's tenuous standing was worsened by the former president's trial, an increasingly fractured political party landscape, and reports of embezzlement of public and international funds. Authorities implemented stricter control over information and public gatherings to stave off public unrest and secure the SDPK's victory in the October 2020 Parliamentary elections. A loyal parliament was needed for implementing president's initiatives and identifying his successor (Kambarov 2020). With the government's failed response to the pandemic further undermining its legitimacy, however, the parliamentary election was marred by irregularities, vote buying, and other types of electoral fraud (Imanaliyeva 2020). The landslide victory for pro-government parties led to protests by opposition supporters that devolved into violent riots forcing Jeenbekov's resignation. In short, Jeenbekov's administration, facing ongoing legitimacy problems due to its poor economic performance and fractured party politics, lacked sufficient standing to pursue securitization of the pandemic. This was especially the case since securitization would require a policy response that Kyrgyzstan's weakened health-care infrastructure could not implement. Even Jeenbekov's successor, Sadyr Japarov, whose position as newly elected president was strengthened by his populist rhetoric and by constitutional changes reverting Kyrgyzstan to a fully fledged presidential system, has largely ignored the pandemic.

### Uzbekistan's Technocratic Response

After 27 years of repressive rule under Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, Shavkat Mirziyoyev came into office through a hidden process of ascension, first as interim leader in 2016 and then as President through a highly orchestrated election in 2017. From the outset, Mirziyoyev's administration has sought to distinguish itself from the Karimov era. Alongside other legitimation strategies designed to separate Mirziyoyev from his predecessor (such as a more open foreign policy), the new government pursued a public turn toward effective, technocratic governance and policy reform (Sattarov 2017). This is a central theme of Mirziyoyev's first term that seeks to portray his leadership as fixing many of the governance problems (inefficiency, corruption, nepotism, etc.) that flourished under Karimov.

The government's technocratic rebranding, therefore, left little room for Uzbekistan to securitize the pandemic. The Mirziyoyev leadership, in fact, has shifted from an initial strategy of limited securitization to a clear trend of de-securitization within the first several months of the pandemic. Certainly, there was a reliance on security measures to enforce stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions, but these policies were not cloaked in discourse that represented COVID-19 outbreaks as a strictly (or evenly primarily) security risk. After initial cases in Uzbekistan were detected in mid-March 2020, the government implemented several emergency measures, including border and school closures, suspension of public holidays celebrations, and bans on public gatherings (Kun.Uz 2020; Uzreport Information Agency 2020). The government also moved swiftly to mobilize scores of medical and law enforcement personnel to implement an initial lockdown. It also sought to mobilize society through neighborhood and village (*mahalla*) committees to combat the pandemic. The official rhetoric occasionally portrayed the pandemic as an "external enemy" but fell short of naming it a national security threat (ostensibly out of the fear of panic in the population) (Vlast' 2020). Instead, the government used TV, news media, bloggers and spiritual leaders to provide continued focus on the pandemic itself (Zakirov 2020). In addition, the government policies were rolled out by the heads of individual ministries and state offices, as well as credentialed experts, in line with the government's underlying technocratic self-image. The government did rely on its police and internal security apparatus to enforce tight restrictions on the public and stay-at-home orders (UzA.Uz 2020). Fines were imposed for those in public without wearing masks or for "hiding" someone who is infected with COVID-19 (Podrobno.Uz 2020). Yet, there was no evident securitization of the pandemic, even in its initial months.

Uzbekistan's de-securitization efforts became more visible by late April, as the government sought to frame its response as rapid and effective in controlling the spread of the virus. In this case, de-securitization was manifested as an attempt to promote an image of its successful early efforts at stopping the virus. Exercising control over information and discussion of the virus, the government disseminated messages of optimism that (inaccurately) framed its response as successful containment of the virus' spread. As in many other countries, subsequent re-openings were followed by surges in new cases, according to some reports these led to an exponential increase of new infections. While cycles of re-openings, surges, and shutdowns persisted through 2020 and 2021, the government continued to pursue its de-securitization of the virus and has not framed the pandemic as a national security threat.

As in the other cases, regime legitimacy and past legitimation strategies at the inception of the health crisis sharply influenced the government's decisions regarding securitization of COVID-19. For Mirziyoyev's administration, full-scale securitization was a risky choice inconsistent with principles of technocratic governance it had been espousing in running the state and economy. These principles have been central to

the legitimizing strategy of President Mirziyoyev, who inherited the legacy of long-standing public grievances, declining economy, and international isolation of Uzbekistan. Conversely, Mirziyoyev claimed to have put Uzbekistan on a path toward prosperity and global integration through a program of economic modernization, anti-corruption reforms, and technocratic governance.

Mirziyoyev initially appeared to make some progress with this approach. When the health crisis descended on Uzbekistan, it had a rather balanced economy and trade relations, low levels of dependency on commodity exports, and diversified exports. Still poorly integrated in the global supply chains, Uzbekistan was not much affected by the fragmentation of global economy due to COVID-19 (Turkstra and Neopole 2020). Having built financial reserves, the Uzbek government was able to implement a set of measures to minimize the initial impact on the shutdown. A series of health policies were initiated as well. Bonuses were provided to frontline health workers, several new hospitals were being constructed, state-led mask production increased, testing capacity (after some delay) was ramped up, and an online portal was created to track and display locations of COVID-19 cases.

These initial responses, however, have not translated into long-term success in combatting the virus or mitigating its negative economic consequences. Indeed, the government faces a sharp decrease in remittances from its migrant workers abroad, which are expected to drop by 35% (equivalent to 5% of Uzbekistan's GDP) (Turkstra and Neopole 2020). The regime has continued to adhere to its technocratic self-image even as its performance has fallen short. The government has not reengaged a lockdown since its early response to the pandemic in March and April 2020, despite several spikes in infections. More broadly, it has not invoked securitization language. In contrast to Kazakhstan's dual claim to legitimacy and Kyrgyzstan's weakened infrastructure, the Mirziyoyev government appears to have relatively greater support in society and higher levels of state capacity. Yet, its deeply embedded legitimation strategy – premised on portraying the regime as commanding technical expertise and putting forward effective solutions to the country's long-standing political and economic stagnation – is directly incompatible with securitizing discourses of the pandemic.

### Denial and Delay in Tajikistan

An increasingly autocratic regime, whose leader President Emomali Rahmon has benefited from a well-developed security apparatus due to foreign security assistance, Tajikistan remains rooted in Rahmon's personalistic rule and his ongoing post-civil war campaign to control the country's historically unruly regions. Since emerging as Tajikistan's post-civil war head of state, Rahmon has based his strongman rule on a mixture of cooptation and corruption, a cult-of-personality, and targeted repression (Driscoll 2015; Markowitz 2013). The regime legitimized Rahmon's rule by claiming that he and his (largely familial) senior officials were the linchpin ensuring domestic stability after Tajikistan's civil war (Driscoll 2017; Epkenhans 2018). In order to sustain this claim domestically

and abroad, the regime pursued legitimation strategies that framed regional problems such as drug trafficking and Islamic activism as existential security threats to Tajikistan and to the region.

Despite these strategies, the Rahmon government has lacked a broad-based legitimacy and found it could not easily resort to securitization tactics it had used in the past. Confronting an entirely different challenge in the pandemic – one that demanded a sustained and effective policy response – the regime saw little benefit in framing COVID-19 as a national security threat. Indeed, the government lacked a clear plan of response, lurching from initial blanket denials of COVID-19 (characterized by misinformation and delusional public statements) to an inconsistent and delayed response. Unlike securitization discourses of other issues, the regime was largely silent in presenting the pandemic as an existential threat even as its effects were felt among the public. Instead, the government's lackluster response was defined by several ad hoc and ill-conceived policy responses.

While other countries across Eurasia were reporting cases of COVID-19, Tajikistan continued to deny the presence of the pandemic within its borders.[5] Initial steps taken by the government focused on sealing off the country (e.g., temperature screenings on incoming foreign travelers, the closure of airports, and limited quarantine measures), but it enforced few domestic controls until early May 2020. Likewise, mosques reopened after being sanitized and massive public Navruz celebrations were held on March 21 (Fergana.Ru 2020; Khovar.Tj 2020). Throughout March and April, the government continued to claim that Tajikistan had no cases, with President Rahmon attributing this to clean homes and sanitary practices of Tajiks, even as the government reported large spikes in illnesses diagnosed as pneumonia, tuberculosis, swine flu, and other diseases. Efforts by doctors to publicly state they have seen signs of COVID-19 were sharply monitored by the Committee for National Security and other offices. Many observers believe that these controls and the lack of action to address the crisis were part of a government strategy to delay its response until President Rahmon's son was installed as Chairman of the upper chamber of parliament on April 17, 2020, thereby putting him in a position to succeed his father as president (Eurasianet 2020c). Indeed, it was only on April 30 that the first case of COVID-19 was publicly recognized, at which point the government shifted from denial to faux crisis management.

From May 2020 onward, the government responded with sporadic half measures, such as closing public schools, banning mass gatherings, and requiring masks in public, yet leaving shops and bazaars open and allowing public transportation to remain at full capacity. Likewise, in lieu of a comprehensive set of health policies, a series of ad hoc symbolic gestures were made to promote Rahmon's personal leadership: medical workers were given a short-term bump in pay, in part due to Rahmon's pledge to donate one month of his salary along with other government officials (Asia-Plus.Tj 2020b). Attempts by other elites to encourage a more aggressive response by the regime were not adopted (Asia-Plus.Tj 2020a).

The lack of testing, tracing and treatment was particularly evident given the tens of millions of dollars in aid from international institutions (such as the WHO, World Bank, ADB), and bilateral assistance from the United States, European Union countries, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (among others). This paucity of health care measures suggested a continued practice of diverting international assistance into private accounts (many of which are offshore) (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017), despite the World Bank's projections that Tajikistan would face 21,000 deaths from early May 2020 if it did not ramp up its response.[6] Aided by the lack of testing and real data, the government used rhetoric and falsehoods to downplay the extent of the disease, claiming that 200 patients were recovering each day. In May 2020, the government shut down a prominent independent website tracking COVID-19 cases and deaths, which listed multiple times more than official tallies.[7]

As infection numbers rose over 2020 and into 2021, the government did at times draw on its security apparatus to enforce a limited policy response to the pandemic. Legal changes included fines on people for spreading information about the pandemic. Persons who were convicted of spreading COVID-19 (e.g., people who contract it) could be imprisoned for up to five years. Repeated violations of physical distancing, masks, and sanitary protocols were reported in the press and in public statements of officials. Yet the government never framed the pandemic clearly as a threat to national security, largely avoided securitization discourse, and continued its strategy of downplaying the dangers of the health crisis.

This rhetorical frame can be understood through the prism of the Tajik government's past legitimation strategies and how the pandemic uncomfortably fits well within them. Over the past three decades, Rahmon's securitization of transnational issues – drug trafficking from Afghanistan, Islamic political activism, and its large migration population in Russia – was part of a broader strategy to garner international aid (especially foreign security sector assistance) (Omelicheva and Markowitz 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, quickly morphed from an international or regional issue to a domestic one that threatened to expose Tajikistan's institutional incapacities and leadership failures. Likewise, securitizing the pandemic offered little financial benefit, which had been a motivation of past strategies of securitization. While the Rahmon government had skillfully presented previous problems as international security threats in order to secure financial and logistical support from the global community and major powers in the region (China, Russia, Iran, among others), the regime has little to gain from securitization of the pandemic. COVID-19 is already recognized as a global crisis and foreign support in the forms of personal protective gear (and eventually vaccines) cannot be converted into profit. The legitimation drivers that had led to successful strategies in the past were no longer relevant, leaving the regime without a clear path forward as the pandemic reached its borders.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Over the first six months of the pandemic in the spring and summer of 2020, the governments of Central Asian states confronted unprecedented stress as they experienced a rapidly unfolding health crisis that threatened to swamp each country's underfunded health sector. Historically, having spent very little on its health infrastructure, the region's hospitals, emergency services, doctors, and other medical staff, and pharmaceutical sector were perilously unprepared for the pandemic. To keep the virus from spreading in their countries, Central Asian governments often adopted a range of extraordinary security measures designed to restrict the movement of people, large gatherings, and other attempts at population control.

While they relied on military and law enforcement personnel to enforce lockdowns and quarantines, governments did not justify these measures exclusively or mostly in the name of national security. This is surprising given that Central Asia has a history of promoting discourses of danger to define other transnational problems (such as drug trafficking, Islamic activism, migration) as existential security threats – a strategy of securitization that has been interwoven into the region's post-Soviet domestic and international political discourse. When facing the spread of COVID-19 and the public health crisis it caused, however, leaders in the region have not done this. Instead, incomplete and inconsistent securitization characterized the region's responses, often followed by hasty de-securitization.

In this paper, we explain this surprising ambivalence toward securitization as a product of the unique legitimacy concerns that accompany securitizing a pandemic and each regime's specific legitimizing tropes. Nondemocratic regimes rely on legitimizing discourses of stability, economic development, and political and economic reform to further solidify their staying power. However, this dependence on "performance legitimacy" makes these regimes vulnerable during crises that require an effective policy response as well as broad-based public compliance. Autocratic regimes, which typically lack the legitimacy to implement and sustain such a response, are unlikely to pursue securitization of a pandemic. This is true even in Central Asia, where securitization of other transnational problems has proven an effective tool of regime security. In addition, each regime's deep-seated patterns of legitimation shaped its governments' limited securitization (or in some cases, its de-securitization) rhetoric as it framed its response to the pandemic. Dual claims to presidential authority in Kazakhstan, a leadership vacuum and elite division in Kyrgyzstan, a turn toward technocratic governance in Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan's exploitative and personalistic rule have each, in their own way, defined a limited and inconsistent securitization of the pandemic in Central Asia.

## Notes

1. While some observers have argued that Central Asian regimes are using disinformation about coronavirus to consolidate and extend their political control, none have claimed that regimes have securitized the crisis (Lemon and Antonov 2020; Marat 2020).

2. These included travel restrictions, suspension of operations of public transport, shopping and entertainment centers, schools, daycares, and universities, bans on all mass gatherings, and more (Eurasianet 2020a).

3. This conclusion is drawn from four expert interviews in Kyrgyzstan.

4. Several international institutions provided help to Kyrgyzstan, including the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank, the EU Delegation in Kyrgyzstan. The United States, China, Russia, Japan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and other countries have also provided humanitarian assistance to Kyrgyzstan.

5. Rahmon's speech to scientists and researchers on March 18, 2020 made no mention of COVID-19. Website of President of Republic of Tajikistan, "Речь Лидера нации, Президента Республики Таджикистан уважаемого Эмомали Рахмона на встрече с учёными страны;" (Speech of the Leader of the Nation, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, esteemed Emomali Rahmon at a meeting with scientists of the country) March 18, 2020; accessed on August 26, 2020, available at: http://president.tj/ru/node/22647.

6. Asia-Plus, Tj, "Всемирный банк предрекает Таджикистану до 21 тыс. смертей от коронавируса," May 1, 2020; (World Bank predicts Tajikistan up to 21 thousand deaths from coronavirus) accessed on August 26, 2020, available at: https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/Tajikistan/society/20200501/vsemirnii-bank-predrekaet-tadzhikistanu-do-21-tis-smertei-ot-koronavirusa.

7. Asia-Plus, Tj, "В Таджикистане заблокировали сайт по сбору информации о погибших COVID-19," May 11, 2020; (In Tajikistan, the website for collecting information on the dead COVID-19 was blocked) accessed on August 26, 2020, available at: https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/Tajikistan/society/20200511/v-tadzhikistane-zablokirovali-sait-po-sboru-informatsii-o-pogibshih-covid-19.

## Disclosure Statement

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