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Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization

The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 was met with jubilation. The Cold War was over, and the West had won eliminating any ideological alternative to liberal democracy and free capitalist market.¹ A few years earlier, the collapse of communist regimes in East and Central Europe unleashed a flood of activity by governments and international organizations seeking to assist in the spread of democracy in the post-communist states. It was expected that the demise of the last stronghold of communism in Europe and the ensuing independence of the former Soviet Union republics would be accompanied by similar dramatic regime changes spurred by the democracy promotion initiatives from the West.

In practice, however, the expectations of quick democratic transitions in the post-Soviet territory have not come to fruition. A decade after the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, the democratization euphoria was replaced with the growing concerns over the retreat of democracy in several post-Soviet countries, where the practices of democracy assistance have been increasingly met with a counter-trend of democracy resistance. The Central Asian republics – Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan - have clearly manifested this trend.

In the early 1990s, after these republics had become unexpectedly independent and openly renounced their communist beliefs, the Western community anticipated that they might quickly undergo democratization and transform themselves into liberal democratic states. The United States, European Union, Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE), in addition to individual European states and non-governmental organizations launched multiple

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democracy promotion initiatives in Central Asian states hoping that with the Western support these republics would transform themselves into the fully-fledged market systems and democracies.

None of the Central Asian countries, however, have met these expectations. The democratic pledges avowed by their leaders, at least on the rhetorical level, have not been reached. Western states and international organizations have criticized these states’ authorities for emasculating legislative bodies and removing independence of courts. The governments of Central Asian republics have expressed frustration with these condemnations and denied the Western charges of human rights violations, political repression, and electoral fraud. The regional authorities have become suspicious and unsympathetic toward democracy promotion programs and began accusing the Western democratization agents in the foreign meddling in internal affairs of sovereign states.

The resistance to meaningful democratic reforms in Central Asia has been noticed in both academic and political circles. This opposition, however, has been approached through the lens of “material”, i.e., economic, resource-, and capabilities-based explanations highlighting the states’ willingness and capacity to use coercive powers of the governing regime for clumping down on any expression of dissent, persecution of political opponents, and legal and extralegal restrictions on the independent press.² Considerably less attention has been dedicated to normative arguments and ideological forms of authoritarian resistance. The latter, however, has played a crucial role in furthering authoritarianism in Central Asian states. It has been used to challenge the prevailing understanding of democracy by presenting a convincing case for an alternative vision of the democratic system and asserting different standards for assessing it.

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How do authoritarian regimes safeguard themselves against the threat of democratization? What ideological and rhetorical strategies do they rely on to garner public support? How do these governments legitimize their policies and actions? These are the questions addressed in this chapter of the book. In the last decades of the 20th century, the democracy issue has moved from the domestic to international context and became a widely recognized principle for the effective and legitimate rule, which can only be dismissed at the risk of international isolation and the loss of reputation at home and abroad. None of the Central Asian governments has relinquished the idea of democracy, in principle, and all have established the de jure democratic foundations for their rule. Despite the blatant violations of democratic principles in practice, they have effectively appropriated the language of democracy in their discussions of the domestic political situation, but instilled democratic ideas with a different content for defending and even encouraging their authoritarian rule.

This chapter examines the “models” of democracy promoted by the governments of three Central Asian republics –Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan – and discusses rhetorical strategies employed for defending these frameworks against the alternative vision of liberal democracy. The goals are both to shed light on the certain aspects of representation of alternative conceptions of democracy espoused by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan and elucidate the role of Russia as a regional hegemon supporting authoritarianism. The chapter begins with three sections discussing the presentations of democracy in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to the review of arguments and strategies employed by the governments of these Central Asian republics for conferring greater authority to their ideological visions and de-legitimizing alternative, predominantly, Western views on the

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democratic rule. It will stress the importance of external validation and indigenization of the Central Asian “models” of democracy as well as securing external ideological support. The conclusion summarizes the common features of the Central Asian “models” of democracy as well as important distinctions characterizing them in addition to discussing the implications of ideological resistance for democratization theory and practice.

Kazakhstan’s “Presidential Democracy”

In April 2011, Kazakhstan held an early presidential election, where the incumbent president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, won a landslide victory scoring 95.55% of the votes cast, thus reasserting his leadership over the country for the third 7-year presidential term. In his inaugural speech, which marked the 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan’s independence and Nazarbayev’s presidency, the Kazakh leader expressed his deep gratitude for trust of the people and extolled, repeatedly, a powerful, modern, united, and respected nation that Kazakhstan has become.³ Larded with accounts of the country’s economic accomplishments and some democratic platitudes, the inaugural address was emblematic of the President’s earlier speeches and statements acclaiming Kazakhstan’s economic progress and improved international standing. Together, these presidential pronouncements, which are widely circulated through the media forums, convey an ideological basis for Kazakhstan’s “own path of development,” variously labeled as “presidential” and “managerial” democracy, and, since recently, democracy with the “visionary leadership.”

In his public speeches, the Kazakh president has been keen on drawing the stark comparisons between Kazakhstan of the early 1990s and Kazakhstan of today. This has been done to remind the domestic and foreign audiences about the challenges that faced the country

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following its independence and successful efforts of his government in overcoming them.

Indeed, after Kazakhstan was thrust into independence following the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, it found itself in an unstable and largely unfavorable context. It had neither strategic reserves nor the army to protect the country from security threats or defend its poorly demarcated borders. Its economic ties were decimated, its levels of production plummeted, and inflation severely undercut the quality of life. Together with the looming economic crisis, the President faced a growing confrontation with the conservative Parliament obstructing reforms envisioned by the Kazakh President. In several speeches and interviews Nazarbayev commented that, in the hindsight, strong presidential rule was the most effective way to push through urgent reforms unencumbered by various resistance forces.⁴ In the most recent memoirs, Nazarbayev explains, “Fully aware of the danger of losing time and further aggravating the crisis, presidential power enabled us to focus on resolving pressing problems and conducting the most urgent reforms as swiftly as possible instead of being sidetracked by protracted discussions and quests for compromises and half-measures”.⁵

Thus, in Kazakhstan, the model of a presidential democracy has been viewed as the most appropriate for the republic’s context. What made this model unique and boosted its popularity among the Kazakh people is the idea of “visionary” leadership responsible for the model’s success. President Nazarbayev has clearly embraced the role of a “visionary” leader. He has been regarded as the “founder of the nation” and “wise father,” whose visionary prowess, acumen, and allegiance to the nation saved the country from political instability and placed it on a path of effective socio-economic transformation. The president has indirectly promoted this image by speaking metaphorically about his role as the head of the family building a house for future

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generations, working hard for the prosperous future of the people, whom the President habitually refers to as “my” people.⁶ It has been argued that this “visionary” leadership and genuine concerns about the well-being of “his” people led the Kazakh President to adopt pragmatic foreign policy and a laser-sharp focus on economy at home. “During those [transitional] years, the only thing I had on my agenda was the economy and the economy only. The main concern was to provide the necessary means of livelihood and reasonable standards of living”, declared the President in his 2011 inaugural speech. “Economy first and then politics” became Kazakhstan’s motto.⁷ It was decided that the goal of economic development had to precede political liberalization, and democracy had to give way to the imperatives of state- and nation-building in Kazakhstan.

Economic prosperity has become a cornerstone of Kazakhstan’s vision of the country’s future. The primacy of economic goals rather than security concerns has also distinguished Kazakhstan from other Central Asian states. In his interviews and speeches, the President of Kazakhstan likes to recite Kazakhstan’s economic achievements, such as the rapid economic growth, enhanced social welfare and education, and high levels of foreign investments. The establishment of new economic benchmarks, often presented in the future-oriented catchy slogans, “Kazakhstan 2030” or “Kazakhstan, one of the world’s 50 most competitive economies” has also become a hallmark of the speeches delivered by the President.⁸ These ambitious economic targets have been used for not only rallying public support for the President and his programs, but also as a means of diverting public attention from domestic political issues and justifying the delay in the implementation of political reforms.

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The precedence of economic reforms over political liberalization has also been defended on the grounds that a functioning democratic system requires a vibrant and thriving middle class. Citing the Singaporean leader, Lee Kwan Yew, who Nazarbayev has always admired, the President once explained that for a democratic system to succeed, “the people must achieve a high standard of education and economic development, [and] create a substantial middle class... The middle class will not emerge without a sustainable economy which cannot exist without a sufficiently strong and wise leadership capable of getting the country out of freefall”.⁹

Opting for the strategy of economic liberalization and marketization of the country, the Kazakh government has not embraced an unbridled capitalism. The aim, as defined by the President, has been to build a “social market economy” and a “people’s capitalism”.¹⁰ A product of the Soviet political economy, Nazarbayev has been convinced that the primary function of the state was to ensure the wellbeing of its people. Contrary to the communist state, where the government made decisions for people, the new role envisioned for the Kazakh government has been defined as the creator of conditions “under which free citizens and the private sector can undertake effective measures for themselves and their families”.¹¹ Thus, the Kazakh model rejects the minimalist conception of the state. On the contrary, it is deemed that the state must play a leading role in the economic transformation as an architect and manager of reforms.¹² Furthermore, alluding to the experiences of other Asian countries, Nazarbayev and his government maintained that a strong state should play a key role in educating people about economic liberalization as well as in promoting and asserting democratic norms.¹³

Convinced in the efficacy of the economic course for building a strong nationhood and an independent state, President Nazarbayev has been anxious and, to a certain extent, cynical about

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democracy in the West and democratic reforms in the post-Soviet countries. He observed the dangers of the hasty democratization in Yeltsin’s Russia and destructive consequences of the democratic experiments in Kyrgyzstan. As a result, he has always insisted on the gradual movement toward democracy to avoid threatening upheavals and destabilizing crises. “We have to prevent [democracy] blowing through like a tornado”, observed Nazarbayev warning that democratic maneuvering could threaten integrity of his multi-ethnic and poly-confessional state.¹⁴

Along with many other people of Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev and members of his government have shown respect, at least rhetorically, for the ideals and goals of democracy. At the same time, they have rejected the notion of a universal model of democracy or path to democratization. “Kazakhstan has long [...] outgrown the childish notion that there is some kind of an ideal, universal model, which can simply be applied to our own country. Such models do not exist,” said Nazarbayev in his memoirs.¹⁵ Tired of being “lambasted and branded” as a dictatorship by the Western commentators,¹⁶ Nazarbayev has also become disillusioned with the U.S. and European practices of democracy. He criticized the Western governments for using double standards in enforcing democracy and trading democratic pressures for commercial interests of the multinational corporations from their states.¹⁷

Although, the Kazakh authorities frequently contend that the Western models of democracy are unsuitable for their state (and, by extension, the Western democratic standards are inapplicable for their country), they have also opposed an argument that democracy was non-existent or unfeasible in Kazakhstan. On the country, it has been stated that Kazakhstan has made significant progress in building democracy as evidenced in the scores of political

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organizations, media outlets, and civil society activism. Some comments of the Kazakh President make it clear that his references are to the Kazakh, rather than Western, model of democracy, which takes into consideration mentality of the population, circumstances of the transition, and elements of the cultural tradition derived from the nomadic past.¹⁸ By recognizing some universal democratic values (but not the entire “model” of democracy), which are portrayed as consistent with, even emblematic “democratic” practices of the nomadic tribes, the Kazakh “model” of democracy combines the modern elements allowing Kazakhstan to claim its place among the modern democratic nations with the commitment to the Kazakh political culture inherited from the past.

Kyrgyzstan’s “Models” of Democracy: “Liberal”, “Kyrgyz”, “Consultative”, and “Parliamentary”

Dubbed as an “oasis of democracy” in a sea of authoritarianism, Kyrgyzstan showed many positive signs of a rapid political transformation and economic liberalization in the early 1990s. The first Kyrgyz president, Askar Akayev, a recognized physicist and communist party functionary, prided himself for being different from other Central Asian leaders. Known for his liberal and, at times, idealistic, worldviews, the first Kyrgyz President demonstrated greater commitment to democratization earning a reputation of Central Asian Thomas Jefferson. Certainly, lacking economic resources and political clout for running the poor and unstable state, the Akayev regime had to present a model of aspiring democracy and market economy to the outside world for getting the much needed financial assistance and political support of the Western governments and financial institutions.¹⁹ Whether as a result of the Western assistance bordering on the pressure of democratization or thanks to Akayev’s liberal and progressive

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outlook, Kyrgyzstan evinced many democratic accomplishments in the early 1990s. The country held regular elections cautiously commended by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It had an active, albeit, poorly organized political opposition and mushrooming “third sector.” People in Kyrgyzstan could enjoy free press and exercise freedoms of speech and assembly. Not without its limitations and problems, Kyrgyzstan’s progress to democracy was regarded as the most advanced in the region noted for its authoritarianism.

By the late 1990s the international community, domestic political opposition, and some of the President’s former allies became disgruntled with the politics of Akayev’s regime. The West was disheartened by electoral machinations and tampering with Kyrgyzstan’s constitution. The opposition protested against the monopolization of profitable business ventures by Akayev’s family and the growing nepotism of his cabinet. As the country sank deeper into economic crisis and pervasive crime and corruption threatened stability of the state, people showed increasing dissatisfaction with the Akayev administration.

Assailed with a stream of accusations from the West, President Akayev tried to negate the universality of democracy or applicability of the Western forms of governance to Kyrgyzstan. In his book, “A Memorable Decade” published in Russia under the title, “A Difficult Road to Democracy”, Askar Akayev argues, “There is no [sic] and cannot be a universal type of democracy applicable in all times, to all countries, and peoples. Every society developed its own approach to democracy taking into account special circumstances of its development”.²⁰ Admired and emulated in the early years of Kyrgyzstan’s independence, the Western model of liberal democracy was now framed as incompatible with the Kyrgyz political order and even threatening to stability in Kyrgyzstan. President Akayev turned into a fervent

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critic of the “export” of democracy, particularly, through the “color revolutions,” which, he believed were funded and instigated from abroad.²¹ He began objecting to any transposition of the Western form of governance in his country on the grounds that it would further divisions in the Kyrgyz society and quickly degenerate into political anarchy and economic disaster.²²

President Akayev and his advisers often defended a national model of democracy by the distinctive aspects of the Kyrgyz history, socio-economic processes, and mentality of the population. Never fully articulated, this model stressed a gradual and evolutionary movement to democracy and adaption of the new institutions to the country’s political culture. Akayev liked to point to the elements of democratic tradition in the Kyrgyz nomadic past, highlighting spiritual freedoms, freedoms of movement and expression, and practices of people’s Kurultai as the bases for the formation of a national model of democracy.²³ Furthermore, he argued that the real measure of democracy should be the actual degree of freedoms in the country, as those are defined and understood within the unique socio-cultural and political contexts of Kyrgyzstan.²⁴ Akayev, for example, maintained that the authentic democracy was not about political opportunities or the exercise of political freedoms. For him, it was about the extent to what the government was concerned about the wellbeing of people and responsible to their needs.²⁵

Overthrown in a popular uprising known as the “Tulip Revolution,” Askar Akayev was denied a chance at building a model of democracy with “national flavor” in Kyrgyzstan. A new administration of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who led the 2005 revolt, came to power on popular pledges of fighting corruption, improving public welfare, and furthering democratic reforms. Despite the promises of democratization, Bakiyev did a volte-face on the democratic rule. In the two years following the ouster of President Akayev, he managed to consolidate all

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power in the office of the President and his administration, while his family surrounded by loyal outsiders seized political, economic, and informational control in Kyrgyzstan.²⁶

President Bakiyev and his advisers argued that the liberal model of democracy had failed in Kyrgyzstan plunging the country into the government infighting and political impasse. Instead, the Russian model of a strong presidential republic with a pliable parliament and centralized “vertical of power” that demonstrated its ability to establish “iron order and discipline in the executive branch” was viewed as more appropriate for the circumstances of Kyrgyzstan.²⁷ Echoing Akayev, President Bakiyev insisted on the gradual evolutionary development of political system in his country, and, similarly to Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbayev, he maintained that the levels of economic development must determine the readiness of the society for democratization as well as the exact nature of democratic reforms.²⁸

By 2010, the Bakiyev regime left aside any pretenses for liberal democracy by announcing that Western-style democracy featuring elections, individual human rights, and political pluralism had run its course in Kyrgyzstan. Going farther than his predecessor in arguing for the unsuitability of the Western model of democracy for Kyrgyzstan, Bakiyev dubbed elections as a “marathon of money-bags” and blamed individual human rights for a decline in public morality and growth in selfishness in the Kyrgyz society.²⁹ In place of liberal democracy, the Kyrgyz president proposed a model of “consultative democracy,” which was supposed to strike a balance between the traditions and values of the Kyrgyz nomadic society and exigencies of the country’s development. The national assembly of representatives of ethnic diasporas, state and local officials, activists of non-governmental organizations, and representatives of mass media, known as Kurultai, called for by the government for consultations

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was named as a paragon of “consultative democracy.” As for the day-to-day management of the state, Bakiyev envisioned consultations within a narrow coordinating body, the Presidential Council, made up of the representatives of the Kyrgyz Parliament, presidential administration, and civil society selected by the President.³⁰

President Bakiyev was deposed by mass anti-government protests in April 2010 and fled the country. The interim government led by Roza Otunbayeva, a prominent political figure and a leader of the democratic opposition against the regimes of Akayev and Bakiyev, convened a Constitutional Committee, which drafted a new Constitution approved by the referendum in June 2010. The new Kyrgyz constitution takes away some presidential powers and shifts others to the office of Prime Minister. The right to nominate a candidate to the post of Prime Minister belongs to a faction or a coalition of factions with the majority of seats in the Zhogorku Kenesh (Kyrgyz Parliament). In effect, the new constitution institutionalizes a parliamentary democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

The future of the “parliamentary democracy” in the Kyrgyz republic is, however, uncertain. Many domestic and foreign political observers, especially those from the West, have hailed the reform. The interim government praised the parliamentary system as the “true government of the people,” which jibes with the Kyrgyz traditions.³¹ In one of her interviews, Roza Otunbayeva explained her position by stating that, “Our [Kyrgyz] nation was once formed out of 40 tribes. However, the presidential system has always led to authoritarian dominance by one clan. The people have driven their president out of the country twice for this very reason. Should this go on like this forever?”³²

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Yet, other political analysts and politicians inside and outside Kyrgyzstan have been apprehensive of these changes. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, for example, expressed his doubts about the viability of the parliamentary republic in Kyrgyzstan, which he regards as the formula for instability and clannish infighting.³³ The political prognosis of the former Kyrgyz President, Askar Akayev, issued in his commentary delivered from Moscow, resonates with the comments of the Russian President. Akayev is convinced that the parliamentary democracy in a country plagued by a systemic crisis is destined to bring further fragmentation and inevitable state failure in Kyrgyzstan. According to Akayev, Kyrgyzstan needs a strong leader to prevent the disintegration of the country and political and economic turmoil.³⁴

On 30 October 2011, Kyrgyzstan held its first presidential election based on the new Constitution. The former Prime Minister and a chairperson of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev, won the majority of votes claiming the Presidential seat. The shape and ideological underpinnings of the Kyrgyz democracy, as those are envisioned by President Atambayev are, yet, to be seen. The little that is known about the background of the new President – his degree in management and political posts in the areas of economy and finances - suggests that he, too, may be inclined toward building a developmental model of democracy with a strong state participation similar to the one designed in the neighboring Kazakhstan.

The “Uzbek Model” of Democracy

Compared to its neighbors, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which have permitted the greater social mobility, limited exercise of political freedoms, and media independence, Uzbekistan has effectively limited any real expressions of democracy and devolved into one of the most

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authoritarian states in the post-Soviet territory. The oppositional parties were disenfranchised in the early 1990s. The parliamentary oversight and independent judiciary have been jettisoned. Media censorship, which was officially banned in 2002, limits people’s access to unexpurgated information and hinders quality journalism. The pervasive security machinery established to guard the state against security threats and fight against religious extremism keeps a watchful eye over the population and effectively roots out any dissent. In 2005, the Uzbek government expelled many Western organizations, such as Freedom House, the BBC, the Eurasian Foundation, and IREX known for their advocacy and democracy promotion efforts. The activities of the remaining Western agencies, including USAID and Human Rights Watch were considerably restrained.³⁵

President Islam Karimov who has ruled Uzbekistan since 1989 has always borne some mistrust for democracy and its institutions. Viewing them as a threat to stability of his country and challenge to his personal political rule, he believed in the importance of placing all expressions of democracy under his own supervision and tight governmental control.³⁶ Notwithstanding the marked disregard for democracy in practice, President Karimov, too, has frequently and unabashedly vaunted about political accomplishments of his administration and democratic credentials of Uzbekistan.³⁷ The books and speeches of the President and his spokespersons contain some insights into the model of democracy envisioned by Islam Karimov for Uzbekistan.

Immediately following Uzbekistan’s independence in 1991, Karimov began publicizing the idea of the “Uzbek path” to development and democracy. It was defined by several principles, which were to guide Uzbekistan’s economic and political transition.³⁸ “State as the

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main agent of reforms” was declared as the main pillar of Uzbekistan’s post-Soviet transformation.³⁹ This principle accorded unquestionable preeminence to Presidential administration vis-à-vis other branches of state power or civil society in determining the direction and scope of socio-economic and political reforms. This principle also shaped the post-independence political culture of leadership in political parties and their relationship with the government and society, ultimately transforming political organizations into the instruments of the presidential rule. Etatism (from French, *état* state), which denotes the supremacy of state in directing the economy, determining the parameters of political and social life, maintaining public order, and enforcing traditional morality, has become the cornerstone of the framework for governance labeled as the “Uzbek model”.⁴⁰

Gradualism was declared as the second pillar of the “Uzbek path.” The Karimov government has taken a gradual path (dubbed as “sluggish” and “slow” by international financial institutions) to marketization of national economy by preserving state monopoly over strategically important economic sectors and granting the state considerable authority in regulating the market and distributing economic resources. It has also supported a gradual approach to reforms in the political realm, where the President has almost single-handedly determined the nature and extent of political transformations.

This gradual approach to democratization was defended on the grounds that democracy must be internally cultivated, and this processes “sometimes takes a very long time”.⁴¹ In the Central Asian region, President Karimov heralded the view that neither democracy nor open society was transposable from one country to another. He rejected the universality of democracy and insisted that a democratic system could not be enforced from the outside. While rejecting the

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idea of the thoughtless following “in the footsteps of the developed countries” alluding to their democratic trappings, President Karimov argued that his country would achieve the high quality of life and “democratic development” by staying committed to its “genuine national traditions”, “sacred faith”, and “other national values”.⁴² The “Uzbek model” of democracy, therefore, has embodied “the glorious values, aspirations and moral principles of [Uzbekistan’s] multi-national population,” according to President of Uzbekistan.⁴³ It was designed to follow “the national–historical way of life of the population, the style of thought, the folk traditions and customs,” declared the President in 1992.⁴⁴

It has been argued that some of the inherent traits of Uzbeks, such as tolerance, patience, compassion for less fortunate, and restraint have predisposed them toward a unique democratic setup.⁴⁵ Other qualities of the national character, such as respect for elders, collectivism, familial duties, communal forms of self-organization, and people-to-people diplomacy laid a firm foundation for the development of modern democratic practices such as the freedom of expression, the rule of majority, and equality of all people.⁴⁶

In addition to being portrayed as culturally sound, the “Uzbek model” has also been presented as sensitive to people’s needs, especially their demands for social welfare as well as public order and security of their state. Similarly to other Central Asian republics, the “Uzbek model” places development prior to democracy, while the national independence and security are prioritized above all. Struck by several incidents of politically motivated violence and threatened by the proximity of raging conflicts, the Uzbek government has developed legitimate concerns about security of the country. It asserted that the development of democracy could not occur in a politically unstable situation. Security, sovereignty, and independence were declared as the

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prerequisites for democratic regime. Karimov was once quoted saying, “I understand and accept constructive opposition in a democratic and *stable* state... Yet, how can we possibly talk about a serious opposition amid a *tortuous transition* to a market economy... in a *highly charged and strained situation* [emphasis added]”.⁴⁷ These views are shared by the Uzbek ruling elite and many ordinary people affected by the fear-mongering propaganda about the threat of radical Islamists.

In the late 1990s, President Karimov introduced a new slogan, “From the Strong State - To a Strong Civil Society,” which, in essence, signaled the devolution of state’s authority to various institutions of people’s self-governance. The new principle, however, has largely remained on paper. It did not entail political liberalization. Neither did it create opportunities for political participation or galvanize political activism.⁴⁸ Even the acclaimed efforts of the Uzbek government to devolve central power to local institutions, namely mahalla, praised as an epitome of the indigenous forms of self-governance and civil society, have resulted in contradictory outcomes. As a result of the decentralization reforms, mahalla, a neighborhood of between 2,000 and 10,000 residents united around a former collective farm, modern apartment complex, or a block of relatively spread-out family dwellings⁴⁹ has taken over the administration of critical state services, such as the collection of utility fees, local business development, among others. In addition, the mahalla administration has been tasked with the monitoring of religious and private practices and serving as the neighborhood watch against the enemies of the state.⁵⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, that mahalla, too, has been transformed into a conduit of state interests at the local level and agency of the grassroots authoritarianism.⁵¹

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

The 2000s have seen several new initiatives of the Karimov administration aimed at the modernization of the country, development of civil society, and support for democratic reforms. These programs, however, have not changed the essence of the “Uzbek model” of democracy and “Uzbek path” to democratization. As articulated by Karimov in his 2011 Presidential address, the essence and substance of the “Uzbek model” assumes the state as the main engine of reforms, which also ensures security, social discipline, preservation of culture, and citizens’ welfare. It declares the priority of economic development over political reforms and stresses the step-by-step gradual approach for preventing social turmoil.⁵²

Strategies of Ideological Resistance

How do authoritarian regimes defend their domestic reputation and insulate themselves from international criticisms? How do these governments legitimize their policies and enlist public support for their “models” of democracy and paths to democratization? The remainder of this chapter examines the main ideological arguments, rhetorical devices, and ideological assistance from abroad that allowed the Central Asian leadership to convince their people in the appropriateness, even inevitability, of the existing models of governance and glean legitimacy to their visions of the “democratic” rule.

First, it has been argued that the models of governance pivoting on the strong leadership were warranted by the exigencies of the period of transition from communism. All Central Asian leaders defended their rule on the grounds that consolidation of authority in the office of the President was necessary for resolving their states’ economic and political crises, overcoming resistance of the conservative parliaments, and pushing through reforms in the socio-economic and political realms. As President Karimov once explained, “I admit that there may be signs of

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

authoritarianism in my actions... But I can give only one explanation for this: at certain times in history ... a strong executive power is still required. This is necessary in order to prevent bloodshed and conflict... If you like, it is necessary to move toward that very same democracy”.⁵³

When the frenzy of the early post-independence years had settled down, the strong state was defended on the grounds that it was still necessary for preserving the hard-won stability and sustaining the pace of reforms. Any alternatives to the state control were framed as the recipes for an impending crisis. This argument has been reinforced by comparisons of domestic situations in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with tumultuous developments in the neighboring republics. In Uzbekistan, President Karimov has portrayed himself as the last bastion against Islamist insurgency and organized crime, and was quoted as saying that “it is better to have hundreds of arrested than thousands killed” to justify his human rights violations committed under the pretext of fighting terrorism.⁵⁴ Nursultan Nazarbayev, too, has presented his state as an exemplar of inter-ethnic harmony and a model of stability in the sea of violent conflict. Contrary to its Uzbek counterpart, the Kazakh government has linked its success in the provision of order and stability to its management of ethnic and religious diversity, creating a competitive economic environment, and integration into the global market.⁵⁵

In Kyrgyzstan, where the government has lacked any objective measures to back its claims of successful performance on either economic or political dimensions, President Bakiyev contended that the true measure of the state’s standing was the level of people’s happiness and “how they smile” in the streets.⁵⁶ The interim Kyrgyz government, which replaced the toppled President, had claimed its legitimacy by pointing to its role in preventing the carnage accompanying Bakiyev’s ouster and diverting the country from the authoritarian path back on to

Mariya Y. Omelicheva

Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

the road to democracy and free market capitalism. All in all, the leadership of all Central Asian republics has tried to solicit consent to their grip on power but presenting the state as the guarantor of order, stability, and economic progress. The lack of the state capable of exercising control has been linked to instability and crisis. The rapid democratization, which became associated with the state departure and the overall weakening of the state, has, therefore, become tantamount to political volatility and economic disaster.

The second strategy used by the Center Asian leaders to procure support for their rule has been to present their models of governance as highly effective. The Central Asian presidents like to draw stark comparisons between the near-collapse situation facing their states in the past and the propitious conditions of the present. Their speeches and statements are peppered with the tales of success and statistics of various accomplishments attained by their governments despite all odds. In his address to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Uzbekistan’s independence, President Karimov vividly demonstrated this approach. Using the graphic language portraying his country “on the verge of abyss” and “people in distress,” he tried to depict a grave and explosive situation prevailing in Uzbekistan in the early 1990s, but those troubled days were declared as bygone.⁵⁷ He, then, contrasted the “raw material-oriented economy” monopolized by the cotton production inherited from the Soviet past with the diversified structure of the contemporary national budget, which has grown, by different estimates of its economic growth, 2-4 times during 20 years of Uzbekistan’s independence. The fact that Uzbekistan’s economy continued to expand during the time of the international financial crisis, growing, on average, by 8.5 percent during 2008-2010 (measured by GDP growth rate) has been widely cited as the testament of the success of the “Uzbek path.”

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

As if the same speechwriter prepared Nazarbayev’s inaugural address delivered in 2011, the Kazakh President echoed his Uzbek counterpart by recalling the time when he delivered his first oath in 1991. “A completely different task was before us then”, remembered the Kazakh President. “We were left on the ruins of the collapsed superpower. We were, first of all, worried about how to feed the nation... to find the money to pay people their salaries and pensions on time.” He continued by acclaiming his people’s success in overcoming the economic collapse and not only creating an efficient economy integrated into the global market, but also successfully withstanding the challenges of the global financial crisis.⁵⁸

The leadership of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has argued persuasively that their governments have effectively delivered on the basic security and developmental agendas. These agendas, in turn, were connected to the demands of their people. In this way, the policies of the Kazakh and Uzbek governments have been framed as consistent with the citizens’ needs. Certainly, in practice, Uzbekistan has fared much worse in improving the quality of life and providing public welfare compared to its northern neighbor. The Uzbek government, nonetheless, has tried to concoct its success by pointing to drastic increases in state expenditures on the social security and claiming considerable improvements in living standards based on such indirect indicators as the decreased levels of child mortality and the overall increase in the life expectancy rates.⁵⁹ Even in the political realm, the Central Asian governments have countered the Western charges of the democratic “stalemate” in the region as misleading and the “democratic failure” verdict as simply wrong. They have defended their commitment to democracy by citing the numbers of non-governmental organizations and political parties and by pointing to a variety of formal institutions established in their states.

Mariya Y. Omelicheva

Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

The Central Asian leaders have been fully aware that in the absence of external validation their democratic proclamations would be utterly ineffective. The charges of free and fair elections would be dismissed as the democratic charade masking the deeply authoritarian nature of their regimes. All Central Asian governments, therefore, has tried to confer a veneer of legitimacy to their policies by ascertaining external validation to their actions and, by doing so, to reinforce the public perceptions of trust in the governments, in the long run.

Rarely does the Central Asian media circulate critical reports of international organizations. Instead, the news are typically replete with the handpicked quotes, staged interviews, and selected statements from foreign representatives and international donors to orchestrate the international recognition of the Central Asian governments’ success. Following every political event, such as a round of elections, a celebration of the national holiday, or the President’s announcement of a new political concept of some sort, the Uzbek media, for example, becomes inundated with the official interpretations of the political occasion accompanied by the commentaries from the neighboring republics, Russia, China, Turkey, Egypt, and other states. The Uzbek government does not rely, exclusively, on the appraisals and commendations from the friendly and like-minded nations, but makes sure to include congratulations from foreign representatives with stronger democratic credentials, such as the deputies of the European parliaments, bureaucrats from the European Commission, government functionaries from the European states, and representatives of the Western international organizations.

In addition to manipulating information in such as way as to create an image of the government, which policies enjoy widespread international support, the Nazarbayev

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

administration has also validated its policies by claiming a strong and improving international reputation. In 2010, Kazakhstan became the first post-Soviet and predominantly Muslim state to chair the OSCE. A year later, it assumed the chairmanship of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and hosted the Seventh Winter Asian Game and the World Islamic Economic Forum. These examples of Kazakhstan’s leadership in the international and regional affairs have been widely cited to demonstrate an increasing importance of the country on the world stage, an accomplishment credited to the intelligent rule of President Nazarbayev, and to claim international legitimacy for his cabinet.

Two other strategies used by the Central Asian governments to defend their models of “democracy” against the Western alternatives are the indigenization of the local practices and delegitimization of the Western expressions of democracy. The strategies of indigenization, which were briefly mentioned in the earlier discussion of the “models” of democracy, denote the Central Asian governments’ effort to frame their institutional frameworks as consistent with their countries’ contemporary and historical socio-political orders. The leadership of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, has linked the principles of modern political systems in their countries to cultural values and traditions of the nomadic societies of the past. The Uzbek government, too, has presented its “Uzbek model” of democracy in ethnic and national terms and even framed the “Uzbek path” as a manifestation of the national traditional forms of “democratic self-expression”.⁶⁰ Contrary to the Western commentators holding a view that neither Central Asian republic can flaunt a slight measure of democratic heritage, the Central Asian governments have passionately disputed these characterizations arguing, instead, that democratic principles have been inherent to “Asian” and nomadic cultures.

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

Simultaneously with the aggrandizement of the national “models” of democracy, the Central Asian leadership has attempted to downgrade the democratic practices of Western states. The use of force for an alleged purpose of democracy promotion in Operation Iraqi Freedom stained democracy promotion with a taint of militarism. The “color revolutions” in the former Soviet territory has triggered alarming anti-American sentiment in Central Asia, especially, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, where democracy promotion has been perceived as a normative disguise for a hidden political agenda, which aims at destabilizing and toppling the recalcitrant regimes. Anti-Americanism fueled on the pages of Central Asian press and television has given rise to anti-democratism. The publicized revelations of the European and American governments using democratic trumps in their bids for the corporate contracts have caused some resentment to Western democracy in Kazakhstan. In response to the US criticisms, the Uzbek government has accused the U.S. administration in an information ploy to dampen Uzbekistan’s international image. It lambasted the US administration with the recriminatory accusations in the violations of the freedoms of mass media and opinion by citing rejections of the American newspapers to publish opinion editorials of the Uzbek journalists.⁶¹

Lastly, political, economic, and other forms of assistance from the Russian and Chinese governments have been indispensable to the endurance of the Central Asian “models” of democracy and their resistance to the Western efforts at undermining them. The Russian and Chinese authorities have granted approval to political processes in Central Asian republics by consistently endorsing the results of their elections, which international observers criticized as rigged.⁶² Russia and China independently and through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

(SCO), has sided with the Central Asian regimes in their dealings with the dissidents, political protesters, and alleged security threats.

Not only have the Russian and Chinese authorities provided the Central Asian government with material and ideological support, their perspectives on strong leadership and strong state have inspired the Central Asian leaders’ conceptions of the proper forms of governance. The Russian and Chinese foreign policies toward Central Asian republics have served as the conduits for the transmission of norms and practices encouraging the authoritarian rule. The leadership of Central Asian states has been keen to adopt the Russian and Chinese ideas about security, sovereignty, and order providing a better fit with the interests of the Central Asian elites in strengthening the existing institutions, as opposed to the Western expectations of democratizing and weakening them. The contagious effects of the Russian model of “sovereign democracy,” which provided a functional ideological antidote to Western democratization, have been felt across Central Asia, not least because of the Kremlin’s access to the Central Asian media forums, which have been used for destroying the credibility of the Western democracy assistance and criticizing pro-Western governments and their reforms.⁶³ In addition to the Russian model, the Central Asian governments have sympathized with the models of development experienced by China and some states of East Asia. The Central Asian elites have been intrigued by the success of Asian “tigers,” which managed to achieve high economic growth without sinking in political chaos or being torn apart by social schisms.⁶⁴

Conclusion

What follows from the previous discussion is that the leadership of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan devised and actively disseminated their own rhetorical and ideological substratum of

Mariya Y. Omelicheva

Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

“democracy” presented under the guises of “presidential democracy” in Kazakhstan,

“consultative democracy” in Kyrgyzstan, and the “Uzbek model” of democracy in Uzbekistan.

Although the Central Asian alternatives to democracy have distinctive features, there are several characteristics that are shared by all of them. The strong state personified by a strong leader has become the crux of the Central Asian models of democracy, especially in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In Kyrgyzstan, this role has been envisioned for a narrow circle of political and business elite, typically championing the interests of their clans, together with the small clique of the president’s confidants. In the context of the turbulent transition from communism, all Central Asian governments chose to prioritize the goals of economic development over political liberalization. It has also been argued that demands for security and order had to be met before democratizing their states. Another common denominator of the Central Asian views on democracy is that they stress the principle of gradual political reforms and reject the idea of the universal forms and methods of democratization. Not only has the Western model of democracy been viewed as antithetic to the Central Asian political orders, it has also been perceived as dangerous for the region with a high potential for instability and conflict.

The Kazakh and Uzbek models, while both stressing the pivotal role of the state, evince important differences in the conception of its role. Kazakhstan has promoted a vision of the state as a manager, responsible for establishing and maintaining conditions favorable to economic growth. The “Uzbek model,” on the other hand, envisages a more paternalistic role for the state. The latter delivers social protection, furnishes moral order, and intervenes much deeper into the citizens’ private and social realms. If the Kazakh model gleans its popularity by encouraging people’s self-enrichment and economic activism attributed to the policies of Kazakhstan’s

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

President, the Uzbek model calls for unconditional support from the Uzbek people appealing to obedience and patience as the foundations of moral order established by the state.⁶⁵

The ethnic heritage features strongly in all Central Asian models. The ethno-national and historical content, however, is not determinative in the Kazakh model, which takes the modern indicators of efficiency as the benchmarks for progress. The “Uzbek model,” on the other hand, is stuck on the ethnic path. Not only does it rely more extensively on the essentialized ethnic and national ideas as the springboard for the vaguely defined progress, it also appeals to the traditional forms of social organization as a means of controlling the population.⁶⁶ The “Uzbek model” encourages loyalty to authority and paternalism in public relations coupled with social obligation and collective demands that supersede individual self-interest.

Of the three conceptions of democracy, the Kyrgyz “model” has been the least durable and least articulated. This can be attributed to frequent changes in the governing administration as well as to the weaknesses of the state in Kyrgyzstan, which compelled its government to play up to competing foreign and domestic interests. However, it is not only the lack of power resources that undermined the effectiveness of the Kyrgyz ideological “models.” The inability of the Kyrgyz leaders to shape political debate in Kyrgyzstan has also affected their domestic political standing. In other words, the lack of a convincing ideological “model” of democracy has undercut the Kyrgyz leaders’ ability to rule. It has been argued that the survivability of the soft authoritarian regime hinges on the means of persuasion more so than the means of coercion.⁶⁷ Neither Akayev nor Bakiyev had been able to effectively shape and frame their political agendas triggering uncertainties about their own legitimacy as well as concern about their ability to rule.⁶⁸

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

To convince the domestic and foreign audiences in the appropriateness of the devised models of governance, all Central Asian states defended their “paths” to democracy by the unique circumstances of post-Soviet transition and appeals to the people’s needs. Presenting their regimes as effective in economic growth and security provision has also been a functional way of legitimizing their governance. The Central Asian government has relied on the strategies of indigenization of their models by presenting them as compatible with their nation’s historical trajectories and political culture and de-legitimizing the Western conceptions of democracy and efforts at international democratization. Furthermore, the Central Asian authorities have been able to benefit from the “ideological cushion” provided by other like-minded states, such as Russia and China, which offered support for the Central Asian regimes.

Importantly, the Kazakh and Uzbek “models” resonate strongly with these countries’ populations. The field research, focus groups, and surveys performed by the author in these republics revealed that most of the elements of the Central Asian “models” of development – the importance of strong leadership and cultural compatibility combined with the low enthusiasm for democratization and higher support for economic reforms – find support in the population. “Democracy” and “freedom” in their traditional meaning have not become the key values for the regimes’ opposition, where it exists. Some of the opponents to the Kyrgyz and Kazakh governments have openly rejected the goal of democratization.⁶⁹

What are the implications of the discussed ideological models for the prospects of real democracy in Central Asia? Unfortunately, the Central Asian governments’ efforts at adjusting democracy to their national contexts did not result in the creation of the national ways of practicing and promoting a democratic regime. On the contrary, what has been presented as the

Mariya Y. Omelicheva

Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek models of democracy has become epiphenomenal to the strategies of denying democratization.⁷⁰ One Russian political scientist observed, “the transformations of political regimes [in Central Asia] did not lead to the expected modernization of their political systems, but resulted in the restoration of pre-modern and archaic political forms”.⁷¹ By revitalizing certain national and historical traditions, such as the strong leadership and paternalistic state, the Central Asian models have embraced those aspects of their political culture, which have been deemed as the key obstacles to meaningful democratization.⁷²

There are several reasons for studying and paying close attention to the ideological arguments of the Central Asian leaders. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan’s leadership, the views of other Central Asian leaders enjoy sweeping support in the population, not least because of the near monopoly of their governments in the informational medium and effective utilization of the techniques of persuasion. The popularity of the Kazakh “model” in Kazakhstan and deference to the Uzbek “models” in Uzbekistan demonstrates how ideological rationalization can be used as an effective method of both the “soft” and “hard” authoritarian rule. At the international level, ideological persuasion by the authoritarian governments erects a new wall of ideological resistance to international democratization and needs to be taken into consideration if one hopes to enhance the effectiveness of the democracy assistance abroad.

Since the survival of authoritarian governments is, to a certain extent, about ideology and its presentation to the population, it should be responded at this level as well. Some of the same rhetorical and ideological strategies, which buttress the regime’s legitimacy and ability to rule, can be used for increasing the popularity of the Western ideas about democracy and support for international democratization. The Western democracy assistance programs should give more

Mariya Y. Omelicheva

Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

consideration to a wider range of social, cultural, historical, and political factors in the region, and assess its developments through a more locally-focused lens. Certain aspect of good governance, such as administrative and legal accountability, can be found in the Central Asian historical and political traditions.⁷³ A democracy promotion initiative that builds on such a historical link will be perceived as more culturally compatible and credible than other appeals that are not embedded in these countries’ cultural contexts. Overall, considerably more efforts should be channeled toward the direct work with the population with the goal of contributing to people’s attitudinal change, which is the only way to break through the democratic deadlock in the region.

By rooting democratization efforts in the solid prior knowledge of the historical and cultural context of democratizing societies and their socio-economic and political situation can also increase credibility of the agents of democratization. The latter’s authority cannot be earned if too much emphasis is placed on differences between the West and Central Asia, as well as the incompatibility of Western individualist culture with the Asian cultural ethos that honor collectivism. Furthermore, to increase the credibility of democracy promotion efforts, they need to be re-legitimized by dissociating democracy promotion from the military intervention or promotion of strategic interests, and decontaminating them from the negative taint caused by the defiance of international laws and human rights violations during the period of the Bush administration. Lastly, instead of dismissing and trivializing the arguments of the Central Asian governments about their “models” of democracy and democratic progress, the Western agencies need to engage in the open discussion and dialogue about those accomplishments and strategies and call for the expansion of critical coverage of these issues by broadcasting organizations.

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

Endnotes

¹ Friedman 1999; Fukuyama 1989

² Silitski 2010

³ Nazarbayev 2011

⁴ Nazarbayev 1998, 87

⁵ Nazarbayev 2008, 8

⁶ Nazarbayev 2008, xi

⁷ Aitken 2009, 202

⁸ Nazarbayev 1997

⁹ Nazarbayev 2008, 83

¹⁰ Nazarbayev 2008, 2011

¹¹ Nazarbayev 1997

¹² Nazarbayev 1998, 96

¹³ Balgimbayev 2006

¹⁴ Nazarbaev 1998, 96

¹⁵ Nazarbayev 1998, 106

¹⁶ Following the presidential election in 2011, Kazakhstan’s ambassador in Washington sent a letter to the editor to *The Washington Post*, in which he harshly criticized American analysts’ efforts to portray Kazakhstan’s democracy as a fictional one (see, Idrissov 2011)

¹⁷ Aitken 2009, 202

¹⁸ Nazarbaev 1998, 106

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International
Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former
Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-
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¹⁹ Juraev 2008

²⁰ Quoted in Abdulatipov 2001

²¹ Tretjakov 2004

²² Zheenbaev and Togusakov 2004

²³ Juraev 2008, 258

²⁴ Bogatyrev 2003

²⁵ Zheenbaev and Togusakov 2004

²⁶ International Crisis Group 2008

²⁷ As cited in Nichol 2007, 3-4

²⁸ Bakiyev 2006

²⁹ Nikolayev 2010

³⁰ Agnin 2010; Rogers 2010

³¹ Bidder 2010

³² Ibid

³³ As cited in Bidder 2010

³⁴ Akayev 2010

³⁵ Spechler 2007

³⁶ Rabbimov 2007

³⁷ See, for example, Karimov 2011a, 2011b

³⁸ Karimov 1993

³⁹ Tolipov 2000, 13

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International
Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former
Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-
104.

⁴⁰ Rabbimov 2007

⁴¹ Karimov 1992 as cited in Tookson 2001, 36

⁴² Tolipov 2000, 12

⁴³ Spechler and Spechler 2010, 163

⁴⁴ Karimov 1992, 10

⁴⁵ Tookson 2001, 36

⁴⁶ Karimov 1992

⁴⁷ As cited in Tookson 2001, 37

⁴⁸ Rabbimov 2007

⁴⁹ Sievers 2002, 96

⁵⁰ Noori 2006

⁵¹ Sievers 2002, 152

⁵² Karimov 2011a

⁵³ Borisov 2005

⁵⁴ Matveeva 2009, 1109

⁵⁵ Nazarbayev 2008

⁵⁶ Karimov, D. 2009

⁵⁷ Karimov 2011b

⁵⁸ Nazarbayev 2011

⁵⁹ Karimov 2011b

⁶⁰ Balgimbayev 2006

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

⁶¹ Overall, the Uzbek government has learned to use statistics to its advantage. The Uzbek authorities, for example, like to cite the US-based public opinion polls showing the low support for democracy as the best form of government in the American population. The Uzbek government has bragged about the abolishment of death penalty and low per capita rate of incarceration compared to many other Western states (see Karimov 2011a; Kim 2005).

⁶² Silitski 2010, 347-348

⁶³ Russia’s monopoly position as a supplier of natural resources and military presence in several post-Soviet states gives it considerable leverage for influence and control in those nations (see, Silitski 340; see also Ambrosio 2008; Jackson 2010; Kavalski 2010)

⁶⁴ Nazarbayev 2003

⁶⁵ Adams and Rustermoveva 2009, 1250

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Schatz 2009, 203

⁶⁸ Ibid, 218

⁶⁹ This is one of the conclusions reached at a round-table held at the Institute for Public Policy, a reputable think-tank in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (Institute for Public Policy 2008).

⁷⁰ Tolipov 2007

⁷¹ Borisov 2005

⁷² Tolipov 2007

⁷³ Warkotsch 2008, 69

Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Central Asian Conceptions of “Democracy”: Ideological Resistance to International Democratization, in *The International Dimensions of Authoritarian Persistence in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Rachel Vanderhill and Michael E. Aleprete Jr., Lexington Press, 2013, 81-104.

I learned a lot from reading this chapter. I especially found value in the description of regime values/approaches from the perspective of those who are living these philosophies/ideologies. Also, the conclusions are very helpful—pointing to the need to understand, not dismiss, the cultural anchors of political ideology. jn