



Anja Mihr  
Paolo Sorbello  
Brigitte Weiffen *Editors*

# Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia

Transformation and Development  
in the OSCE Region

osce ACADEMY  
in Bishkek

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Editors

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# Preface

The mutually reinforcing effect of security and democracy has had to undergo a stress test several times between 2021 and 2022. This anthology highlights some of the conflict areas that have penetrated security and securitization within the OSCE region. Against this backdrop this compilation of chapters aims to illustrate cases and activities of proactive engagement from the Balkans to Central Asia and across the OSCE region.

This year's volume is divided into three parts. Part I presents chapters on securitization consolidation or de-consolidation of political regimes in general; in Part II this year's editors present a special section on China's Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative and its impact on regime change, democracy and development throughout the Eurasian continent; and in Part III the reader finds further research topics with respect to the OSCE region.

The chapters in Part I illustrate how OSCE's informal approach to peace, security, and securitization as norm entrepreneur is closely linked to the level of democracy within and among its member states. The higher the level and quality of democratic performance, the less likely the security of countries and safety of people and of territorial integrity are to be at stake.

This is the third annual edition of the OSCE Academy compilation series on Transformation and Development in the OSCE Region highlights research on processes of political, economic, and regional transformation spanning from global to local perspectives across the continent.

## The Different Parts of the Book

Security threats to the democratization process have affected most countries across the OSCE region, in particular in Central Europe and Central Asia. By analysing some of the common threads of securitization and the challenges they currently pose, the chapters in the first part of the book help paint a picture of the main nodes of interplay between diplomacy and governance.

This volume is structured as an inverted pyramid, zooming in from the general to the specific, focusing on cases and situations in OSCE participating States, and concluding with short chapters meant to tease out future research. This structure helps articulate local issues within larger frameworks and gives space to local contingencies that lie outside the norm.

Starting from this general perspective, Chapter “[Inter-State Diplomacy Within the OSCE Permanent Council](#)”, by Daniel Schade, highlights the importance of institutional interaction within the OSCE and how this affects the ability of its different bodies to speak with one voice towards the outside world. Schade’s original analysis of the Permanent Council allows for a reading of the system of alliances and the ongoing debates among member states within the OSCE institutional system. In Chapter “[Development Aid and the Democratic Process in the OSCE Region](#)”, Mario Ghioldi presents a data-heavy qualitative analysis of the impact of development aid on democratization, prosperity, and corruption in the OSCE region. Importantly, he sets off by outlining the “silent revolution” in international cooperation, which sees different and non-traditional actors as new potential sources of aid. By providing a historical picture of development aid and contrasting it with the goals of the OSCE of improving democratization and economic growth and combating corruption, Ghioldi argues that most recipient countries financed by emerging donors score low in terms of the concerns of democratization.

By dynamically focusing on two different regional integration processes, Ana-Maria Anghelescu and Svetlana Dzardanova provide a thorough overview of the role of the OSCE in the development of Eurasian integration in Chapter “[The OSCE ODIHR and Regional Organisations as Norm Entrepreneurs: The Case of Post-pandemic Kyrgyzstan](#)”. The authors focus on the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the organization’s role as “norm entrepreneur” in post-pandemic Kyrgyzstan. Anghelescu and Dzardanova argue that, despite its efforts, the Kyrgyz government has aligned more substantially with the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization than with the OSCE.

Looking from within the Eurasian integration process, Saniya Malikbayeva and Gabit Gabdullin analyse anti-Eurasian sentiments in Kazakhstan in Chapter “[The Rise of Anti-Eurasian Sentiment in Kazakhstan](#)”. Their survey analysis and study of media platforms is useful in intercepting trends of rampant nationalist, anti-Russian, and anti-Chinese sentiments. Importantly, the authors highlight how regional differences within Kazakhstan are strongly correlated with dissenting views.

The COVID-19 pandemic has played a major role in shaping the development of securitization and democratization policies in some countries, especially with respect to processes of regional integration, as highlighted in Chapters “[The OSCE ODIHR and Regional Organisations as Norm Entrepreneurs: The Case of Post-pandemic Kyrgyzstan](#)” and “[The Rise of Anti-Eurasian Sentiment in Kazakhstan](#)”. These chapters are followed by Chapter “[Development Aid in Central Asia: A “Chessboard” for Great Powers?](#)”, in which Nargiza Kilichova delves into the role of external actors in Central Asia, especially as it concerns development aid. Kilichova’s focus on the geopolitical implication of aid represents a useful tool of analysis and her ability to

briefly outline the concrete efforts made in development assistance by different actors helps to put in perspective the different rationales that catalyse such commitments.

Elena Zhirukina's initial analysis of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban's takeover in 2021 represents a timely study that arguably foreshadows a shift in Russia's foreign policy towards Central Asia and Afghanistan. In Chapter "[Central Asia's Security Provider and Peacekeeper? Assessing Russia's Role After the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Beyond](#)", Zhirukina focuses specifically on the role of bilateral and multilateral security institution-building by Russia and offers a topical look into the response of the Collective Security Treaty Organization to the crisis in Kazakhstan in early 2022.

The volume's focus then briefly shifts to the Western Balkans, with Eni Lamçe's Chapter "[Securitizing and De-securitizing Actors of the OSCE: The Case of the Western Balkan Region](#)" on securitization and de-securitization as mediated by the OSCE in the region. Importantly, Lamçe compares and scrutinizes the differences between securitization efforts in the Western Balkans and in Southeast Europe, as well as providing a detailed analysis of the OSCE's de-securitization efforts in the human dimension. As a counter, Noela Mahmutaj offers different, a perspective of Russia's policy in the Western Balkans and how it has changed over time in Chapter "[Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans](#)". Mahmutaj's historical and geopolitical analysis of the role of various great powers and international organizations in the Western Balkans helps to provide a clearer picture of the latest developments in the region. In Chapter "[Social Security of States with Limited Recognition: A Case Study of the Republic of Kosovo](#)", Paulina Szelag provides a detailed analysis of social security policies in Kosovo which highlight a neoliberal shift in the country and could provide a framework for further research in states with limited recognition. In addition, Szelag also highlights the role of international organizations, from the United Nations to the OSCE, in helping Kosovo's engagement with the international community.

In the chapters which follow this, the volume turns to the South Caucasus with Aydin's piece on new opportunities for cooperation among the three post-Soviet countries of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Aydin places a strong emphasis on trade and its potential role in building mutually beneficial ties across the South Caucasus region in Chapter "[Peacebuilding in the OSCE Region: An Analysis of the Juxtaposition Between the Conflict Prevention Centre with the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund](#)". In the following chapter, Claudia Ditel provides an in-depth analysis of the role of women in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through its various iterations. Ditel focuses in particular on male-dominated militarism, bringing examples of the consequences of wars for internally displaced people and the role of small arms and light weapons as fundamental pillars of patriarchal traditions of militarism.

Part I of the volume on the OSCE Region's security architecture concludes with four chapters on various issues concerning Central Asia. Chapter "[Gender Equality, Women's Rights and Neo-traditionalism: The Case of Kyrgyzstan](#)", by Asylai Akisheva, and Chapter "[Ending Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan: Reflections on the Spotlight Initiative](#)", by Aliia Maralbaeva and Chiara Pierobon, both focus on legislative initiatives aimed at fostering gender equality and ending gender-based

violence. Akisheva's chapter starts from a watershed referendum called in 2021 to amend the Kyrgyz Constitution and its effects on the concepts and practices of gender equality in the country. This referendum was viewed with much concern by the OSCE and Akisheva argues that the "neo-traditionalist" stance of the new Constitution could clash with the objectives of fostering women's rights and gender equality. Maralbaeva and Pierobon reflect on the Spotlight Initiative, a project sponsored by the European Union and the United Nations aimed at eliminating gender-based violence. In their article, the authors highlight the case of Kyrgyzstan, focusing on the legislative framework, concrete cases of domestic violence, and the role of non-state actors.

In Chapter "[From Social Media to Social Change: Online Platforms' Impact on Kazakhstan's Feminist and Civil Activisms](#)", Anaita Azizi provides a deep dive into social transformations in Kazakhstan and how these are affected by civil and feminist activism. In her chapter, the author uses inductive and deductive methods to analyse the impact of online social media platforms as instruments of activism. Azizi's survey of activists sheds light on the reflections of old and emergent movements in Kazakhstan up to the uprisings in January 2022. Remaining focused on the Central Asian region, Chapter "[The Role of Teahouses in Central Asia: A Case Study of the Ferghana Valley](#)" by Ryan Schweitzer presents an ethnographic study of teahouses in Central Asia's Ferghana Valley, which sits at the crossroads between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The chapter is a product of Schweitzer's fieldwork in the region, aimed at analysing the role of teahouses as an integral component of Central Asia's civil society. By focusing on a somewhat parallel institutional network, both beyond and under government oversight, the author conveys an insightful portrait of social spaces in Central Asia.

Part II of this anthology presents the Special Section on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its impact on political regimes in Eurasia. In it, the different authors highlight the effects that the BRI has had on countries and societies located on the Eurasian continent between China and Europe (see the Chapter "[China's Belt and Road Initiative: Curse or Blessing for Democracy in Eurasia?](#)", Introduction to the Special Section, by Mihr and Weiffen). This section features chapters explicitly aimed at assessing the political implication of Chinese development and structural investment programmes across Eurasia. They illustrate how structural and economic development impacts political systems and regime change and, hence, overlaps or, in some cases, contradicts OSCE informal measures to uphold human rights and democracy. This is a valuable addition to this anthology which complements the main section on Securitization and Democracy.

Inclusion of this special section would not have been possible without the support and joint efforts of all three editors of this year's edition; however, special thanks must go to our guest editor, Brigitte Weiffen, Chair of Research Committee 34 on Quality of Democracy for the IPSA.

This volume concludes with Part III, two shorter chapters aimed at sparking academic debates and future research. In Chapter "[Balkanization Instead of Eurasianism: Fragmented Technological Governance Across the OSCE Domain and Its Implications](#)", Tobias Burgers proposes the term "Balkanization" to define the way in which technological governance has become fragmented in the OSCE



region. Erman Akilli, in Chapter “[Exploring Heritage Diplomacy: The Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\) an the Western Balkans](#)”, explores the possibility of using heritage diplomacy as a tool for conflict resolution, especially in the context of the Western Balkans and in connection with the BRI.

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**Part I**  
**Security Architecture in Eurasia**



# Chapter 1

## Inter-State Diplomacy Within the OSCE Permanent Council



Daniel Schade

### 1.1 Introduction

With its 57 participating states represented on site at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna, the OSCE is a microcosm of international diplomatic activity between countries stretching from the Euro-Atlantic area to Central Asia. Given its focus on issues such as security, democracy, and human rights, its participating states ultimately interact on a broad range of political issues on a regular basis. The organization's activity across its different so-called dimensions is usually carried out by its component bodies such as its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) which is responsible for election monitoring, or its High Commissioner on National Minorities which handles (potential) ethnic tensions in OSCE participating states. However, the management of the organization's activities at large ultimately resides within a particular political body, its Permanent Council (PC). Here, representatives of all participating states regularly meet and make essential decisions for the functioning of the OSCE as a whole. Beyond its decision-making role, the Permanent Council, which meets on the premises of the organization's headquarters in Vienna, also serves as a forum for debates between participating states on ongoing political issues affecting them. In essence, the Permanent Council can be considered the "hub of the OSCE" (Stefan-Bastl, 2003).

This chapter outlines the role(s) and modes of operation of inter-state diplomacy within the OSCE Permanent Council. It argues that the state of political relations between OSCE participating states exhibited within the Permanent Council can contribute to our understanding of political tensions in the OSCE's geographical space, ranging from Canada and the United States in the West, across Europe and Turkey, to Central Asia and Mongolia in the East.

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To assess the inter-state diplomacy of its participating states, it also helps to identify factors which facilitate or hinder the functioning of the organization at large, and particularly its capacity to positively intervene in conflicts in the wider OSCE space. The chapter focuses, in particular, on the alliance patterns which become apparent in the Permanent Council. These can usually be observed through the presentation of joint statements, reinforcement of one another's contributions, or collective shaping of individual aspects of the meeting agendas. A particular focus in this analysis lies on the unique behaviour of European Union (EU) member states and like-minded countries in the Permanent Council, which often effectively operate as one entity rather than dozens of individual participating states. Such behaviour is then also considered with regard to other countries' participation in Permanent Council meetings and compared to the behaviour of the large EU-bloc present within it. Lastly, the chapter utilizes a case study on the Russia-Ukraine conflict prior to Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 to outline how the ultimately political nature of this body affects the OSCE's ability to mediate conflicts.

Beyond such insights into alliance behaviour, a focus on the role of the OSCE's Permanent Council is also relevant in its own right. While considerable scholarly attention has been paid to many of the OSCE's institutions, such as its Secretariat and the role of its Secretary General (Knill et al., 2016), the rotating Chairmanship-in-Office (Kemp, 2009; Raunig & Peer, 2019; Vandewoude, 2011), and its Parliamentary Assembly (Chepurina, 2017; Cutler, 2006; Gawrich, 2017; Habegger, 2006, 2010; Lipps, 2021), specific work on the Permanent Council is almost non-existent (absent the early exception of Stefan-Bastl, 2003). While countries' behaviour within the Permanent Council is sometimes featured in the margins of research outlining countries' stances within the OSCE at large (see, for instance, Janeliūnas, 2013 or Šimáková, 2016), there has been little consideration of the institution in and of itself, and even less on the behaviour of OSCE participating states within it.

The analysis in the chapter is based on the agendas and minutes of OSCE Permanent Council meetings which are publicly and electronically recorded as per the OSCE's rules of procedure (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2006). These include not only the actual subjects which were discussed, but also a list of statements given by individual participating states and others. While the available data does not include the transcripts of statements as a matter of principle, the text of individual statements is still available separately in many cases.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. It first outlines the role which the Permanent Council plays for the OSCE at large, as well as describing how diplomatic interaction occurs within it. The chapter then moves on to describe and illustrate regular and key alliance patterns present within the Permanent Council, focusing on the most prevalent alliance, that of European Union member states and their regular partners. It then discusses the insights that can be drawn from these patterns for the functioning of the wider OSCE, as well as the overall political ties between different groups of countries using recent examples of key conflicts between OSCE participating states as examples, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, in particular.

## 1.2 The OSCE Permanent Council

Summits of the heads of state and governments of the OSCE's participating states technically form the organization's highest decision-making body, and were initially meant to be held every two years (Zellner, 2011). However, only seven have been held over the course of the long history of the OSCE and its predecessor, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). These are also usually reserved for the introduction of wide-ranging changes to the functioning of the entire organization in accordance with changing international circumstances, though this has only seen mixed success depending on the summit at hand (Zellner, 2011). Given the difficulties encountered at its last meeting in Astana in 2010, future such meetings now appear ever less likely (Zagorski, 2011). This leaves the annual Ministerial Councils held in the country of the rotating Chairmanship-in-Office as the *de facto* highest political authority of the institution.

However, the infrequent nature of these meetings means that the most regular and meaningful political interaction among participating states ultimately occurs within the organization's Permanent Council. According to the OSCE's rules of procedure, the "Permanent Council (PC) is the principal decision-making body for regular political consultations and for governing the day-to-day operational work of the Organization between meetings of the Ministerial Council" (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2006). As such, it serves a number of decision-making and consultation roles among OSCE participating states (Stefan-Bastl, 2003).

The Permanent Council is composed of the OSCE participating states' permanent representatives and diplomats to the OSCE. As these are usually based in Vienna, the Permanent Council is thus composed of a group of diplomats who operate in the same work environment and interact with one another on a very regular basis. Under normal circumstances, Permanent Council meetings take place once per week (with the exceptions of winter and summer holiday seasons), and sometimes even more often. This body thus provides for frequent and structured diplomatic contact between the OSCE's participating states through and beyond its formal decision-making role for the OSCE itself. While state representatives are the Permanent Council's core participants, its role and function also means that there are regularly scheduled appearances of various other OSCE representatives within this body. These include the OSCE's General Secretary, OSCE mission heads or special representatives, and other invited guests. Occasionally, this also includes diplomats from the eleven OSCE Partnership for Co-operation countries, who are allowed to participate in OSCE Permanent Council meetings without voting rights.

The Permanent Council's core task is to make operational decisions for the OSCE by consensus. Nonetheless, most of its meetings are devoted to wider political discussions between representatives of OSCE participating states as the body is also meant to serve as a forum for political consultations. Building on the Permanent Council's structured agenda items, participating states use the weekly meetings to debate issues either relevant for the entirety of the organization and its membership or concerning specific developments in individual countries.

The agenda is ultimately managed by the representative of the country holding the OSCE's rotating Chairmanship-in-Office, but the discussion of specific topics can be requested by any regular attendee at Permanent Council meetings. While some issues appear on the agenda quite regularly based on specific anniversaries relevant for the organization's history, relevant historic events in the wider European area, or regular reports of other OSCE bodies, other ongoing issues are also put on the Permanent Council's agenda by countries affected by them. This can lead to individual issues appearing on the same agenda multiple times but under distinct headings proposed by specific participating states. This typically occurs when there is a conflict or when there are significant political differences on an issue between participating states as each side might then suggest an agenda item that suits their interpretation of the issue at hand.

Debates then proceed with individual countries making statements in turn, usually beginning with the country which proposed the agenda item in question. The format of the proceedings also liberally allows for repeat interventions on the same topic (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2006). It is also permissible for countries not to intervene at all, as there is no obligation to partake in debates or respond to political statements directly targeted at individual countries. Similarly, while Permanent Council decisions are made based on the consensus principle, in theory necessitating that all 57 participating states agree, some degree of dissent can be voiced by interpretative statements attached to OSCE decisions. Much like for the discussions on other Permanent Council issues, interpretative statements are then often political in nature.

While participating states usually intervene individually in Permanent Council meetings, it is also permissible—and indeed relatively frequent—for groups of countries to give joint statements, where only one of the countries in question will participate in the debate, but clearly indicate that this contribution is also made “on behalf” of others. This occurs in cases when the views of specific groups of participating states are closely aligned.

Aside from these often changing and rather ad hoc possibilities for countries to speak as a group, there is also a much more regular and organized version of this system at play for OSCE participating states who are simultaneously members of the EU. These have, for a long period of time, resorted to making collective statements given by the rotating chairmanship of the EU. A representative of the EU's own bureaucracy, the European Commission (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2006), is also entitled to participate in and speak at OSCE Permanent Council meetings since EU member states have given up their domestic powers to the EU in some of the issue areas debated at the OSCE. This is not how the EU operates at the OSCE in practice, however. Since the EU changed the functioning of its foreign policy system under the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, there now is a dedicated EU permanent representative to the OSCE who makes collective statements for the EU (its member states and the European Commission) in practice. However, this is not formally recognized by the OSCE, as it is almost impossible to reform the existing rules of procedure. This is due to widely diverging political views on even the (future) legal status of the OSCE (Börzel & Peters, 2019), which would necessarily affect any attempts to formally modify its current mode of operation.

Much like participating states can decide to give joint statements under the “on behalf” system outlined above, some participating states also choose to do so when the EU makes statements of its own. While the EU then technically also gives these statements “on behalf” of these countries, this is described as countries being “in alignment” with the EU’s position, and thus recorded separately in OSCE Permanent Council minutes. In practice, however, this further increases the number of countries signing on to individual EU statements, much like for countries giving statements “on behalf” of others. Both the “on behalf” and alignment system can also be used for interpretative statements to substantive decisions made in the OSCE Permanent Council.

Through the setting of competing agendas and the giving of joint statements, it is thus possible for OSCE participating states to indicate the proximity of their views via actions in the OSCE Permanent Council and thereby ultimately exhibit alliance behaviour within it.

### 1.3 Regular Alliance Patterns in the OSCE Permanent Council

The different kinds of potential alliance behaviour outlined above regularly occur in the OSCE’s Permanent Council setting, with the EU being at the centre of such developments. A consideration of these helps to understand the political dynamics of the Permanent Council in practice and ultimately casts some doubt on whether it can really be considered a forum for debate among the 57 individual participating states.

The most frequent kind of alliance behaviour observed in OSCE Permanent Council settings is the EU’s collective activity within this body. In recent years, collective EU statements have been the norm rather than the exception at almost all Permanent Council meetings. For almost any agenda item, it is possible to find a collective statement given by the European Union’s representative, and it is common practice for the EU, rather than its individual members to collectively suggest agenda items. This, in consequence, also means that the 27 OSCE participating states who are also simultaneously members of the European Union are very infrequent individual participants in OSCE Permanent Council meetings. While the EU has attempted to act as one within the OSCE for a long period of time (van Ham, 2009), this has become even more pronounced since 2009 when the European Union altered its functioning under the Treaty of Lisbon to further centralize its foreign policy behaviour. This has been described as its “single voice mantra” (Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014; Macaj & Nicolaïdis, 2014) for its foreign policy as a whole, but is particularly developed in the OSCE setting. What is especially remarkable about this is that this mode of functioning relies on EU member countries to prepare statements under a similar consensus principle as applies to the OSCE at large. All collective EU statements on topics ranging from the situation in the Donbas region to congratulating the

new OSCE Secretary General have therefore been prepared and agreed upon by the EU's representative and those of its 27 member states ahead of Permanent Council sessions.

This is not to say that OSCE participating states who are simultaneously members of the EU have entirely given up on being active participants at Permanent Council meetings. Indeed, countries occasionally still make statements on their own, though often under specific circumstances. Firstly, the necessity for the EU to come to a prior agreement on all statements given by it makes it a very inflexible participant in ongoing debates. It is thus often individual EU member states who then need to intervene when a response is necessary to a statement given by another OSCE participating state which concerns the EU. Similarly, some EU member states such as France or Germany are individually part of the OSCE's so-called Minsk group meant to mediate in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or the so-called Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine. These tasks require specific EU countries to regularly report back to the Permanent Council, and thus necessitates them to act individually.

The alliance pattern observed here does not end with the EU's 27 member states however. In addition to the coordination of collective EU statements, every effort is also made to have other countries align with the EU's position on a regular basis. This is successful to some degree for almost all EU statements, and effectively extends the EU's collective voice further, often leading to situations where an EU statement represents the majority of OSCE participating states overall. The countries usually making use of this offer often do so given their special relationship to the EU itself. For instance, Iceland is tied very closely to the EU economically through its membership in the European Economic Area (EEA) and is one of the countries which aligns very frequently with the EU's statements. What's more, other countries that regularly align with the EU's position in the Permanent Council are at various stages of attempting to join the EU itself, such as Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Albania. For these countries, this can represent actual alignment with the EU's position, their desire to signal wanting to move closer to the EU ahead of their potential membership, or even them fulfilling a soft legal demand by the EU to gradually align their foreign policy with that of the EU as their EU accession process progresses (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2021). In any case where a country which has such a special relationship to the EU aligns with the EU's position, then the actual statement will not just record the country's name, but also the kind of special ties that the country has to the EU itself, such as it being a candidate for membership.

Whereas it is thus the norm for EU positions to be held in the name of more countries than its actual membership, it is also important to point out countries which one would expect to regularly align with the EU's position, but ultimately do not. Two clear outliers in this regard are the United Kingdom and Switzerland. While the latter is tied to the EU almost as closely as Iceland through its bilateral agreements, the former was part of the European Union until 2020. In the case of Switzerland, this can likely be explained by the country's desire to act independently in line with its history of neutrality. The British case, on the other hand, is ultimately tied to the country's withdrawal process from the EU and wanting to reassert its independence.

There are also some countries such as Serbia and Norway which sometimes align with the EU's position but do not do so as frequently as, say, Montenegro. Norway tends to hold independent statements on issues relating to democracy, human rights, or the freedom of the media, while aligning with the EU's view in other cases. Serbia, on the other hand, is a candidate for EU membership, yet still decides not to participate in EU statements relatively frequently. Ultimately, this is likely down to long-standing diverging views on some foreign policy issues compared to the EU mainstream which cannot be bridged quite as easily. Lastly, while one would also expect that countries like the United States or Canada would share the EU's views in many instances, these also opt to stay almost entirely away from aligning with the EU's position to present an independent voice in the organization.

The kind of alliance behaviour exhibited by the EU through its collective statements is by far the most common occurrence of such behaviour at the OSCE and signals the existence of a relatively coherent political group present within it. That is not to say that other participating states do not make use of their ability to present collective statements under the "on behalf" system. However, this happens much more rarely, and typically does not come anywhere close to the number of countries involved in EU collective statements. Whereas the range of topics covered by EU collective statements is almost exhaustive, other cases of collective statement furthermore often apply to relatively ceremonial statements. For instance, every year, on the anniversary of the end of World War II, many countries who were formerly part of the Soviet Union tend to present a collective statement. In 2019, such a statement was given by Kyrgyzstan on behalf of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (OSCE Permanent Council, 2019a). In 2021, a similar statement given by Russia also included Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, which were formerly part of Yugoslavia (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021a) and fought on the same side as the Soviet Union during World War II. What is particularly interesting about such ceremonial statements is their ability to bring together countries otherwise separated by strong tensions. This was particularly relevant in said 2021 statement by Russia, to which both Armenia and Azerbaijan signed on despite the recent 2020 war in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Other occasions where such alliance behaviour can be observed on an even smaller basis are in positions held on issues such as the freedom of the media or human rights, which bring together countries like Iceland, Norway, or Switzerland (and sometimes Canada) who are particularly keen on promoting such values in their foreign policy. Lastly, there are also a few instances in which relatively large groups of participating states choose to make collective statements, including EU member states. One such example was in the Permanent Council meeting of 13 June 2019 on the topic of elections in one of the breakaway regions of Georgia which is occupied by Russia, where the EU gave a collective statement. Poland then gave an additional, harsher collective statement supported by a large group of EU countries which are traditionally the most critical towards Russia, to which Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States also signed on. The statement was particularly clear in pointing to Russia's role in violating Georgia's territorial integrity (OSCE Permanent Council, 2019b).



Similar statements by almost identical groups of states were also given on other occasions when the issue appeared on the OSCE's Permanent Council agenda. Again, while such statements remain exceptions, these nonetheless occasionally come up for other issues as well, such as on the topic of human rights violations in Chechnya (OSCE Permanent Council, 2020a), or the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus (OSCE Permanent Council, 2020b, 2020c) when groups of participating states debated and ultimately discussed invoking the so-called Moscow Mechanism.<sup>1</sup>

There are also occasional instances of a large plurality of OSCE participating states signing on to collective statements to underline their common commitment to a particular cause. One such instance was a statement given by the Czech Republic on 4 July 2019 on behalf of 46 of the OSCE's 57 participating states on the occasion of the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture (OSCE Permanent Council, 2019c). Here, the EU as a collective entity tends to be absent given the lack of formal recognition of its standing at the organization.

Another possible way to indicate alliance behaviour is to make specific choices as to which agenda items participating states partake in during Permanent Council discussions. Given the aforementioned point that specific conflicts often appear as separate agenda items with distinct wording, participating states can ultimately make the choice under which specific reading of a conflict situation they want to intervene.

An example of such competing agenda items relates to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. There have been very few Permanent Council meetings in recent years when this topic has not been on the agenda, usually as part of its regular wider agenda category on current issues. While the existence of a continued dispute between the two countries on these matters is neither surprising nor particularly insightful, the way in which the matter is discussed more widely remains indicative of the political tensions present within the organization. Given the fundamental underlying disagreement surrounding how to interpret the conflict at hand, the matter is typically raised twice on each meeting agenda: once as a topic introduced by Ukraine on "Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine and illegal occupation of Crimea," and simultaneously as a Russia-sponsored agenda item on the "[s]ituation in Ukraine and the need to implement the Minsk agreements."

The latter agenda item which represents the Russian reading of the state of the conflict usually only sees very few interventions by participating states. There is usually only an initial statement by Russia, to which Ukraine tends to respond immediately. Most of the time, all other participating states then ignore Russia's agenda item unless the content of Russia's statement warrants a direct response when individual participating states have been specifically singled out in a Russian statement. In contrast, the agenda item raised by Ukraine sees much more frequent contributions by other participating states. Typically, it is the EU and its allies who will respond immediately after Ukraine. While these statements are usually also somewhat critical of Ukraine's role in the ongoing armed conflict, the statements are generally largely supportive of the overall interpretation of Ukraine's position on this topic. This is

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<sup>1</sup> This allows the OSCE to send experts to individual participating states in order to resolve issues related to the OSCE's human dimension.



similar behaviour to that shown by other regular interveners on this agenda item such as the United States and Canada.

In recent years, similar competing agenda items could also regularly be observed in the wake of the 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh, which put Armenia and Azerbaijan at odds with one another. Since the renewed outbreak of the conflict, Armenia has regularly added an agenda item on the “Aggression of Azerbaijan against Artsakh and Armenia with the direct involvement of Turkey and foreign terrorist fighters” where it tends to remain the sole intervener. Likewise, a separate agenda item by Azerbaijan on the “de-occupation and ‘counter-offensive’ in the captured territories” (or a similar item) mostly sees only Azerbaijan, and sometimes Turkey, intervene. To avoid ascribing support to either reading of the conflict proposed by the belligerents, a more neutral third agenda item on the “situation in and around Nagorno-Karabakh” often sees many more contributions by participating states not directly involved in the conflict.

While most cases of competing agenda items relate to ongoing issues, sometimes this can also occur on the anniversary of a past conflict when a different reading of history by distinct groups of participating states prevails. For instance, on the 22nd anniversary of NATO’s intervention in the Kosovo conflict at the session of 25 March 2021, two distinct agenda items on the subject existed. The first, proposed by Serbia, was on the “Twenty-second anniversary of NATO’s aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,” while the other, sponsored by the United States, was entitled “Twenty-second anniversary of NATO’s response to the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo.” Whereas only Serbia and Russia spoke under the first heading, the second was exclusively used by NATO members to emphasize their views on the anniversary.

Overall, OSCE participating states thus have distinct ways to indicate the proximity (or indeed opposition) of their views within OSCE Permanent Council meetings. However, the above consideration of actual alliance patterns observed also leads to the conclusion that, while alliance behaviour is particularly pronounced for EU member states and their allies (such as accession candidates), such tools are used much less frequently by other OSCE participating states. Overall, it is thus sensible to consider OSCE Permanent Council interactions not primarily as separate interactions between all 57 individual participating states, but rather as interactions between one relatively coherent block representing almost half of the OSCE’s participating states and the remaining individual states, with occasional alliance behaviour exhibited there as well, underlining the political nature of this body.

## **1.4 The Permanent Council as the Heartbeat of the OSCE**

The kinds of alliance patterns which can be regularly observed in the OSCE’s Permanent Council are ultimately representative of wider political issues affecting the organization. It is the heartbeat of the OSCE and, hence, illustrates the current state of tensions between some of its participating states based upon how participating states

which are not directly affected by them take sides on controversial matters. The debates and tensions surrounding the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict illustrate how state behaviour in the OSCE Permanent Council relates to the OSCE's ability to intervene in ongoing conflicts. It is the parallel political and decision-making roles of the Permanent Council which render it more difficult for the OSCE to play an active, neutral, and positive role in ongoing conflicts.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict is perhaps best suited to illustrating how the political nature of the Permanent Council relates to the OSCE's ability to intervene in conflicts affecting its participating states. This is not least the case since it was this very conflict which contributed to the renewed relevance of the organization at large (Lehne, 2015) as it has played an active role in mediating the conflict across its different phases from the initial protests in Ukraine, to the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing conflict in the Donbas region. What has further made the organization ideally suited to dealing with this conflict is its aim to consider security from a wide range of perspectives, as well as its inclusive membership which brings together the different state parties to this conflict. Indeed, as most forums for East–West dialogue and between Russia and Ukraine were suspended amidst the onset of the crisis, it was in the setting of the OSCE that the first mediating steps could be taken (Kropatcheva, 2015).

However, its inclusive membership and the consensus principle which lies at the heart of OSCE decision-making has ultimately made it more difficult for it to achieve this task, especially when a wide array of OSCE participating states take sides. In the case of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, diverging views between the two countries were to be expected. While Russia has and continues to insist (Åtland, 2020; Haug, 2016) that it is not playing an active role in the Donbas conflict and that it now considers Crimea to be an integral part of Russia, the Ukrainian view has obviously been different. While the latter's interpretation is largely shared by many Western OSCE participating states, the strength of support for Ukraine ultimately differs among individual Western parties (Kropatcheva, 2015). While these disputes have been aired in diplomatic statements in the OSCE Permanent Council, they have also affected the decision-making of this body, with real-life consequences on the ground.

The OSCE was able to set up its Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine which was meant to observe the situation on the ground and mediate in the conflict since 2014. Beyond this, the OSCE has also set up an observer mission on the Russia-Ukraine border, as well as facilitated political dialogue through the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine. Each of these ultimately require the consent of all participating states in the Permanent Council, making an active OSCE contribution to conflict resolution dependent on the very actors involved within it and regularly at odds in political discussions within the Permanent Council.

This has had consequences for the conduct of the OSCE's operations on the ground. The OSCE Permanent Council has been able to regularly come to a unanimous agreement over the extension of the mandate of the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. However, its ability to perform its duties is constantly hampered in practice by diverging views on the conflict. The ability to come to a consensus over the

SMM ultimately relies on the lack of clarity in the operation's mandate and it being subject to various interpretative statements by individual participating states, which regularly confirm their differing views on the conflict. Russia, for instance regularly emphasizes the SMM's lack of operational authority over Crimea, as the country now considers this to be an integral part of Russia. At the same time, it points to a necessity to monitor the rights of the Russian-speaking minority in all of Ukraine (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021b, attachment 3).

Ukraine, on the other hand underlines the relevance of monitoring the situation with regard to Crimea, as well as monitoring Russian support for insurgents in the Donbas region (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021b, attachment 6). Other countries' interpretative statements largely fall in line with the observed alliance patterns for the issues discussed above, with the EU (and a number of aligning countries), as well as Canada and the United Kingdom, also underlining its view that Russia is attempting to undermine the effectiveness of the SMM on the ground.

Different from the Special Monitoring Mission, the effectiveness of the related OSCE Observer Operation on the formal Russia-Ukraine border has been further hampered by the severe limitations to its mandate imposed by Russia. Here, the country refused to extend the observer's mandate beyond two particular border crossings (Oberson, 2021), while also not allowing the observers to conduct searches there (Kemp, 2018). As a result, the operation was discontinued at the end of September 2021 (OSCE Observer Mission at Russian Checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk, 2021). Once more, the final decision related to ending this operation demonstrates the internal divisions. While Ukraine, the EU, and some aligning countries, as well as Canada, the UK, and the United States, have deplored Russia's lack of willingness to prolong the operation (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021c, Attachments 1–4), Russia pointed out that it was no longer willing to prolong it given ongoing political divisions over the Russia-Ukraine conflict (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021c, Attachment 5).

These difficulties in coming to a common vision on how the OSCE should intervene in ongoing conflicts is thus directly related to the simultaneously political role of the Permanent Council. Here, long-lasting frictions dating back to at least the Russia-Georgian war of 2008 have contributed to Russia having an uneasy relationship with the OSCE (Kropatcheva, 2012, 2015). Furthermore, the country has increasingly seen itself being relatively isolated in the organization, with its efforts to develop similar alliance behaviour to that of the EU among members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) having largely failed (Kropatcheva, 2012). Absent ceremonial occasions, such as the commemoration of the end of World War II, the formal members of the CIS instead prefer to issue their own statements in the Permanent Council or to remain silent. This lack of acceptance of the organization as a neutral arbiter given its membership and the politically charged nature of its debates thus ultimately hampers its ability to utilize the tools at its disposal to successfully mediate ongoing conflicts.

While Russia's current ambivalent stance towards the OSCE's role in conflict situations has served to illustrate the problematic link between the political nature of the Permanent Council and the organization's ability to fulfil its mandate, it is

important to consider that this is but one prominent example of participating states' reluctance to allow the OSCE to play an active role where it was meant to do so. For instance, while the EU has been keen to promote an active OSCE role in recent ongoing conflicts, including the one between Russia and Ukraine, EU member states are much more reluctant to accept a role for the OSCE in mediating conflicts involving the EU itself or for tensions between its member states (Kropatcheva, 2012). The United States has long kept a low profile in the organization as well (Hopmann, 2019; Nünlist, 2017), with the Trump administration making its participation in it ever more problematic (Hopmann, 2019). One example where the US has also constantly refused to allow the OSCE to take an active role is in debating the issue of the continued use of the death penalty by the US federal government and some US states.

While the kind of alliance behaviour which can be observed in the Permanent Council thus helps to illustrate the political tensions among its members, the parallel presence of political discussions and formal decision-making powers thus ultimately makes it difficult for the OSCE to act in ongoing conflicts as intended.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Consideration of the behaviour of OSCE participating states within its core political and decision-making body, the Permanent Council, allows for not only the measurement of the heartbeat of the organization, but also an evaluation of the effects of its functioning, both for the OSCE itself and between its participating states more generally.

While the activities of the Permanent Council are largely limited to countries giving statements on particular agenda items, the patterns of participation themselves are indicative of alliance behaviour within the OSCE. Such behaviour ranges from agenda setting and intervention under particular item headings to actual cooperation between participating states as part of collective statements. A consideration of these reveal that ongoing conflicts involving OSCE participating states find a discursive outlet in the OSCE's Permanent Council. Given the possibility of politically framing individual agenda items, the same subject is often discussed within individual Permanent Council sessions, albeit from radically differing political perspectives.

Collective actions by some participating states then also reveal regular alliance patterns that can be observed even when countries technically partake in the OSCE on an individual basis. Here, the European Union member states and certain closely affiliated countries stand out as a singular bloc making up the majority of OSCE participating states. While some other alliance behaviours can also be observed within the Permanent Council, these are much less frequent and involve far fewer countries than in the case of the EU. This is despite efforts by countries such as Russia to establish the CIS as a distinct bloc within the Permanent Council.

The observed alliance behaviour is but one element exhibiting the ultimately political nature of the Political Council. As the case study on the Russia-Ukraine

conflict has shown, this is particularly problematic in a setting where the OSCE's capacity to mediate an ongoing conflict are directly tied to the consensual decision-making within the Permanent Council. The patterns of political alignment observed within the Permanent Council thus do not only matter in terms of its role as a forum for diplomatic interaction, but have real-life consequences on the OSCE's ability to be an active player on the ground during ongoing conflicts.

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# Chapter 2

## Development Aid and the Democratic Process in the OSCE Region



Mario Ghioldi

### 2.1 Introduction

The following study has the aim of investigating the effects of development support provided by emerging and traditional donors in various OSCE areas. In particular, it seems relevant to compare the impacts of aid provided by China and Russia with the effects of that provided by the US, the EU, and European countries in four different OSCE regions: Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Western Balkans, and Eastern Europe. Following their political declarations and statements, traditional donors have been more focused on supporting recipients' political changes in order to improve their democratic processes; meanwhile, emerging providers seem more focused on improving the recipients' economic growth through mutual cooperation programmes. In this context, beyond analysing the different aid modalities and aid provider's recent history in this field, the article will examine if development support provided by the above-mentioned actors has improved democratic performance and economic growth, and reduced local corruption in the recipient countries.

### 2.2 The Silent Revolution in the Development Aid Sector

Given the increase in the number of development aid donors (Paulo & Reisen, 2010) from the end of the Cold War, studies now tend to agree that international cooperation is facing what might be called a "silent revolution" (Woods, 2008), where new actors present themselves as a valuable alternative for aid-receiving countries (Dreher et al., 2011), thus undermining or scaling down the activity of traditional ones. Scholars have tried to categorize donors into different groups, dividing between traditional

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and emerging donors (Bakalova & Spanger, 2013; Walz & Ramachandran, 2011; Zimmermann & Smith, 2011). Actors in the first group include those operating inside the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), such as European Union (EU) institutions, EU members, the US, and Japan, while the second group includes multilateral development banks such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and countries with emerging economies such as China, India or Turkey (Altunışık, 2014; White, 2011). Russia itself is considered by scholars as a re-emerging donor (Bakalova & Spanger, 2013; Larionova et al., 2016), considering the increase in development aid in the two decades following the post-Cold War crisis (Larionova et al., 2016). Some authors, however, have stressed that this division is fairly vague (Dreher et al., 2013).

This chapter describes the evolution of the development aid sector in the OSCE region and analyses how scholars have studied the effects of these development aid actors on recipient countries (Nogueira de Morais & Virtanen, 2015; Sato et al., 2010), with a particular focus on economic growth (Moreira, 2005), on democratic progress (Askarov & Doucouliagos, 2013; Knack, 2004), and on corruption (Asongu, 2012; Okada & Samreth, 2012).

Studies on the relationship between development aid and economic progress have found that financial support from specific donors enhances economic growth while aid from others does not promote economic development (Davies, 2010; Minoiu & Reddy, 2010; Park, 2011). While scholars studying the relationship between aid and democratic progress have found opposing outcomes. Though some scholars have discovered a positive correlation (Dunning, 2004; Goldsmith, 2001), others have found a negative/neutral correlation (Crawford, 1997; Djankov et al., 2008; Smith, 2008), or did not find any significant effect (Knack, 2004).

In this, the literature has highlighted the differences between foreign aid provided by traditional donors and that provided by emerging donors. As a matter of fact, traditional donors are more committed to supporting the recipient nation's democratic progress, offering conditional aid (Orbie, 2011). Conversely, emerging donors provide aid unconditionally, without interfering in the recipient's governance issues (Dreher et al., 2011; Lammers, 2007); thus, new providers such as China, Russia, or India are expected to provide financial support without using the Western approach, where development aid is focused on good governance, the fight against corruption, and human rights protection (The Economist, 2010).

If traditional donor aid cannot provide a relevant input for the whole democratic process of recipient countries due to their local background, their controlled support may yet enhance some democratic aspects, such as slowing down the prevalence of corruption in beneficiary countries. Differently, even though the emerging donor support is more effective in aiding economic growth, this unconditional aid may be misused by local institutions as found by studies concerning Chinese development aid in Africa (Isaksson & Kotsadam, 2018).

As discussed above, a comprehensive assessment looking into the different fields of OSCE work and the regional differences among its 57 member states is still missing in the literature. Scholars have thus far only analysed aid impacts on specific regions, such as the Western Balkans (Pickering, 2010), Central Asia (Arazmudarov, 2015),

the Caucasus (Wetteland, 2020), and Eastern Europe (Wedel, 2015). Development aid to these regions is sent by both traditional and emerging donors, such as EU institutions, European countries (Germany or France), the US, China, and Russia. Therefore, it seems relevant to have a more general analysis which examines the impact of aid provided by the above-mentioned donors in the OSCE territories.

## 2.3 Traditional and Emerging Donors: Different Actors, Different Approaches

In the last several years, recipient countries of the OSCE area had the opportunity to receive development aid both from traditional and emerging donors. Therefore, it is important to describe the different approaches taken by such providers with OSCE recipient countries. In particular, the following paragraph aims to explain the perspectives of the traditional donors, as well as emerging donors China and Russia which collectively are the most active donors in the area.

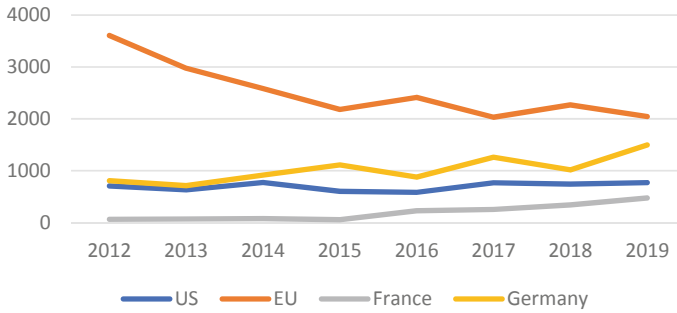
### 2.3.1 *Traditional Donors (Western Countries)*

The literature typically classifies traditional donors as the group of providers coming from the “Western world,” including the US, EU institutions, EU member states, Japan, and Korea. These providers, in line with the theories of exporting liberal pluralism (Kymlicka & Opalski, 2002), have sponsored their aid conditionality, using allocations as important tools in order to promote democratic systems in recipient countries (Orbie, 2011). The most relevant example concerns the European Union, which supports democratic openness in different OSCE regions (such as the Western Balkans or Eastern Europe), offering conditional aid or the European memberships (Koch, 2015; Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008). An example of this approach is the EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III<sup>1</sup>) approved by the European Parliament in June 2021, which allows for the possibility of assistance suspension in case of recipient country democratic backtracking.

Nevertheless, despite the rhetoric of declarations, studies have found that the previous performance of recipients (Maizels & Nissanke, 1984), level of corruption

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<sup>1</sup>The first generation of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance was put in place in 2007, followed by IPA II in 2014. The same countries covered by the instrument will also be eligible for funding under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI/Global Europe). The political agreement will be converted into the final legal text of the Regulation, still subject to formal approval by the European Parliament and the Council. The IPA III is set to be adopted and become law in early autumn 2021. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/it/press-room/20210531IPR05115/political-deal-reached-on-seven-year-funding-for-accession-countries>.



**Fig. 2.1** Traditional donor aid allocation in the OSCE area from 2012 to 2019 (Source OECD Data <https://data.oecd.org/>)

(Alesina & Weder, 2002), and respect for human rights (Neumayer, 2003) were not important factors in determining traditional donors' aid allocation. Conversely, the same studies have found that aid allocation is more strongly influenced by donor political interests. Therefore, the aid sent to OSCE regions by traditional donors should have the real goal of spreading their influence in these areas.

Despite the negative trend concerning development aid in the OSCE area provided by traditional donors, the financial support of these providers is still more relevant than that allocated by emerging donors (Fig. 2.1).

According to the OECD, unlike the approach taken by emerging donors, traditional donor development aid is focused on democratic progress and the rule of law.

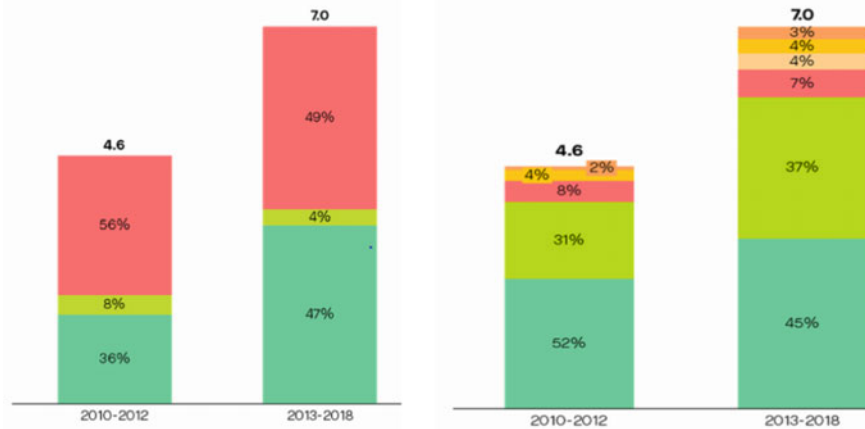
### 2.3.2 A Newer Player in the Field of Development Aid: China

Since 1970, China has grown into a relevant provider of financing for global development (Bräutigam, 2011). According to China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era (Chinese Government, 2021), China spent RMB270.2 billion (US\$42.0 billion) on its international cooperation efforts between 2013 and 2018 (approximately RMB45 billion or US\$7.0 billion annually) (Johnson & Zuhr, 2021). Nevertheless, this data represents only a small fraction of Beijing's engagement in developing countries. Against this background, the Chinese government has stressed how its development of cooperation is different from that of the OECD donors, as Beijing's cooperation is "a form of mutual assistance between developing countries" (Lorenzo, 2021). This new concept of mutual assistance, different from the idea of traditional donor foreign aid, was expressed by Xi Jinping himself (Johnson, 2016), who stressed the great role of China in the new international order resolving global and development issues and mainstreaming the UNSDGs 2030 Agenda. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents the country's tool to implement this vision of

the global community, where the Chinese financial support is mainly focused on economic growth.

Considering the Chinese approach, it is difficult to fit Beijing’s development finance into the OECD framework which is used by the majority of literature (Johnson & Zuhr, 2021). China usually provides funds for a specific project through multiple mechanisms. For example, the BRI includes commercial, non-commercial, financial, and non-financial contributions to development. Some of these may be considered foreign assistance by China, while others may qualify as ODA, and yet others could only be categorized as development finance more broadly. The methodological of this paper section provides more details on how Chinese aid may be tracked.

China’s commitment to development was also highlighted by the latest White Paper provided by the Chinese government (Oh, 2020). Between 2003 and 2018, Beijing allocated US\$42 billion to foreign assistance. Over half of these funds took the form of loans, usually with a preferential interest rate of 2–3%. The other 47% was given as grants. These financing mechanisms are used by Beijing to fund projects related to social welfare, human resource development, technical cooperation, material assistance, and emergency humanitarian assistance (Fig. 2.2). Concessional loans, on the other hand, are used for industrial and infrastructural projects, and goods and materials. Even though China’s foreign assistance focuses on African countries, the share of Chinese assistance to African countries fell in the 2013–2018 period in favour of assistance to Asian countries. This may also be caused by Beijing commitments in Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.



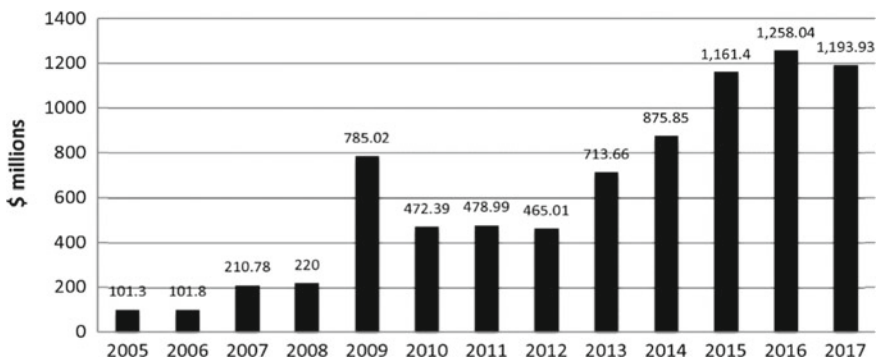
**Fig. 2.2** China’s average annual foreign assistance by type of flow and China’s average annual foreign assistance by recipient region (Source Donor Tracker <https://donortracker.org/>)

### 2.3.3 Regional Hegemon: Russia

Russia's financial contributions to development aid have significantly increased in recent years, showing Moscow's growing interest in regional and global development cooperation (Zaytsev, 2021; Fig. 2.3). As a matter of fact, after the tumultuous period in the 1990s, the Russian development assistance programme increased from US\$100 million in 2004 to a peak of almost US\$ 1.3 billion annually by 2016 (Balas et al., 2018).

Even though these amounts are modest in comparison with other donors, they are significant enough, especially taking into account the degree to which the Russian economy is stressed by international sanctions. In this context, the majority of Russia's development assistance is focused on traditional partners or neighbouring countries. According to OECD, the most relevant Russian recipients are Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Cuba, North Korea, Nicaragua, Guinea, Serbia, Mozambique, Syria, and Armenia. Together, the country-specific programmes focused on these states accounted for 95% of Russian bilateral aid in 2017 (Knobel & Zaytsev, 2017). The Russian commitment in the OSCE area is in line with Moscow's national objectives in the Eurasian economic space (MoFA RF, 2014) linked with economic integration at the sectoral and country level with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

The Russian commitment to Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the other CIS countries is also showed by Moscow's activities in the multilateral environment, where Russia uses multilateral mechanisms through the World Bank or the World Food Programme to increase infrastructure development and the food security, with a special focus on the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Armenia (Zaytsev, 2021). In general, Russia has become one of the largest donors in the case of many post-Soviet countries (The volume of Russian assistance, 2018). Like that of other emerging donors, Russian bilateral aid is mainly focused on economic and social growth, with



**Fig. 2.3** Official development assistance provided by the Russian Federation in the period from 2005 to 2017 (US\$ millions) (Source OECD Data <https://data.oecd.org/> and the MoF of Russia <https://minfin.gov.ru/en/>)

a special focus on rural infrastructure and development, food security, health, and water and sanitation.

### **2.3.4 Comparing Donor Policies**

There is an unquestionable impact of development aid provided by China, Russia, EU institutions, European countries, and the US from 2012 to 2019 within the OSCE. While they all focus on economic and social development in general, they have very different target areas and groups, such as in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. According to the literature, development aid sent by traditional donors should promote the democratic process in the OSCE's recipient countries. Thus, the recipient countries of the emerging donors should have higher corruption rates than the beneficiary countries of traditional providers, taking into account the possibility of misuse of aid by local institutions. At the same time, the OSCE recipient countries mainly supported by Russia and China should show higher economic growth than those countries supported by traditional donors in the period considered. This outcome should confirm the hypothesis by which emerging donors may have a better understanding of recipient needs thanks to their recent past as beneficiary countries.

## **2.4 Methodological Framework**

The study calculates the impact of aid provided by two emerging and two traditional donors on 15 recipient countries coming from four different OSCE's areas: the Western Balkans (5 countries), Eastern Europe (2), the Caucasus (3), and Central Asia (5). Following a positivist approach, the hypotheses are tested taking into account quantitative data provided by different international organizations (such as the OECD<sup>2</sup> and the IMF<sup>3</sup>) and think tank data sets (such as Freedom house,<sup>4</sup> AidData<sup>5</sup> and Transparency International<sup>6</sup>). This data will be used in order to calculate (a) the main donor (emerging or traditional) of the OSCE's recipient country considered; (b) the democratic progress of the beneficiary states; (c) their economic growth and

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<sup>2</sup> The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development "OECD Stat" (2022) <https://stats.oecd.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> The International Monetary Fund "IMF Datamapper" (2022) <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/datasets>.

<sup>4</sup> Freedom House "Expanding Freedom and Democracy" (2022) <https://freedomhouse.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> Aiddata "Chinese Development Finance" (2022) <https://www.aiddata.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Transparency International "Report Corruption" (2022) <https://www.transparency.org/en/end-corruption>.

(d) their corruption level. The study covers the time range from 2012 to 2019. The study caps the time frame at 2019 because recipient and donor countries have since been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***2.4.1 Tracking Development Aid in the OSCE***

To identify the top donor for each beneficiary state, it is relevant to track the aid provided by providers. In relation to the DAC donors considered, this study uses data provided by the foreign aid database available from OECD Statistics. This data set shows the most comprehensive data for the traditional donor ODA. Even though the OECD Statistics also provided data concerning aid coming from emerging donors such as Russia, it is necessary to verify the data against that from other tools used to track development aid coming from new providers. As a matter of fact, the OECD data set does not provide details concerning project-level data on outgoing Russian aid flows and does not furnish any data related to China (Strange et al., 2017). Beijing does not participate in any international reporting systems such as those run by the OECD DAC due to China's distinct approach to development finance as more focused on "a form of mutual assistance between developing countries" (Johnson & Zuhr, 2021). Thus, studies in the literature have created different systems in order to track the Chinese aid. This analysis builds on the methodology and data collected by the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute<sup>7</sup> which provides the most detailed estimate on China's development aid based on DAC standards. Moreover, in order to confirm data on emerging donor development aid trends, this investigation uses the statistics provided by AidData. Similarly, to the OECD Statistics, AidData provides a cross-sectional, time-series data set furnishing statistics also related with emerging donors. The reliability of the database is also confirmed by the considerable amount of development aid quantitative analysis based on the AidData project (Donner et al., 2016; Dreher et al., 2018; Tierney et al., 2011). Using these data sets, the research can identify which are the top donors among China, Russia (as emerging), the EU and the US (as traditional) for the 15 recipient countries previously mentioned (Table 2.1).

### ***2.4.2 Measuring the Democratic Progress of OSCE Recipient Countries***

In recent decades, academia has provided different methodologies for analysing the democracy levels of countries. These include Polity IV, the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the Freedom House ratings. This study will be

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<sup>7</sup> Jica Ogata Sadako Research Institute "Jica Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development" (2022) <https://www.jica.go.jp/jica-ri/publication/topic/donors.html>.

**Table 2.1** Top donors of the recipient countries considered in the OSCE region

OSCE's regions	Top donors of 15 recipient countries of the OSCE				
	Recipient countries	Principal donor	Amount of aid provided (US\$ millions) <sup>1</sup>	Main donor type	Other donors
Western Balkans	Albania	EU institutions	871.29	Traditional	China/Germany
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU institutions	1616.61	Traditional	China/US
	Macedonia	EU institutions	698.83	Traditional	Germany
	Montenegro	EU institutions	637.53	Traditional	China
	Serbia	EU institutions	2946.64	Traditional	UAE/Germany
Eastern Europe	Moldova	EU institutions	1037.47	Traditional	Romania/US
	Ukraine	EU institutions	2846.21	Traditional	Germany/US
Caucasus	Armenia	Germany	343.69	Traditional	EU/US
	Azerbaijan	EU institutions	87.37	Traditional	Germany/Japan
	Georgia	EU institutions	1556.47	Traditional	Germany/US
Central Asia	Kazakhstan	China	18,823.52	Emerging	EU/Turkey/Russia
	Kyrgyzstan	Russia	1157.46	Emerging	China/Turkey
	Tajikistan	China	5352.94	Emerging	Russia/EU
	Turkmenistan	China	1705.88	Emerging	EU/US
	Uzbekistan	China	3823.52	Emerging	Japan/France

Sources OECD <https://www.oecd.org/>, AidData <https://www.aiddata.org/>, JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute <https://www.jica.go.jp/jica-ri/index.html>

<sup>1</sup>Due to the lack of data concerning the Chinese aid, the amounts related to this donor have been created considering the estimation provided by AidData and Jica Ogata Sadako Research Institute

based on the democratic quantification offered by the Freedom House ratings which highlight the importance of political rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law in a country (Schmidt, 2015).

Despite some criticism (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002) related to rating shortcomings and the use of a system based on intuitive observation, scholars have determined the Freedom House method to be accurate and replicable in other investigations focused on measuring democracy.

Using the Freedom House 2012 and 2019 scores for the 15 recipient countries considered, this research calculates democratic progress as follows:



**Table 2.2** Democratic score of the recipient countries considered in the OSCE's region

OSCE's recipient countries	Freedom house democratic score (Ds)		Democratic progress Ds 2019–Ds 2012
	Total 2012	Total 2019	
Albania	63	68	5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	60	53	−7
Macedonia	65	59	−6
Montenegro	72	65	−7
Serbia	78	67	−11
Moldova	65	58	−7
Ukraine	60	60	0
Armenia	40	51	11
Azerbaijan	23	11	−12
Georgia	58	63	5
Kazakhstan	27	22	−5
Kyrgyzstan	41	38	−3
Tajikistan	26	9	−17
Turkmenistan	7	2	−5
Uzbekistan	4	9	5

Source Freedom House <https://freedomhouse.org/>

$$Dp = \text{recipient} \times 2019 \text{ Ds} - \text{recipient} \times 2012 \text{ Ds}$$

where  $Dp$  represents the democratic progress from 2012 to 2019, and  $Ds$  the Democratic score provided by Freedom House for the years 2009 and 2012.

The higher the  $Dp$  value, the more the recipient country considered has democratic progress for the period considered. Differently, a negative  $Dp$  value shows how the country considered in 2019 is less democratic than it was in 2012 (Table 2.2).

### 2.4.3 *Measuring Economic Growth*

As suggested by different investigations (Ahmed et al., 2007; Lucic et al., 2016), even though the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is not the only index to consider measuring a country's economic condition and population wealth, it may be a relevant indicator for estimating the economic progress of a recipient country, in particular in order to understand how development aid has impacted democratic progress. Therefore, economic progress is measured in this article by considering the average growth of the Gross Domestic Product (annual per cent change) and the GDP per capita in the period between 2009 and 2019 based upon the IMF and WB databases (Table 2.3).

Given the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic growth in the last two years, the study is focused only on the decade before the outbreak.

#### **2.4.4 Measuring Corruption**

This research takes into account the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) provided by the Transparency International database <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/index/nzl>. Outcomes coming from recent studies have raised a debate on how foreign aid has been misused and embezzled by local authorities (Andersen et al., 2022; Barrett et al., 2020). CPI data were previously used in other studies (Gyimah-Brempong, 2002; Nageri et al., 2013) to show that corruption impacts democratic progress and the economic development in recipient countries, affecting the general development of a country, generating political instability and institutional inefficiency, and decelerating the growth rate and the productivity (Lambsdorff, 2003; Mo, 2001).

In this context, Transparency International collects and aggregates data coming from different sources which provides the perceptions of country experts and business people on the level of corruption in the public sector. The Transparency International information points to a scale of 0–100, where 0 is the highest level of perceived corruption and 100 the lowest one. Therefore, if a country receives a score of close to 100, the level of perceived corruption is low. Conversely, a country ranked with a low score shows a high degree of perceived corruption.

The Transparency Index 2012 and 2019 scores for the 15 recipient country are considered in the following Corruption Perception Index (Table 2.4) calculation used in this study:

$$\text{CPI score} = \text{recipient} \times 2019 \text{ CPI} - \text{recipient} \times 2012 \text{ CPI}$$

### **2.5 Principal Outcomes**

Taking into account the data collected and the tables previously shown, it was possible to analyse recipient country performance in the mentioned sectors.

As shown in Table 2.1 concerning the top donors of the 15 recipient countries of the OSCE, the EU institutions and the EU members can be seen to be the most relevant donors in different OSCE regions. This may be explained by the high numbers of EU programmes in support of the EU's neighbours (under the European Neighbourhood Policy) and to help countries prepare for EU membership. China and Russia, by contrast, are the most important donors in Central Asia, where the influence of Moscow and Beijing is still strong as is shown by the workings of the Belt and Road

**Table 2.3** Economic progress of OSCE recipient countries, 2012–2019, in bold data related to the average GDP growth, GDP per capita difference and relative change

Recipient countries OSCE's area	OSCE recipient country economic progress 2012–2019										GDP per capita (current US\$)				
	Real GDP growth (annual per cent change)										Average Real GDP growth (annual per cent change) 2012–2019	GDP per capita 2012 (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2019 (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2019–2012 difference (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2012–2019 percentual change (%)
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019							
Albania	1.4	1	1.8	2.2	3.3	3.8	4.1	2.2	4248	5356	1108	26.08			
Armenia	7.1	3.4	3.6	3.3	0.2	7.5	5.2	7.6	3682	4623	941	25.55			
Azerbaijan	2.2	5.8	2.8	1	-3.1	0.2	1.5	2.2	7496	4806	-2691	-35.88			
Bosnia and Herzegovina	-0.7	2.4	1.1	3.1	3.1	3.2	3.7	2.8	4779	6120	1341	28.06			
Georgia	6.4	3.6	4.4	3	2.9	4.8	4.8	5	4422	4698	276	6.24			
Kazakhstan	4.8	6	4.2	1.2	1.1	4.1	4.1	4.5	12.387	9813	-2574	-20.77			
Kyrgyz Republic	-0.1	10.9	4	3.9	4.3	4.7	3.5	4.5	1178	1374	196	16.63			
Moldova	-0.6	9	5	-0.3	4.4	4.7	4	3.6	3046	4494	1448	47.53			
Montenegro	-2.7	3.5	1.8	3.4	2.9	4.7	5.1	4.1	6587	8911	2324	35.28			
North Macedonia	-0.5	2.9	3.6	3.9	2.8	1.1	2.9	3.2	4697	6022	1325	28.20			
Serbia	-0.7	2.9	-1.6	1.8	3.3	2.1	4.5	4.2	6016	7412	1396	23.2			
Tajikistan	7.5	7.4	6.7	6	6.9	7.1	7.3	7.5	969	891	-79	-8.04			
Turkmenistan	11.1	10.2	10.3	6.5	6.2	6.4	6.2	6.3	6675	7612	937	14.03			
Ukraine	0.2	0	-6.6	-9.8	2.4	2.5	3.4	3.2	3855	3663	-193	-4.98			

(continued)

Table 2.3 (continued)

		OSCE recipient country economic progress 2012–2019												
Recipient countries OSCE's area	Real GDP growth (annual per cent change)										GDP per capita (current US\$)			
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Average Real GDP growth (annual per cent change) 2012–2019	GDP per capita 2012 (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2019 (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2019–2012 difference (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2012–2019 percentage change (%)	
Uzbekistan	7.4	7.6	7.2	7.4	6.1	4.5	5.4	5.8	<b>6.425</b>	2137	1719	<b>-418</b>	<b>-19.56</b>	

**Table 2.4** Corruption perception Index score of the recipient countries considered from the OSCE region

Recipient countries	CPI 2012	CPI 2019	CPI score
Albania	33	35	2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	42	36	-6
Macedonia	43	35	-8
Montenegro	41	45	4
Serbia	39	39	0
Moldova	36	32	-4
Ukraine	26	30	4
Armenia	34	42	8
Azerbaijan	27	30	3
Georgia	52	56	4
Kazakhstan	28	34	6
Kyrgyzstan	24	30	6
Tajikistan	22	25	3
Turkmenistan	17	19	2
Uzbekistan	17	25	8

Source Transparency International <https://www.transparency.org/en>

Initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Aggregating data coming from Tables 2.1 and 2.2 related to the democratic performance of recipient countries, it seems relevant to stress the negative scores in all OSCE areas. If this result could be expected in those recipient countries supported by emerging donors (such as Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, or Turkmenistan), the outcome is surprising if we consider the beneficiary countries which receive more aid from traditional donors (all the recipient countries in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the Caucasus) as they show no positive relationship between the amount of aid allocated and democratic progress. These results seem to suggest the ineffectiveness of the aid conditionality approach carried out by traditional donors who send their financial support after taking into account criteria other than the democratic openness of the local institutions of beneficiary countries (such as their geopolitical goals).

With regard to economic growth, it is possible to identify a positive relationship between development aid and economic growth in all the recipient countries considered (as shown in Table 2.3). The Internal crisis has slowed down the progress of Ukraine, which is the only recipient country to show negative results. Central Asian countries (particularly Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), mainly supported by China and Russia, have been the top economic performers during the period considered. This data shows how aid coming from new providers is considerably more efficient, likely due to the recent past of these donors as recipients. By contrast, economic growth in the regions financed by traditional donors (such as the Western Balkans or Caucasus) is lower than that in the Central Asian countries.

This difference may be explained by various factors. Firstly, the Western Balkans and Caucasus have already reached a good level of development; therefore, their current economic growth is less significant than that of the Central Asian countries. At the same time, aid directed by emerging donors may prove to be more efficient in terms of economic progress, as Russia and China are more aware of beneficiary needs due to their recent past.

Other interesting results concern the relationship between development aid and corruption as shown in Table 2.4. Beyond the exception of two Western Balkan countries (Bosnia Herzegovina and North Macedonia) and Moldova, it is possible to see a general improvement against corruption. In particular, countries mainly financed by emerging donors (such as the Central Asian states) show a general improvement on the Corruption Perception Index, proving to be less corrupt than before. While the corruption levels in these countries remain higher than in other OSCE areas where CPI have negative or less progress in the period considered, it is important to stress the lack of inverse correlation between emerging foreign assistance and increased corruption.

The next paragraph analyses in a critical way the findings of the statistics collected taking into account the aforementioned outcomes and using these to create a unique data set by aggregating the data (Table 2.5). It uses this analysis to explain possible relationships between emerging versus traditional donor aid and OSCE recipient countries.

## 2.6 Main Findings

Using data from the aforementioned database, it is possible to identify a non-significant correlation between development aid and the democratic process in recipient countries considered (the correlation among the two variables, development aid, and democratic progress is  $-0.135$ ). As a matter of fact, only four states (Albania, Armenia, Georgia, and Uzbekistan) of the fifteen analysed have positive scores. In particular, it seems relevant to stress the insignificant link between democratic progress and aid sent by traditional donors, such as the European Union, which allocate their assistance through aid conditionality in order to support democracy building in recipient countries. A clear example of this is in the Western Balkan region where EU institutions are providing external incentives such as European Union membership or assistance in exchange for political and legal transformation (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019). The lack of relationship between aid receipt and democratic progress in the region may be explained by two factors. Firstly, traditional donor aid focused on building democratic processes is not effective due to local background elements; for example, the corruption levels in the Western Balkan countries are still high despite a slight improvement in some countries, as is shown in Table 2.4. Secondly, as stressed by other studies, traditional donor aid allocation is strongly influenced by their own geopolitical and national needs (Alesina & Dollar, 2000). Thus, the EU and other Western countries allocate their financial assistance to the Western Balkans,

**Table 2.5** Data set merging OSCE recipient country main donors (traditional or emerging), Democratic Progress and Corruption Indices, and their Economic Development Indicators

OSCE's recipient countries	OSCE's recipient countries main donors	Amount of aid provided (in US\$ millions)*	Freedom house democratic progress			Corruption Perception Index		
			Total 2012	Total 2019	Democratic progress	CPI 2012	CPI 2019	CPI score
Albania	EU institutions	871.29	63	68	5	33	35	2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU institutions	1616.61	60	53	-7	42	36	-6
Macedonia	EU institutions	698.83	65	59	-6	43	35	-8
Montenegro	EU institutions	637.53	72	65	-7	41	45	4
Serbia	EU institutions	2946.64	78	67	-11	39	39	0
Moldova	EU institutions	1037.47	65	58	-7	36	32	-4
Ukraine	EU institutions	2846.21	60	60	0	26	30	4
Armenia	Germany	343.69	40	51	11	34	42	8
Azerbaijan	EU institutions	87.37	23	11	-12	27	30	3
Georgia	EU institutions	1556.47	58	63	5	52	56	4
Kazakhstan	China	18,823.52	27	22	-5	28	34	6
Kyrgyzstan	Russia	1157.46	41	38	-3	24	30	6
Tajikistan	China	5352.94	26	9	-17	22	25	3
Turkmenistan	China	1705.88	7	2	-5	17	19	2
Uzbekistan	China	3823.52	4	9	5	17	25	8
OSCE's recipient countries	Economic progress							
Country	GDP annual percental growth avg (2012-2019)	GDP per capita 2012 (current US\$1)	GDP per capita 2019 (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2019-2012 absolute change (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2019-2012 relative change (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2015-2011 relative change (percentual) (%)		
Albania	2.475	4248	5356	1108	0.26	24		

(continued)

**Table 2.5** (continued)

OSCE's recipient countries	Economic progress					
Country	GDP annual percental growth avg (2012–2019)	GDP per capita 2012 (current US\$1)	GDP per capita 2019 (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2019–2012 absolute change (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2019–2012 relative change (current US\$)	GDP per capita 2015 –2011 relative change (percentual) (%)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2.3375	4779	6120	1341	0.28	28
Macedonia	2.4875	4697	6022	1325	0.28	28
Montenegro	2.85	6587	8911	2324	0.35	35
Serbia	2.0625	6016	7412	1396	0.23	23
Moldova	3.725	3046	4494	1448	0.48	48
Ukraine	−0.5875	3855	3663	−192	−0.05	5
Armenia	4.7375	3682	4623	941	0.26	26
Azerbaijan	1.575	7496	4806	−2690	−0.36	−36
Georgia	4.3625	4422	4698	276	0.06	6
Kazakhstan	3.75	12,387	9813	−2574	−0.21	−21
Kyrgyzstan	4.4625	1178	1374	196	0.17	17
Tajikistan	7.05	969	891	−78	−0.08	8
Turkmenistan	7.9	6675	7612	937	0.14	14
Uzbekistan	6.425	2137	1719	−418	−0.20	20

Caucasus, and Eastern Europe more to share their influence in these strategic regions than with the goal of recipient country improvement (Berthelemy, 2006).

As expected, recipient countries financed by emerging donors (with the exception of Uzbekistan) have negative democratic scores as Chinese and Russian aid is more focused on economic development. With regard to the expectation, those recipient countries mainly financed by China and Russia will show higher economic growth, the annual percentage growth of GDP of Central Asian countries seems to confirm this trend. This may validate the theory concerning the higher efficiency of aid provided by emerging donors in accelerating a recipient country's economic progress due to being more aware of beneficiary needs based on their own recent past. Furthermore, new providers are more focused on allocating financial assistance to sectors which promote economic progress than are the traditional donors (Woods, 2008). Therefore, development aid, especially that coming from emerging donors, may be considered to be an economic growth accelerator which can affect economic trends positively in recipient countries.



Starting from this data, further investigation should be carried out the relationships between development aid, economic growth, and the benefits for all population categories of the recipient countries in the OSCE area. In addition, the emerging donor development aid economic growth model has been criticized due to resource exploitation that can occur and the unsustainability of the approach (Manning, 2006). Considering this, it may be interesting for further research to analyse whether traditional and emerging assistance provides the same positive (or negative) economic outcomes to different parts of society in recipient countries. Finally, future analysis should analyse the environmental impacts of economic growth, in particular in recipient countries assisted by the emerging providers.

Other interesting results concern the third main topic on the relationship between development aid and corruption. With the exceptions of Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia (which had good scores in 2012 according to the Corruption Perception Index) and Moldova, the corruption levels in all recipient countries decreased in the period under study.

Among the beneficiaries, one of the top performers is Armenia, with a CPI score of 42 and an improvement of 8 points since 2012. This result was also affected by local anti-corruption reforms usually supported by traditional donors, in particular the US (Galstyan, 2018). Another interesting result is related to the positive performance of Central Asian recipient countries which are mainly financed by emerging donors (Uzbekistan + 8; Kazakhstan + 6; Kyrgyzstan + 6). Although the corruption scores in these countries remain high, the positive trends are particularly relevant as it would seem to indicate that development aid provided by emerging donors does not increase corruption in the OSCE area as in other areas such as Africa or Latin America. These results may be explained by considering the multiple OSCE anti-corruption programmes launched in the different OSCE areas considered in order to increase cooperation with local and national institutions, including assistance on corruption prevention measures, anti-money laundering, and countering terrorism. This could have had a higher impact in those countries with more elevated corruption levels (indicated with lower CPI scores in the data set) such as the Central Asian or Caucasus states (Georgia excluded).

## 2.7 Conclusion

Using a positive approach based on quantitative data provided by international organizations and think tanks, the following paper has empirically tested the impacts of aid coming from emerging (China and Russia) and traditional donors (Western Countries and the EU) in four different OSCE areas: the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. As assumed, there is no clear relationship between aid and democratic progress. While this result was expected in relation to the recipient countries mainly financed by emerging donors, this outcome is more surprising in terms of aid sent by traditional providers. Beyond allocating their assistance on projects concerning the institution building, traditional donors have usually shown

their intention to send “conditional” aid based upon a recipient country’s commitment in terms of improving their democratic processes. The result thus seems to contradict the utility and effectiveness of the aid conditionality approach of the traditional donors, possibly because where they send their financial support is also based upon their own geopolitical goals.

Regarding economic progress, the existence of a positive relationship between development aid and economic growth was confirmed by the results, as all the recipient countries showed a high percentage growth rate. The only exception concerns Ukraine, which suffered a slowdown during the internal and international crises from 2013 to 2015. Among the regions considered, higher economic development values are shown by the Central Asian countries, which are mainly financed by emerging donors. This confirms the hypothesis that aid coming from new providers is considerably more efficient, potentially due to their recent past of these donors as recipients.

In this preliminary assessment, I could not find a considerable relationship between aid receipt and corruption, as the majority of the recipient countries considered showed a general improvement in this area. This goes against the trend in other areas where aid, in particular that provided by emerging donors, has a positive relation with corruption level. This may be also explained by the activities of international or intergovernmental organizations, such as the OSCE, which launch several projects in terms of mitigating and fighting corruption in the mentioned countries. For example, in Uzbekistan and in Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE supports local agencies in enhancing good governance and fighting corruption.

Even though there remain several aspects for future investigations to analyse, such as in what way development may facilitate the democratic process, in what way it might accelerate the fight against corruption, and whether foreign assistance can benefit all population categories, the findings of this study can provide useful tools and inputs for the OSCE and its member countries. Taking into consideration the different qualities of the donors discussed, the various peculiarities of the regions analysed, and knowledge of the OSCE missions deployed on the field, the OSCE can design specific projects and programmes involving recipient institutions and various traditional/emerging beneficiaries in order to facilitate sustainable, inclusive economic growth and greater democratic progress.

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# Chapter 3

## The OSCE ODIHR and Regional Organisations as Norm Entrepreneurs: The Case of Post-pandemic Kyrgyzstan



Ana-Maria Anghelescu and Svetlana Dzardanova

### 3.1 Introduction

Some reasons behind the worldwide decline in democracy reside not in the general lack of public appeal of the regime, but rather in the crisis of this model generated by the problems faced by an advanced democracy, increasingly successful authoritarian regimes, and the resulting shift in the balance between these sides.<sup>1</sup> The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been for the past four decades a platform for political debate on a broad range of security issues. In 1995, following the end of the Cold War, the OSCE developed its role in conflict management, but it still struggles with finding its purpose in a divided world where regionalisation has become the norm. Although the Ukraine crisis of 2014 has brought new impetus to the OSCE, there remains a question regarding the motive behind states' willingness to continue to cooperate within the framework, despite inconsistent and limited visibility.

In this context, this chapter represents an attempt to contextualise the broad debate on the decline in democracy in the world by discussing the case of Kyrgyzstan. Despite the cliché of the country as an “island of democracy,” the truth remains that Kyrgyzstan has been viewed, both from within and from the outside, as a potential success story of post-Soviet democratisation. The flourishing, albeit struggling, civil society is considered a clear sign of this success, used by donors and investors as a cover for assuming that the political regime was diminishing the persistence and spread of corruption.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the discussions surrounding the decline in democracy, see Plattner (2015).

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In this chapter, we intend to discuss the impact of a public health crisis on the democratic normative agenda. In this sense, we aim to analyse the OSCE-ODIHR Human Dimension agenda in Central Asia, specifically in Kyrgyzstan during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the capacity of the OSCE to determine the respect for democratic standards in a contested area where multiple norm entrepreneurs are active. The agenda is composed of commitments in the following specific areas: democratic society (elections, democratic institutions and rule of law), human rights for all (civil and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights, including provisions regarding media freedom and working conditions for journalists and general freedom of expression), human rights for specific groups (minorities, migrants, refugees, including persons in detention or prison and others), equality, tolerance and non-discrimination (including gender equality), action on specific threats to human security (trafficking in human beings, drug and arms trafficking, prevention of terrorism), and the applicability of international humanitarian law (OSCE ODIHR, 2011). The responsibility for implementing this normative agenda lies with the participating states, with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) providing assistance in fulfilling the commitments absent any sanctioning power, reflecting the political character of the organisation (OSCE ODIHR, 2011).

Specifically, we will look at the impact of the ODIHR agenda, and the role and place in Kyrgyzstan of the OSCE as an international organisation which is a norm entrepreneur of democratic rules, in relation to other international organisations in the Central Asian region, namely the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Our hypothesis is that the crisis factor of COVID-19 heightened the normative competition between the international organisations based on the debates which took place regarding the most appropriate political regimes to enforce crisis response measures, and that this, in turn, lowered the capacity of the OSCE to pursue its Human Dimension aims as it was focused mostly on crisis support. The case of post-pandemic Kyrgyzstan allows us to investigate our assumption for several reasons: the relative openness of its political regime towards norm entrepreneurs, the country being often labelled as “an island of democracy” by international donors, and the availability of local data documenting the quality of democracy in the country compared to that available in other Central Asian countries.

The following section presents the theoretical framework used for assessing the role of the OSCE Human Dimension in Kyrgyzstan during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022. We then proceed with an overview of the norms promoted through the OSCE Human Dimension within the ODIHR, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) against the democratic standards of rule of law, human rights, and free and fair elections, among others. The section following that focuses on the quality of democracy in Kyrgyzstan, offering a brief overview of the main democracy indices, as well as a qualitative study of the measures implemented by Kyrgyzstan’s government in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the main violations of democratic standards, as well as the activities and relevance of the OSCE, with a particular focus on the Human Dimension.



### 3.2 The Human Dimension: Democratic Norms and Crisis Factors

The long-used cliché of the “island of democracy” in relation to Kyrgyzstan, although contested in the academic literature for its inability to capture the inner workings of the local political system, still shapes public perceptions of the country (Laruelle & Engval, 2015). The foreign policy of the country has been shaped around development aid provided mostly by Western sources (Dzhuraev, 2020), fostering democracy promotion projects in order to attract external resources (Sharshenova, 2018).

Patterns of cooperation at the regional level are usually placed on a spectrum having at its extremes the process of regionalism, which is defined by formal institutionalisation of cooperation, a top-down approach, and regionalisation, which is a targeted cooperation based on geographical proximity, a rather bottom-up process (Börzel & Risse, 2016). However, the anarchical structure of the international system gives states the ultimate role in deciding the level and scope of regional cooperation based on their interests, a tenet shared by neorealist and neoliberal literature on International Relations alike. Therefore, the decision of states to cooperate in international organisations should not be considered a priori to be morally good, but rather resulting from various degrees of preference bargaining (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). This study adheres to a view of international organisations in line with the realist school of International Relations, under which states decide to cooperate because of their own interests, which usually lie in the realms of security, power, and competition.<sup>2</sup>

A significant portion of the regional integration literature focuses on the role of democratic norms and socialisation as instruments for facilitating cooperation bargaining. It is in this context that some scholars have argued that patterns of regionalism outside Europe should be considered in relation to regime stability (Acharya & Johnston, 2007; Allison, 2018; Libman, 2007). Referring particularly to the Eurasian regional organisations, researches have argued that they are usually not based on the normative contents and values specific to their European counterparts, leading instead to new conceptualisations such as “protective integration” (Libman, 2007) or “virtual regionalism” (Allison, 2008). These describe such forms of regional cooperation as having specific goals, usually pertaining to security, providing a framework for political solidarity and normative justification for centralisation and authoritarianism (Allison, 2018). Under this understanding, states, represented by their governments or leaders, give higher preference to their own survival and less to norms which may undermine their legitimacy. While not excluding the normative dimension of cooperation, these forms of regionalism are based upon Westphalian norms rather than those of a supranational order capable of interfering in domestic policies in the name of democratic principles.

Costa Buranelli considers Central Asia to be a likely case of illiberal solidarism based on discourses and practices aimed at “cooperation and convergence in given

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the realist tenets in relation to states’ cooperation in international organizations, with a specific focus on the OSCE, see Elena Kropatcheva (2012).

areas of international relations” (Costa Buranelli, 2020). The author argues that the process of counter-institutionalisation at the regional level, developed through discourses and practices going against democracy promotion, can be viewed as authoritarian diffusion based not only on the logic of consequences (regime survival) but also on the logic of appropriateness (shared norms). In turn, focusing on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Karabayeva explores the applicability to Eurasian integration of two specific instruments of normative diffusion, constitutive localisation and norm subsidiarity, as conceptualised by Acharya (cited in Karabayeva, 2021). Constitutive localisation refers to how states implement foreign ideas in order to correspond to the local cognitive priors (“local culture” broadly defined), while norm subsidiarity implies a process through which states create international norms in order to prevent domination from greater powers. Karabayeva argues that Eurasian regionalism represents a process based on the EU model of economic integration for maintaining states’ sovereignty (constitutive localisation), promoting a multi-speed and multi-level approach (norms subsidiarity) (Karabayeva, 2021). In the case of inclusive international organisations which preserve the intergovernmental approach, such as the OSCE, these approaches to norm diffusion become more relevant, since they can highlight different perceptions of the scope of international cooperation and lead to a better understanding of the capacity of the organisation to ensure that states will fully comply with the principles and prescribed norms.

These arguments are compatible with the broader discussion on the basic assumptions of democratisation and the subsequent myths regarding democracy promotion by multilateral organisations. Based on previous research by Joseph Raz, Samuel Moyn, Wendy Brown and Susan Marks on the myths of human rights, and Assel Tutumlu argues that democratisation too is built upon similar myths: presumptive universality (democracy is a universal goal of humanity), historically deep roots (democracy has a long history, proving an evolution of similar principles of representation), keeping distance from politics (democracy is universally acceptable, despite its shortcomings, transgressing all political divisions), and the clear-cut distinction between authoritarianism and democracy (abuses and inequalities, determined by economic factors, happen mostly in authoritarian regimes, since political freedoms provided under democracy offer the opportunity for economic development) (Tutumlu, 2016). All these myths shape the understanding of democratisation as an evolutionary process, which can be influenced by various actors aiming to develop the societies towards the ultimate goal of democracy. However, as Tutumlu argues, the results of democratisation actions can be explained through the “bricolage myth,” which is the unintended effect of a competition among various actors with contested views, leading to weak democratisation results (Tutumlu, 2016). Since Eurasian regionalism is a competitive space for different understandings of democracy (as a goal per se and as a means for attracting funding and aid), such a meta-theoretical perspective on democratic norms diffusion provides a basis for situating the OSCE normative framework among the alternatives promoted by Russian Federation and China through their sponsored regional organisations.

With regard to the impact of crises on the quality of democracy, research regarding the effects of the financial and economic crisis of 2007–2008 on human rights highlighted that a state-centred vision on the human rights regime limited capacity to address the negative impacts on the most vulnerable, and that international human rights standards tend to be insufficiently defined to be properly enforced in times of crisis (Nolan, 2015). Other research regarding the impact of economic crises on democracy has shown that, in times of crisis, the quality of democracy degrades due to more difficult decision-making in terms of producing legislation which caters to citizens' needs, higher sensitivity of the citizens to the governments' capacity to deliver, and increased alienation from political institutions (Morlino & Quaranta, 2016).

Specific research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on democracy has already emerged, citing previous evidence which shows that “publics may be willing to eschew civil liberties and democratic procedures in favour of strong leadership and technocratic governance” (Parry et al., 2021, p. 197) despite mixed evidence regarding the real capacity of authoritarian regimes. Parry et al. pursue a systemic overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on private and public spaces, as well as on the empowered space “where political institutions reside and where decision-making power lies” (Parry et al., 2021, p. 198). Their research, while rather Eurocentric, suggests that governments have expanded their powers and invaded the private space, but also the fact that democracies are not prepared to support deliberation and participation in times of crisis, especially as there is a need for the institutionalisation of these processes (Parry et al., 2021). A wider empirical analysis conducted by Freedom House has shown that governmental measures to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened the quality of democracy and human rights, with “struggling democracies” and highly repressive states at the forefront of this process (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020).

In the next section, we highlight the main norms promoted through the OSCE Human Dimension, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in order to assess their compatibility and the potential impacts on non-consolidating democratic regimes.

### **3.3 The OSCE Interplay with EAEU and SCO Normative Frameworks in Central Asia**

While the OSCE has been explicit about its democracy building efforts (Lewis, 2012) and critical of the worsening human rights and democracy situation in participating states, EAEU and SCO membership come with certain economic and integration prospects, while also bearing no threats to participant state's regime *status quo*. This section highlights the direct and indirect normative elements of the OSCE, EAEU, and SCO in relation to their respective participating or member states from Central Asia.

Although the declared goals and principles of the OSCE and SCO are compatible—dealing with ensuring security and regional stability through enhanced cooperation within the priority areas (counteracting terrorism, separatism and extremism, and illegal migration; promotion of regional economic cooperation; and development of energy systems, to name the few), the SCO puts an emphasis on mutual interests, non-interference in internal affairs, economic growth, and the development of good-neighbourly and friendly relations, but does not envisage a human rights or democratisation monitoring, reporting or promotion mechanism (SCO Charter, 2001). While the OSCE and SCO focus on security and cooperation, the EAEU puts economic integration and development first, and operates on the principle of the “sovereign equality of states” (EAEU Treaty, 2014).

The preparatory phases of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) serve as an indication that states engage in political cooperation out of self-interest, agreeing to compromise on certain issues in view of the possible gains they may have. The rule of consensus set out within the OSCE frameworks protects participating states from any decisions that may go against their own interest; thus, at times, making cooperation more difficult and more concerned with the national aims, rather than with finding a common ground.

ODIHR activities are not governed by a legal framework or convention, but instead by the overall norms set out by the Council of Europe and the European Conventions, as well as by UN Conventions. In addition, the ODIHR does not have a legal personality (Gasbarri, 2018). Acting only as a politically binding organisation for its participating states, the OSCE develops norms and rules without a clear-cut mechanism for ensuring that the participating states act responsibly and are committed to their agreements. In this context, one may wonder how it is possible that the OSCE is still in existence, particularly following the Ukraine crisis and the divide perceived by the participating states. The participating states act as rational actors, thus perceiving the OSCE as a unique platform which allows for exchanges, even between those actors whose relations are tense, but who nevertheless use the platform for their own benefit and interests (Iloniemi, 2015; Kropatcheva, 2012). In this way, the OSCE provides a framework which can be adjusted according to participating states’ interests in absence of the responsibility of legally binding decisions (Kropatcheva, 2012). As Isaacs argues in his research regarding the interpretation of OSCE norms by Kazakhstan, the normative framework set out by the OSCE was defined long before Kazakhstan was a sovereign state, and as a matter of fact before the sovereignty of all Central Asian states, which leads the local political elites to re-interpret the norms for their own purposes through “constitutive localisation,” thus challenging their very essence and leading to increased authoritarianism (Isaacs, 2018).

We consider relevant to this research the position adopted by the Russian Federation towards the OSCE, since it is usually mirrored by the Central Asian states (Dunay, 2017). In his research, Wolfgang Zellner considered Russian activities in the OSCE under two categories: positive interests, corresponding to the state’s political agenda, and negative interests, which are external conditions set out by other actors and whose effects have to be avoided by the respective state’s actions (Zellner,

2005). The main positive interest of Russia was to achieve a Europe-wide security arrangement, which could not be successfully fulfilled mainly because the Western states were already developing and strengthening their own security arrangements. Russia also perceived the OSCE as increasingly responding to the positive interests of the Western states, extensively promoting the human dimension and engaging in active involvement in the post-Soviet countries. This in turn represented a threat to Russian influence, becoming a negative interest in the framework of the OSCE (Dunay, 2017; Kropatcheva, 2012; Zellner, 2005). Considering these aspects, we can evaluate the involvement of the Russian Federation in the OSCE as being one of a rational actor that uses the opportunities offered by the institutions in order to maintain its foreign policy goals. The criticism brought over the years by Russia<sup>3</sup> to the OSCE in general and to the activities of the OSCE ODIHR, which have also seen support from some CIS countries, including Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, provides a clearer image of the interests that these states have (Dunay, 2017; Putz, 2016). It also shows that the institutions can, in the long run, alter the structure of domestic policy, which in turn may erode the legitimacy of certain regimes, providing ground for limited involvement in order to curtail the influence of such institutions.

Strengthening respect for human rights, democratic institutions, and the electoral system have been central to the OSCE agenda and activities in the Kyrgyz Republic, and over the years have become an apple of discord between the organisation and the host country. In 2016, President Almazbek Atambayev proposed a number of amendments to the country's Constitution, deemed by the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission joint opinion as noncompliant with "the international human rights and rule of law standards and OSCE commitments" (ODIHR Opinion No. CONST-KG/294/2016). At the same time Kyrgyz authorities heavily criticised the OSCE for providing a platform to Kadyrzhan Batyrov (one of the ethnic Uzbeks accused of inciting the 2010 interethnic clashes in the south) during the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw (Putz, 2016). These could have served as a deal breaker leading to further political alienation and confrontation. Since the 2017 mandate change and sufficient presence downsized—initiated by the Kyrgyz government and explained as due to "the considerable progress of the Kyrgyz Republic on the path of democratic reforms"—Kyrgyzstan's national priorities, ownership, and capacity have been put before the country's commitments to the OSCE (OSCE Permanent Council Decision No. 1250, 2017). Not only was the OSCE Centre in Bishkek transformed into the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek, and the OSCE Field Office in Osh closed, but the Kyrgyz government also insisted on stricter state control and limiting "the scope of the Office's reports only to its own programmatic activities" (OSCE Permanent Council Decision No. 1250, 2017).

The EAEU was established to "ensure free movement of goods, services, capital and labour as well as coordinated, agreed or common policy in the economic sectors"

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<sup>3</sup> For further analysis on this topic, see Viatcheslav Morozov (2005). Russia's changing attitude toward the OSCE: Contradictions and continuity. *Sicherheit und Frieden (S + F)/Security and Peace*, 23(2), 69–73, and Andrey Kortunov (19 May 2021). To stay or not to stay? Seven concerns Russia has about the OSCE. *Russian International Affairs Council*: <https://russiacouncil.ru/en/analytically-and-comments/analytically-to-stay-or-not-to-stay-seven-concerns-russia-has-about-the-osce/>.

(EAEU Treaty, 2014). Its normative framework prioritises economy over politics, at least on paper, promising freedom of choice to citizens and the benefits of harmonised legislation and a common market to businesses. The union promotes ideas of cooperation and regional integration, while respecting principles of the international law, including the principles of territorial integrity of member states as well as differences in their political structures (EAEU Treaty, 2014).

Leveraging its labour migration policies and the EAEU visa-free regime for labour migrants, Russia enjoys considerable support from its allies in the region in events of major international confrontations. For instance, remittance-dependent Kyrgyzstan was among the few states that recognised the results of the Crimea referendum and the decision to join the Russian Federation as legitimate (RFE/RL, 2014). Research has shown that the EAEU is used by the political elites in Kyrgyzstan as a legitimisation tool for security and stability (Kudaibergenova, 2016). The country's 2015 accession to the EAEU, however, was marred by inducements provided by the Russian Federation, consolidating the view that the organisation's function is not based on procedural coherence, but rather on an alternative normative agenda to counter Western influence (Heathershaw et al., 2019).

The SCO lays out the normative framework for what can be described as "security-based regional cooperation" with goals formally, if not fully, compatible and non-adversarial to those of the EAEU and OSCE. The organisation is said to encourage cooperation in a variety of areas from trade to environment; ensure peace and stability in the region by combating transnational criminal activity; and promote a "new democratic, fair and rational political and economic international order" (SCO Charter, 2001).

Although most often analysed from the perspective of a politico-military alliance, SCO integration takes place on several levels, including at the economic and energy levels. The success of integration in some dimensions is limited due to the divergent interests of China (as an importer of energy resources) and Russia (as a large exporter of energy resources with an inefficient manufacturing economy which is opposed to deeper economic integration within the SCO), leading to the strengthening of the advisory nature of the SCO rather than its use in other capacities (Libman & Vinokurov, 2021). While the agenda of the SCO is visibly more normative, implying an assertion of local understanding of political regimes based on non-interference and the fight against extremism and separatism, the EAEU refers explicitly only to economic cooperation and integration, but represents a vision of Russian Eurasianism (Tskhay & Costa Buranelli, 2020).

China finds the SCO instrumental to its own economic and security interests in the region and beyond, promoting economy over a political and human rights approach, and stressing both mutual non-interference and cooperation in "counter-acting terrorism, separatism and extremism, illicit narcotics and arms trafficking, and other types of criminal activity of a transnational character" (SCO Charter, 2001). Increasingly dependent on China's loans, investments, and infrastructure projects, Central Asian states stay silent on any reservations and concerns they could have about the treatment of fellow Muslims in China (Pannier, 2020). Human and minority rights violations against Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang,

including Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks, have been reported on and heavily criticised by civil society and the international community. Despite growing anti-Chinese sentiments among local populations and pressure from civil society, Central Asian leaders prefer to maintain stable and positive relations with their powerful neighbour and demonstrate support for China's actions to the extent possible in their own contexts (Uralova & Bober, 2020).

Moreover, Chinese, and Russian approaches to domestic politics, especially with regard to elections and suppressing public protest, also play an important socialising role for Central Asian regimes. The Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP), for instance, is quite infamous internally and internationally for their "often brutish, thuggish tactics" when dealing with riots and protests (Girard, 2020). Russia, in its turn, has been systematically tightening control over any opposition since the 2011 Bolotnaya Square protests in Moscow, both in terms of suppression tactics and legislation (HRW, 2013; Omelicheva, 2021). It is relevant to note that Central Asian states have mirrored Russian legislation on restricting the public manifestation of dissent through "authoritarian policy transfer" (Lemon & Antonov, 2020).

SCO framework investment projects and military exercises benefit both Russia and China by promoting their ideas and supporting loyal regimes. According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, trade volume between China and SCO partners reached 245 billion US dollars in 2020 and total Chinese investment in other member states exceeded 70 billion dollars as of July 2021 (Xinhua, 2021). To further boost integration efforts, Russia suggested switching from US dollars to national currencies for SCO trade settlements and setting a Eurasian financial advisory mechanism to facilitate this process (Russia Today, 2020). These suggestions make both SCO and EAEU membership more appealing to autocratic regimes keen on their own survival, and thus consequential for the human rights situation in the region, enabling consolidation under "norm subsidiarity" in order to resist the influence of Western powers.

While international organisations are generally viewed as vehicles for the promotion of democratic norms, some researchers analyse how their normative frameworks might undermine democratisation and benefit authoritarian regimes. Utilising "treaty nestedness" analysis, Ambrosio shows how treaties and agreements making up the SCO's legal framework advance "a regional agenda which runs counter to promoting democratic political development and human rights by prioritising regime stability over political change" (Ambrosio, 2016). In line with this argument, a report prepared by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) states that aligning domestic legislation of member states with SCO doctrine and principles "extends the control of China and Russia, the SCO's dominant regimes, over regional counter-terrorism policies and practices and over human rights in SCO countries" (FIDH, 2012). The "constitutive localisation" thus becomes more visible, with local re-interpretations of globally used concepts in ways that serve the purposes of the local elites.



Therefore, in comparison with the OSCE, and ODIHR in particular, the SCO and the EAEU are indirect norm entrepreneurs based on their protective integration policies and roles as intergovernmental instruments for legitimising political regimes. They promote norms through the development of discourse on protecting national sovereignty and, more generally, the status-quo. The EAEU is an expression of Russia's normative vision, where "Russia is not a revisionist power but, conversely, a status quo, conservative one, which struggles to challenge the cosmopolitan approaches based on democracy-promotion and human-rights enhancement advanced by Western liberal powers" (Tskhay & Costa Buranelli, 2020). Tskhay and Costa Buranelli argue that the Central Asian states are using "balancing regionalism" as a tool for avoiding excessive great power influence, for obtaining economic and political gains, and for conforming to the norms of regionalism and multilateralism, "enhancing their international standing and legitimacy" (Tskhay & Costa Buranelli, 2020).

Analysis shows that, in comparison with the EAEU and the SCO, the OSCE takes a comprehensive approach to security, operating in three different dimensions, from politico-military to economic and environmental, to the human dimension. Norms and concepts promoted within the latter include democratic institutions and free and fair elections, gender equality, fundamental human rights and freedoms, media freedom and development, and others.

### **3.4 The Quality of Democracy in Kyrgyzstan and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Upon gaining its independence, Kyrgyzstan officially declared itself a secular and democratic state, enshrining this in its 1993 Constitution. Two revolutions and a coup d'état later, the country seems to struggle to keep up with the "island of democracy" label once too readily and generously offered by the international community. In recent years, the country has been categorised under either hybrid or authoritarian regime by various international organisations depending on their measurement method and scale. This section analyses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the quality of democracy in Kyrgyzstan, with consideration given to the ambivalent attitude of the Kyrgyz government backed and strengthened by the ongoing competition of the norm entrepreneurs active in the country. The case of the parallel negotiations with the United States and Russian Federation for military bases in Kyrgyzstan is well documented (Levine, 2016, p. 210), and points to the interplay between security factors and normative agendas, ultimately leading to the erosion of commitments on democracy promotion (Cooley, 2012; McGlinchey, 2020).

The first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Kyrgyzstan on 18 March 2020. Authorities responded by declaring a state of emergency, imposing a complete lockdown and curfew from March 25 until May 10 in several cities, as well as introducing social distancing requirements and switching to remote work and education. The



country was among those OSCE participating states that “sought derogations from international human rights standards” in connection with the state of emergency, namely freedoms movement and assembly, however, only for cities and districts where a state of emergency had been declared (OSCE ODIHR, 2020a). The COVID-19 pandemic incited international donors to offer significant aid to Kyrgyzstan, but corrupt practices hindered proper accountability of the spending. Reports cited widespread corruption across the country at the level of the hospitals as well as in the administrative authorities, leading to repeated public outcry regarding the poorly equipped medical workers and hospitals (Satke, 2021). On a different note, Dzhuraev pointed out that the pandemic underscored the lack of regional coordination in crisis response in Central Asia, as well as a lack of “quick external solutions to domestic problems,” especially in terms of funding (Dzhuraev, 2021), an area particularly troublesome for Kyrgyzstan, whose economy is highly dependent on external assistance and remittances.

From the onset of country’s independence, Kyrgyzstan opted for a multi-vector foreign policy, thus trying to attract as much investment and support as possible for the needs of the small mountainous and poor state (Abdyldaev, 2017; Dzhuraev, 2020). State- and nation-building, “consolidation of independence and sovereignty, securing national interests by political and diplomatic methods, and the creation of favourable conditions for political and economic reforms” were among major challenges and goals to the young republic’s foreign policy (Sari, 2012). As put in the country’s National Security Concept, Bishkek officially views the OSCE mainly as a watchdog organisation, monitoring the situation with regard to human rights, democratisation, and elections, while the EAEU and SCO are strongly associated with comprehensive cooperation, the development of friendly relations with regional partners, and addressing issues of stability and sustainable development (McDermott, 2012).

OSCE activities in Kyrgyzstan focus on border management, preventing human trafficking and violent extremism, supporting human rights defenders, and promoting gender equality and inclusivity, among others. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek continued its regular activities of training of staff, specialists and legislators; conducting needs assessment missions; and preparing electoral observation missions (OSCE ODIHR, 2020c). However, the OSCE was most visible during the electoral observation missions, when the ODIHR signalled its concerns around vote-buying and the possibility of the lack of impartiality on the part of the Central Electoral Commission (OSCE ODIHR, 2020b). The elections were followed by a violent change in government, which Doolotkeldieva relates, among others, to the economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 measures and public dissatisfaction with the government (Doolotkeldieva, 2021).

An evident landslide shift in the quality of democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic happened when the presidential elections in January 2021 were combined with a constitutional referendum, in which the majority (81.30%) opted for a strictly presidential regime in the country. In April of that same year, 79.32% of voters approved

the new Constitution, significantly expanding presidential powers (Central Commission for Elections and Referendums of the Kyrgyz Republic). Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic was used by the new government to significantly weaken democratic institutions, leaving the track of a semi-parliamentary system. Further weakening checks and balances, the country's new Constitution also reduced the parliament in number (from 120 to 90 members) and decision-making powers, while allowing the president to initiate new laws and referendums. The incumbent now enjoys more influence over judiciary, members of the cabinet, the National Bank, and the Central Election Committee (Venice Commission Opinion No. 1021/2021). Article 7 of the document introduces a new consultative body, the People's Kurultai, controlled by the president and duplicating, as some fear, many of the parliament's functions (HRW, 2021). Examining the role of the Kurultai and selection procedures for its numerous members, Zhanaev points out that it might "reproduce medieval practices of its traditional way of governance," and ensure more legitimacy and further empower the president against the national parliament (Zhanaev, 2021). Vague references made in the document to traditions, moral values, and the protection of young people could be, analysts say, manipulated to restrict activities, freedom of speech, and peaceful assembly (Imanaliyeva, 2021). These changes, coupled with ongoing economic crisis, widespread corruption, and nepotism, could be detrimental to the rule of law, human rights and freedoms, and overall democratisation efforts in the country.

Under the pretence of public health concerns and measures, the Kyrgyz government also took steps to further narrow public space targeting civil society and media (IPHR, 2020). Authorities deliberately attacked and threatened journalists and medical staff for spreading "false information" about the virus, inadequate protective equipment, and working conditions or payment (Hotam, 2020). Parliamentarians proposed a draft law on Manipulating Information aiming to criminalise the dissemination of so-called "false news." The draft did not comply with international freedom of expression standards and has been met with public protest and heavy criticism by international organisations for its unclear purposes and for also targeting user anonymity, among other raised concerns. The revised draft law was first rejected by the Kyrgyz parliament in June but approved by late July 2020. In late August 2021, the new President Japarov signed the controversial bill into law, a decision met with general discontent (RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service, 2021). This is not the first time the Kyrgyz government has attempted to tighten control and proposed laws inspired by Russian legislation. Previous examples include the Foreign Agents Law (Lelik, 2016) and the bill "against gay propaganda" (Jacques, 2018). This is arguably the case due to a number of factors, including a shared history, media space and language, and strong elite interplay that allow the Kremlin's strategic narratives and discourse to spill outside the country's borders so that its legislative measures governing civil society and media are copied with enthusiasm by other states in the region, as shown by previous research (Lemon & Antonov, 2020).

Amidst intensifying anti-Western rhetoric among elites and lawmakers, another law "mirroring Russia's latest restrictions" came into force in July 2021. Adding to existing financial reporting requirements, the new law obliges non-profits operating

in Kyrgyzstan, exempting those working with the state, political parties and religious organisations, to submit detailed reports on their sources of funding and spending to avoid possible forced shutdown (Talant, 2021). While proponents argue the law could help in controlling the NGO sector to protect “Kyrgyz statehood from interference from other countries, preserve the traditions and culture of the people,” critics see it as a targeted attack on “NGOs focused on government accountability regarding corruption and human rights” (Putz, 2021). The official position over the tightening of legislation is that NGOs are “overly politicised,” and that those threatening national security should be treated accordingly (Masalieva, 2021). Cooperation is welcomed, yet only from organisations complying with the new rules and not confronting the state. Such an attitude and retaliatory measures showcase the prioritisation of regime security over the human dimension and support Lewis’ observation that the SCO, unlike the OSCE, does not consider non-state bodies as useful in the promotion of security, instead seeing them as “potentially threatening stability in various ways” (Lewis, 2012, p. 1224).

Even prior to the 2021 elections and the pandemic years, the 2019 V-Dem<sup>4</sup> report introduced the first model for forecasting autocratisation and listed Kyrgyzstan in the top-10 most at-risk countries among Philippines, Fiji, Mali, Hungary, Guatemala, Kosovo, the Republic of Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Tanzania. The 2020 V-Dem report lists Kyrgyzstan as an “Electoral Autocracy,” highlighting also that violations of democratic norms in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, including excessive use of emergency powers, limitations to freedoms, and the lack of predictability regarding the foreseeable end of these measures, were more frequent in closed and electoral autocracies, such as Kyrgyzstan (V-Dem Institute, 2021). This situation is consistent with the conclusions of the previously mentioned research on the decline in the quality of democracy in times of crisis, signalling that weak democracies are more impacted by their effects.

Both the 2020 and 2021 Freedom House reports confirm the observation labelling Kyrgyzstan a consolidated authoritarian regime, coming in 14th out of 100 countries in 2021 (up from 16th in 2020). Kyrgyzstan’s democracy index was falling already in pre-pandemic 2019, when it scored 4.89 and was ranked 101 out of 167 (still the best result in Central Asia) (Freedom House, 2021). It slipped down to 4.21 in 2021 and was ranked 107 out of 167 by The Economist Intelligence Unit, as the “failed parliamentary election in October further exacerbated the steady erosion of democratic principles in the country” (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). It is also notable that, in the report prepared for the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting OSCE-2017, human rights organisations connected the deterioration of the human rights situation in Kyrgyzstan with country’s accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (OSCE ODIHR, 2017). Further decline in the quality of democracy in 2020–2022 in Kyrgyzstan has been connected both with COVID-19 mitigation

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<sup>4</sup> Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) is an institute and approach used to collect data and measure democracy building on five principles. To learn more about the project and methodology visit the V-Dem website: <https://www.v-dem.net/>.

measures and the electoral turbulences and upheaval of October 2020, which were signalled in the Freedom House report for 2021 (Putz, 2021).

As shown in this section, the pandemic challenged the weak democracy in Kyrgyzstan by fostering initiatives aimed at inhibiting the public participation of civil society and further centralising the power around the president following a coup d'état brought about by public discontent exacerbated by the public health crisis. During this time, external normative frameworks were used by the political elites of Kyrgyzstan in order to justify further repression of dissent and limitations of free speech, with the OSCE-ODIHR pursuing its regular monitoring activities with regard to the elections but having little sway in pressuring the authorities to comply with human rights standards, even when implementing safety restrictions.

### 3.5 Conclusions

The pandemic years had a harsh impact on democracy and liberal norm promotion in the Kyrgyz Republic, culminating in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2021, and the constitutional referendum which returned the country to a strong presidency. The pandemic is said to have accelerated the ongoing global decline in democracy, with no exception for Central Asia. Taking advantage of COVID-19 and political disturbance, President Japarov was able to not only fast-track his way into office but also consolidate presidential power.

Kyrgyzstan was the first Central Asian country to have a female president, and the 2018 election was considered to be “Central Asia’s first peaceful handover of power from one democratically elected leader to another” (V-Dem Institute, 2019). Thus, Kyrgyzstan has already witnessed three changes in government driven by civil unrest, as well as a peaceful transition of power, unlike its other Central Asian counterparts. Prior to the pandemic, Kyrgyzstan was the last outpost of relatively institutionalised political pluralism in a region where most of socialisation and liberal norm promotion efforts were unsuccessful (Lewis, 2012). What started as a health crisis in a politically and economically turbulent state, amplified pre-existing differences in vision and approaches between the state and some norm entrepreneurs, while working in favour of others.

Our research has shown that Kyrgyzstan’s national and regime interests and priorities are more aligned with those of the SCO and EAEU rather than those of the OSCE, mainly due to the visibility of the Russian and Chinese backed organisations, which have more resources, political weight, and leverage in the region. The OSCE, through its politically binding character, cannot advocate for significant changes and reforms, relying mostly on naming and shaming instruments to highlight violations of democratic norms, while, at the same time, working at grassroots levels and only under the mandate agreed to by the national government to promote technical procedures which can reinforce democratic standards in various areas. OSCE membership offers Kyrgyzstan, a politically weak state with a poor economy, the framework of upholding its badge of honour of being an “island of democracy,” while, at the same

time, pursuing policies aimed at reinforcing the centralisation of power around the president, models already enacted and proven stable in the region and advocated for through the activities of the EAEU and SCO.

Further research is needed to evaluate the real impact of the new political leadership in Kyrgyzstan on the foreign policy orientation of the country, and to assess the real possibility of norm convergence with its Central Asian neighbours with consideration given to Sadyr Japarov's rise to power and the ongoing border conflict with Tajikistan. The pandemic has led to temporary progress on Eurasian integration under the framework of the EAEU, especially with regard to vaccine diplomacy, customs exemptions, and relief in border control, but has deepened and exposed the pre-existent dysfunctional practices of corruption and tightened control (Figueiredo Ferreira, 2020). The SCO also supported its member states in managing the COVID-19 pandemic by fostering sharing of medical best practices (Pantucci, 2020), which shows its role as a tool for enhancing China's international profile and reflects a larger effort in diversifying its purpose from a security-oriented organisation to one fostering economic integration and more (Neapole, 2020).

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# Chapter 4

## The Rise of Anti-Eurasian Sentiment in Kazakhstan



Saniya Malikbayeva and Gabit Gabdullin

### 4.1 Introduction

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), established in 2015 and consisting of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, has gained significant attention among both scholars and policymakers. Similar to other integration processes, economic development has been a crucial factor in the creation of the EAEU. While it is argued that certain imbalances between the members of the EAEU potentially pose a challenge for its future functioning (Mursalova et al., 2020), there are also internal constraints in term of popular resistance as well as balancing the interests and commitments within its members states. One of the leading and founding members of the EAEU is Kazakhstan. In spite of the worsening economic situation and recent political change, Kazakhstan remains a “locomotive” of Eurasian integration (Gotev, 2020).

This chapter investigates this discrepancy by assessing the main existing narratives against Eurasian integration circulating among the population of Kazakhstan. After careful examination of various materials, we found that, in addition to economic concerns, concerns over national sovereignty, national identity, and territorial integrity are the most prevailing themes within Kazakhstani society. Some of these narratives also intersect with anti-Russian and rising anti-Chinese sentiment. We also explore how the trajectories of these discourses are manifested vis-à-vis regional differences.

Despite the economic benefits promised by Kazakhstan’s participation in the EAEU, over the past decade, the perception of the population, including that of civil

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society and the business community, has been less optimistic. Between 2010 and 2015, civil society groups were actively engaged in discussions on the topic through press conferences, forums, and roundtables where they expressed their concerns related to Kazakhstan's accession to the Customs Union, and later the Eurasian Economic Union (Makhmutova, 2016).

These concerns varied from doubts about the potential economic benefits to potential threats to national identity. Similarly, the business community of Kazakhstan viewed this initiative as purely institutional, one that failed to consider the interests of small and medium business enterprises. In addition to these public anxieties that were sometimes instrumentalized by the opposition, Kazakhstan's government position was further complicated by the need to balance its emphasis on the pragmatic approach to integration against its efforts to sustain sovereignty (Laruelle, 2015). Despite these challenges and the discourses among different groups, following the establishment of the Eurasian Customs Union, initiated by Russia, in 2010, Kazakhstan signed the treaty to the Eurasian Economic Union. This came into effect on 1 January 2015.

The discrepancy between the popular attitudes towards projects of integration and the discourse promoted by the government is not something new. Similar trajectories can be traced back in the establishment of the European Union (Libman, 2017). Nonetheless, in case of the EAEU, this difference is significant and persistent (Libman, 2017). The process of Eurasian integration in Kazakhstan is a largely top-down process and depends on the will of the national leaders. There is a very limited room for other actors to express and promote their interests. According to Roberts and Moshes, "the EAEU has a two-way interaction problem, where the Commission is too weak to effectively push the integration process forward and nonstate actors too weak or too cautious to use supranational institutions to lobby their interests – a crucial limit on the ability of the EAEU to achieve 'transformative' integration" (Roberts & Moshes, 2016). This is largely attributed to the lack of political pluralism in the EAEU member states. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia are each rated "not free" by Freedom House and other organizations, scoring very low on measures of civil liberties and political rights. Moreover, over the past several years these countries have tightened legislation governing civil society and, in particular, NGO funding.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On 23 September 2015, the lower house of Kazakhstan's parliament, the Mazhilis, passed amendments to several measures tightening control over non-governmental activities. The legislation creates a single "operator" responsible for disbursing all grants from any source, foreign or domestic; requires NGOs to submit information to a government database, at the risk of otherwise being fined or closed; and empowers the Ministry of Culture and Sports to monitor NGO activities (Freedom House, 2015).

## 4.2 Kazakhstani Governmental Position

Kazakhstan's leadership actively supported the creation of the Customs Union in 2010 along with its transformation into the EAEU. From its original proposal in 1994 by Nursultan Nazarbayev at Moscow State University, Kazakhstan has considered the Eurasian Union to be a purely economic entity, without any political dimension. At the initiative of Kazakhstan's government, the EAEU's basic principles contain an article that ensures respect for each member state's political system, meaning that members are not obliged to make political changes as a result of closer integration (Satpayev, 2015). Mostafa (2013) argues that, apart from the potential economic benefits, membership in the EAEU can defend the country from "contending claims and counter-claims on the country's real identity and belongingness" which mainly circulate in Russian discourses. Membership in the EAEU is also part of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy which, since 1992, has become a mechanism for balancing its relationships with the great powers of Russia, China, and the US (Vanderhill et al., 2020). Multi-vector foreign policy is "a policy that develops foreign relations through a framework based on a pragmatic, non-ideological foundation" (Vanderhill et al., 2020). It has been argued that Kazakhstan, similarly to its Central Asian counterparts, exploits the competition between the great powers in order to enjoy "increased benefits, assistance, and better contractual terms" (Cooley, 2012).

Since economic benefit remains a priority for Kazakhstan's participation in the EAEU, the country tends to be sceptical about the admission of the new countries to the Union (Popesku, 2014). In the same vein, Kazakhstan has been largely cautious with "Putin's dream" of a political union (Henley, 2014) with a common currency and a single language (Ferreira, 2020). Even though Nazarbayev first proposed a new regional currency for the Single Economic Space to stimulate intra-regional trade and economic cooperation, Kazakhstan and Belarus backed away from this in the aftermath of Russia's tensions with West (Kim, 2015). Moreover, Kazakhstan has been in favour of closer ties between the EAEU and European Union (Gotev, 2020).

Prior to signing the agreement establishing the EAEU in 2014, Kazakhstan made a statement that it would reserve the right to withdraw from the Union if it threatened to limit the sovereignty of the country (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017). While these statements appear to contradict Kazakhstan's position as a main advocate for the union, they are primarily addressed to the nation's internal audience, and to some extent demonstrate the presence of mistrust between the members of the Eurasian project. This governmental discourse that emphasizes the pragmatic approach and respect for national sovereignty was preserved following the political transition of 2019 (Isaacs, 2020).

For some, it came to a surprise when, in March 2019, Nazarbayev announced his resignation after almost three decades in power; however, this did not occur without him leaving clear advice on Eurasia's integration for his successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Tokayev initially took up the post as an interim president, eventually winning the presidential elections in June 2019. Despite mass protests, the political transition was characterised by stability and continuity of the established political

regime (Isaacs, 2020). Although there was some effort by the newly elected president to demonstrate his voice and power, he remains committed to the legacy of Nazarbayev, particularly continuing his policies regarding the Eurasian Union and wider multi-vectoral foreign policy (Isaacs, 2020). Since his inauguration, Tokayev has been actively involved in activities aimed at enhancing the further development of the EAEU. Some experts claim that Tokayev has decided to take a new political course by paying attention to public attitudes towards the union (Karr, 2020). In the beginning of 2020, Kazakhstan rejected further attempts by Moscow to expand cooperation within the EAEU, in part because of fears that the union was being used by the Kremlin to increase control over its neighbours. In particular, in January 2020, the Russian government proposed that “health care, education, science, the environment, sports, and tourism” become an important part of the Eurasian integration (Karr, 2020).

Recently, in Kazakhstan there have been more and more calls to leave the economic union with Russia despite such potential negative consequences as leaving the transport infrastructure zone and the loss of ability to export in the usual directions. This was reflected in Tokayev’s criticism in May 2020 of the new strategy of the EAEU, one which was eventually sent for revision (Sanchez, 2020). Tokayev recognized that the proposed integration model did not take into account the peculiarities of the national legal systems of the member states and did not meet the principle of reasonable sufficiency. He also admitted that to take such an approach would lead to the rejection of the strategy by national public opinion, since it would restrict the sovereign rights of member state governments and parliaments (Leonov, 2020). Furthermore, during the summer of 2021, Kazakhstan renounced Russia’s call to implement a joint response to Western sanctions against Russia and Belarus (Eurasianet, 2021).

### **4.3 Dynamics of Popular Attitudes Towards Eurasian Integration in Kazakhstan**

The public opinion of Kazakhstan on the issue of the country’s participation in the Eurasian integration process is divided into two opposite camps. The supporters of integration are represented mainly by the government, its opponents are represented by the opposition and civil activists. Most of the groups that oppose the integration lack a broad social base and their activities have been mainly concentrated in Almaty and Nur-Sultan (Tolegenov, 2020). According to Tolegenov (2020), Eurasian scepticism “does not have a clear representation in the ideological palette of the member countries of this union and is not represented on the party-political landscape.” Moreover, there is a lack of the critical debate within the epistemic communities and an absence of a well-established concept of anti-Eurasianism in the media.

An important role in the evolution of the public opinion and its subsequent development is played by the stages of the Kazakhstan’s participation in the Eurasian

project. Prior to ratification of the treaty establishing the Eurasian Customs Union in 2010, debates regarding the potential benefits of Eurasian integration were provoked within society. This period can be considered to be a peak of the integration debate. This discussion was joined by political activists, officials, and opposition leaders, leading to the intensification of criticism of Kazakhstan's intention to cooperate in the creation of the Customs Union and its further transformation into the EAEU. One vivid example was the campaign against the Customs Union launched by the National Social Democratic Party, Azat. In 2010, Azat proposed that they be an "implementation of urgent government crisis response measures due to the joining of the Customs Union." They mainly argued that there would be negative economic consequences that would weaken not only small and medium businesses but would also economically disarm the local population (Nursha, 2014). While the controversies related to the nature of the Eurasian project and Kazakhstan's position in it have often been exploited by the opposition, they have had little impact on government's plans.

The next stage that shaped public discourse was the period after the Customs Union agreement came into force. Prior to the ascension to the Treaty establishing the Eurasian Economic Union, an anti-Eurasian Forum was set up in Almaty (Anceschi & Sorbello, 2014). The main argument employed by the organization against membership was the threat posed by EAEU membership to Kazakhstan's national sovereignty and independence as well as territorial integrity (Satpayev, 2015; Tolegenov, 2020). The anti-Eurasian forum carried out number of activities, including a press conference calling for a referendum and public demonstrations. However, following the signing of the Treaty on 29 May 2014, a decline in criticism was witnessed. Apart from the few public gatherings, the criticism that has accompanied Kazakhstan's participation took place mainly in the social media platforms.

While, at the very beginning, those for and against Eurasian integration were actively involved in the debate, the general populace was rather passive. In this regard, several results monitoring public opinion can be highlighted. Following the example of its counterparts in Europe and Latin America, the Eurasian Development Bank launched the annual EDB Integration Barometer in collaboration with Eurasia monitor in 2012 (Vinokurov, 2017b).<sup>2</sup>

It carried out annual monitoring of public opinion in all EAEU member states between 2012 and 2017. Comparison of the annual results suggested a decline in overall support for the union in all EAEU countries, including Kazakhstan. According to the results of the 2014 public opinion poll, the citizens of Kazakhstan were the biggest proponents of the Customs Union, with more than 84% in favour. While a decline in public support was witnessed between 2012 and 2017, in Kazakhstan this

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<sup>2</sup> The EDB Integration Barometer project envisages annual monitoring of foreign policy, foreign trade, sociocultural, and other integration-related preferences of citizens in the post-Soviet space. The notion of "integration preference," as applied to an individual, is interpreted through a simpler notion of "attraction to a country." Attraction is measured in three dimensions: political, economic, and sociocultural. Each of these dimensions, in turn, is disclosed through a certain interest displayed by the respondent (in politics, the economy, and sociocultural interactions), and through relevant questions. Each questionnaire contains about 20 questions.

was rather moderate, dropping from 80 to 76%. By contrast, in Armenia this fell from 61 to 46%. This trend is partially explained in Armenia by the escalation of the conflict with Azerbaijan (Vinokurov, 2017a). To the contrary, in Kyrgyzstan public support increased from 67 to 81%. Similarly, in Kazakhstan the Institute of Eurasian Integration conducted an opinion poll among the population which demonstrated 51.6% support for integration within EAEU (KazInform, 2014). Unfortunately, no details regarding the sample or methodology of this opinion poll or subsequent studies are available.

Since the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union entered into force in 2015, there has been a visible decline in the integration debate, with the exception of direct criticism in response to particular developments. For example, the draft of the development strategy of the EAEU for 2020–2025 sparked a heated debate as “critics and fighters against the EAEU revived” (Ergaliyev, 2020). In this regard, Kazakhstan’s president Tokayev was the main critic and proponent of further reworking of the strategy. Among the concerns that were raised were those related to issues surrounding natural gas transportation, which were also supported by the leaders of Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, other concerns were expressed in relation to unresolved economic problems and the inclination of the Eurasian Economic Commission towards extending its power to the supervision of the social and humanitarian spheres of the member states (Leonov, 2020). The Eurasian Economic Commission was instructed to carry out necessary amendments to the draft strategy which was eventually approved on 11 December 2020. Ministry of Trade and Integration of Kazakhstan reported that Kazakhstan “managed to achieve the exclusion from the strategy of norms that are contrary to the interests of the republic, and to ensure the inclusion of initiatives that will advance the economic interests of Kazakhstan within the framework of the Union” (Oroskulov, 2020).

#### 4.4 The Role of Nationalism

A rather crucial feature of the Eurasian integration debate in Kazakhstan is related to Kazakh nationalism and nationalist tendencies. While these tendencies are not unique to the country, but rather are seen across the eastern part of the OSCE region, they play a significant role in the governmental approach to integration in the Eurasian Union. Since acquiring its independence, Kazakhstan has faced the challenge of nation building and state formation in the context of a highly fragmented population in terms of “religious, linguistic, and ethnic lines” (Narotum, 2006). Kazakhstan differs from its neighbours in the level of its ethnic diversity. Despite tolerance and support for other ethnic minorities, it is clear that domestic policies and programmes are mainly “Kazakh first” (Goble, 2019). The question of the Russian population in Kazakhstan is an especially sensitive issue. While more and more Russians are leaving the country, those who remain experience more pressure and increasing Kazakhisation (Aitymbetov et al., 2015). There is an element of confrontation and

controversy between the two predominant national identities, “Kazakh and Russian-Slavic,” that is reflected in related policies.

This perceived confrontation can be traced in the attitudes held by supporters and opponents of Eurasian economic integration in Kazakhstan. According to Dzhaksylykov (2016), the line between those who support and oppose Eurasian integration “runs not only and not so much in the field of economic justifications as in the field of national self-identification.” It is also argued that civic identity and civil position is interpreted through ethnocultural self-identification (Dzhaksylykov, 2016).

Since the beginning of the process of Eurasian integration, warnings against and disagreements with the process were mainly expressed by Kazakh nationalists (Kudaibergenova, 2016), whereas Russian populations were primarily in favour of closer integration. The discourse around Kazakhstan’s deep integration into the Eurasian Economic Union, to a certain extent, reflects the state of development of the civil identity of Kazakhstanis, in particular, the meaning and place of ethnocultural self-identification in relation to civil identity (Dzhaksylykov, 2016). Kazakh nationalists highlighted their displeasure with the prospect of the Customs Union by launching public addresses and a petition that claimed that “the terms of the Customs Union Agreement don’t promote and defend the national, economic, and strategic interests of our republic” (Nursha, 2014). Nationalists continued their agenda between 2010 and 2014. During this period, the debate went from a focus on the economic and political aspects of the union to national political ones. According to Anceschi & Sorbello, (2014), the movement against Kazakhstan’s membership in the EAEU was mainly filled with nationalist sentiment and established its position “by advocating the promotion of the Kazakh language and the preservation of Kazakh culture.”

As discussed, the governmental discourse goes in line with the demands associated with the preservation of the national identity and territorial integrity. A new wave of Kazakh nationalism has recently been observed which has been manifested through the replacement of the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in the Kazakh language with the Latin alphabet, intention to print banknotes purely in the Kazakh language, and some calls for Russian-language schools closure (Goble, 2019). This new wave is argued to have an impact on the domestic as well as foreign policies of Kazakhstan.

## 4.5 The Rise of Anti-Russian and Anti-Chinese Attitudes

The 2014 Ukrainian crisis occurred in the same year that the Treaty on the EAEU was adopted. This further fuelled not only anti-Eurasian narratives but also intensified the anti-Russian connotations of the discourse. There is a body of literature that tries to unravel Russia’s role and aspirations related to Eurasian integration. One of the prevailing views focuses on Russia’s intention to promote its hegemony in the region (Kirkham, 2016). In particular, the EAEU has been regarded as an instrument through which Russia seeks to create and ensure its influence in the post-Soviet region (Libman, 2017). Currently, Russia is seen as a counterbalance to Chinese



influence in Central Asia, in particular in Kazakhstan (Stronski & Ng, 2018). With the examples of the Belt and Road Initiative sometimes referred to as New Silk Road, China is currently not only expanding its presence in the economies of the Central Asian countries but also steadily consolidating its dominance in some economic sectors (Nursha, 2019). In the light of the constant need to balance these two powers, Kazakhstanis are developing both anti-Russian and anti-Chinese sentiments (Goble, 2018). These negative views undoubtedly affect the further promotion of the strategic interests of both countries. The anti-Russian sentiment has been fuelled by several factors. First of all, the political discourse on the nature of the Eurasian project has been largely interpreted as a threat to the sovereignty of Kazakhstan by both the government and the population (Jarosiewicz, 2014). This fear existed before the establishment of the EAEU; however, it was reinforced by the explicit statement in Putin's proposal on introducing a common currency and more politically driven cooperation (Sharipzhan, 2015). Concern over the loss of sovereignty in addition to territorial integrity was exacerbated in Kazakhstan during the Ukrainian crisis. Specifically, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was interpreted as a signal to other post-Soviet states with a large Russian population (especially in regions bordering Russia) of the potential for military intervention and destabilising efforts by Russia in case of internal political instability (Ford, 2014). Despite the security assistance promised as a part of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the lack of direct countering of Russia in Ukraine by the UK and US alarmed Kazakhstan enough for the country to reconsider its cooperation with Russia (Stronski, 2020). This led to the increased cooperation efforts by Kazakhstan not only with its neighbours but also beyond the region (Jarosiewicz, 2014). Immediately after the situation in Ukraine started to evolve, the Kazakhstani government started to take measures to counter the possibility of such Russian interference, including a new Kazakh penal code that included an article that made threatening the country's territorial integrity and calling for secessionism punishable by ten years in prison. Access to Kazakhstani citizenship for Oralmans<sup>3</sup> was made easier<sup>4</sup> in order to increase the ethnic balance of the population (Laruelle, 2015).<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the growing anti-Chinese sentiment, it is stated that it is "is deeply rooted in Kazakh society and elites" and is stronger than the anti-Russian sentiments (Laruelle, 2015). With the evolution of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in recent years, this sinophobia has intensified (Laruelle, 2015). These attitudes are also being exploited and instrumentalized in opposition to government policies (Plakhina, 2021). In March 2021, people in the cities of Almaty, Nur-Sultan, Shymkent, Aktobe,

<sup>3</sup> Ethnic Kazakhs who have re-immigrated to Kazakhstan since 1991.

<sup>4</sup> "The changes include allowing returnees to settle anywhere they choose and get oralman status, allowing them to apply for permanent residence immediately and allowing them to apply for citizenship as soon as they have received permanent resident status and be granted citizenship as early as within three months" (Witte, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> "To help even out the country's population, oralmans began to be directed to seven regions in the country's north and west: Akmola, Pavlodar, Kostanai, West Kazakhstan, East Kazakhstan and Atyrau – areas that were experiencing population loss and where there would be more space for housing and new construction" (Witte, 2014).

and Uralsk rallied against an increased Chinese economic presence and influence (Laruelle, 2015). Participants in these rallies also condemned the repression of ethnic Kazakhs and Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang Autonomous region (RFE, 2021).

This rising anti-Chinese sentiment, in the light of China's Belt and Road Initiative, in which the EAEU, and Kazakhstan in particular, features as a key partner, is likely to present additional challenge to the foreign policy of Kazakhstan's government.

## 4.6 Regional Differences and Contrasting Views

Kazakhstan, the ninth largest country in the world in terms of square kilometres, has a large and uneven concentration of ethnicities between the North and the South. Ethnic minorities and groups live, in large part, very separate lives. For example, Russians mainly reside in the northern part of the country, and Kazakhs in the southwest. Russians account for approximately 50% of the population in the northern part of Kazakhstan, depending on the location. For instance, in the city of Petropavlovsk, Russians make up 59.28% of the population while ethnic Kazakhs only comprise 29.99% (Zhanmukanova, 2021). In the south and western regions of Kazakhstan, ethnic Kazakhs make up more than 70% (UNFPA, 2019).

This results in a visible fragmentation of the views regarding Eurasian integration, where the north tends to ally with Russia and the south does not. Revision of independent investigations in different regions of Kazakhstan reveals that the northern parts of the country including Kostanay (Makanov, 2015),<sup>6</sup> Ural (Amenov, 2016),<sup>7</sup> and Pavlodar (Dzhaksylykov, 2016)<sup>8</sup> have a positive perception of the EAEU while the southern parts of Kazakhstan find the idea of the EAEU rather unattractive. Ethnic Kazakhs, and notably Kazakh nationalists, in the north tend to be sceptical of the

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<sup>6</sup> See: Sociological data concluded that population of the regions that borders with Russia tends to have mainly positive attitudes toward the Eurasian integration. The EAEU is viewed as a necessary step in highly competitive twenty-first century. Participants of this study rejected any link between the EAEU and "imperial aspiration" or "geopolitical schemes" that can pose a threat to sovereignty and independence (Makanov, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> See: Union of Social Scientists in West Kazakhstan among different integration experts of the Ural region. According to the results of the survey, the vast majority of the respondents felt positive about the EEU when asked about the benefits of the EAEU. Eighty percent of respondents were satisfied with the coverage of the activities of the EAEU in the media. When asked whether the integration poses any risk to Kazakhstan's sovereignty, only 8% expressed their respective concern. However, with respect to the principles of equality and mutual benefit, people of the Ural region seem to be less convinced (Amenov, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> See: Survey study, representatives of Russian and Slavic national associations fully support the creation of the Eurasian Union and believe that integration should be deep. Their arguments in favor of integration are based on the following ideas: an alliance is necessary to protect against external threats (military and economic threats posed by Western countries, primarily the United States); the union is economically beneficial; the peoples of these countries are close in culture and worldviews, the process of their assimilation is underway. The result among common population is ambiguous. For example, the position against the EAEU was not supported by a list of argument, beliefs were more based on intuitive denial (Dzhaksylykov, 2016).

EAEU as well. According to the study by Dzhaksylykov (2016), “nationalists on both sides are already taking opposite positions in relation to the EAEU: Kazakhs are against deep integration, Russians are for.” Some of the participants of that study even expressed their scepticism towards the results of the cross-national polls which proclaimed Kazakhstan’s unreserved support for becoming a member of the EAEU. Not only was this attributed to the potential bias of the researchers but also to Russian propaganda that prevails on national television (Dzhaksylykov, 2016). Overall, studies emphasize that studying the public opinion of the Kazakhstanis with respect to the EAEU is challenging as a consequence of the very limited and superficial understanding of the Eurasian Economic Union among the vast majority of the population, alongside other factors.

## 4.7 Conclusion

Based on the discussions above, one can conclude that the general population in Kazakhstan maintains a critical perception of the EAEU and the different kinds of institutional Eurasian integration projects. Kazakhstan’s membership in the EAEU has been controversial not only because of the uneven extent of the benefits but also due to its continuous efforts to counter Russian attempts to extend its scope of influence.

Regarding the public opinion, there is a lack of extensive research and public opinion polls. Civil society activities are restricted to social media platforms and tend to be mainly based in big cities. Since Kazakhstan became a part of the EAEU, there has been an overall decline in the integration debate. With respect to the discrepancy between the popular attitudes and governmental stance on Kazakhstan’s membership in the Eurasian project, this relationship is more complicated than it seems. Not only has Kazakhstan’s participation been regarded “puzzling” given the value it places on its independence (Kudaibergenova, 2016) but its unwillingness to allow for more sophisticated critical debate is primarily explained by resorting to the authoritarian logic. Thus, even though opposition groups exploit the controversies related to Eurasian integration against the government, the political establishment that currently rules Kazakhstan is willing to respond to the discourse regarding the perceived threat to sovereignty and integrity, particularly as these were further exacerbated by the events in Ukraine which fed anti-Russian attitudes. As demonstrated previously, the government is compelled to consistently underline the economic baseline and priority of the Union. At the same time, in regions bordering Russia, a large portion of the Russian population tends to be supportive of even closer union with Russia. In the past, local governments in these regions have managed to smooth things over at the expense of the nationalist nation-building strategy.

An event that might have an impact on the perception of the Eurasian Economic Union, not only in Kazakhstan but also in the rest of the members’ states, is the rise of mass political upheaval that has emerged in EAEU member states over in recent

years.<sup>9</sup> However, there seems to be a lack of extensive research into how these protests either have transformed the perception of Eurasian integration within the population or have further exacerbated anti-Eurasian sentiment. In spite of the occurrence of public protests and revolutions, most have failed to produce any meaningful institutional and structural changes. Although the population in Armenia has become increasingly “hostile” towards Russian presence in its economy<sup>10</sup> in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution that ousted its Russia-friendly government, the government hasn’t revised its membership in the EAEU. Similarly, protests in Belarus failed to produce a sharp change in public opinion, possibly because Lukashenko had previously expressed some resentment in the prospective of closer integration with Russia (Stronski, 2020).

Last, but not least, the public health crises as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic became a stress test for the EAEU. The pandemic demonstrated the unpreparedness of the union in the face of a socioeconomic crisis. The pandemic and its socioeconomic and political challenges are likely to have an impact on the development of the EAEU in the upcoming years. Among other implications is the potential rise of critical debate around the prospect of deeper integration. Moreover, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and despite of the Kazakhstan’s government’s official stance of neutrality in Kazakhstan, there have been calls for leaving EAEU primarily due to adverse effects of the Western sanctions against Russia on Kazakhstan’s economy.

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<sup>9</sup> In 2020, a political crisis began in Belarus prompted by a widespread criticism of the results of the presidential elections. In September, an unprecedented military escalation was witnessed in Nagorno-Karabakh. In Kyrgyzstan, the protests against the results of the parliamentary elections started in October while in Kazakhstan, public protests took place in summer 2019 in response to the results of the presidential elections following the resignation of Nazarbayev (Kesarev, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> In 2017, Pashinyan-led “Yelk” parliamentary faction proposed Armenia’s withdrawal from the EAEU. However, later he confirmed Armenia’s commitment to deepening further integration in the EAEU. This is partially explained by the Armenia’s heavy economic and energy reliance on Russia (Terzyan, 2019).

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# Chapter 5

## Development Aid in Central Asia: A “Chessboard” for Great Powers?



Nargiza Kilichova

### 5.1 Introduction

The Central Asian countries, after gaining their independence in the early 1990s, have rapidly become a focus for competing interests and donor influence. As a result, the region is referred to as an intercontinental corridor exposed to different influences, the impact of which ranges from its economic to security-building options and strategic alignments (Freire, 2010). As an intergovernmental organisation, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) tried to gain influence in the region when the Central Asian republics joined the organisation soon after their independence. The European Union (EU) also joined efforts towards promoting a democratisation agenda by including “democracy, rule of law and human rights” in its Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) (The European Communities and their Member States and the Republic of Uzbekistan, 1992, Art. 2), which provide the framework for the EU’s bilateral relations with the republics of Central Asia.

The development assistance landscape of Central Asia, where international donors including the EU and OSCE provide development aid, is changing. The former Soviet Central Asian republics that have remained in Russia’s orbit are still economically and politically reliant on Russia to varying degrees. In addition to Russia’s traditional influence, Russia has recently showed a stronger presence in the region. During the visit of President Xi Jinping of China to Kazakhstan in September 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative was introduced, signalling that Beijing wanted to be a major player in Central Asia as well (Pantucci, 2016). As the economies and material strength

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of Russia and China grow, these emerging countries are increasingly “investing” in foreign aid.

This chapter focuses on OSCE and EU engagement in the Central Asian region and on an actor-centred comparative perspective that sheds light on the local context of each actors’ development assistance and how they understand and translate this into a development assistance strategy. The chapter starts from the premise that actors’ approaches to promoting the rule of law do not overlap, but rather run in parallel. This parallel can be described as parallels between the external spirits—the “Western spirit,” the “Eurasian spirit,” and the “Shanghai spirit.” It is also important to highlight the “Central Asian spirit,” as the Central Asian states are sovereign countries with leaders who build their foreign policies on the basis of the so-called multi-vector policy, which aims to balance relations with the major powers (Kazantsev et al., 2021). A similar multi-vector constellation can be used to describe the development assistance landscape of Central Asia and reflects the multi-parallel nature of development assistance.

The following questions provide the analytical framework for this chapter: (1) Do domestic political and rule of law institutions and the development policies of relevant actors in the field differ from each other, how so, and how this is translated into rule of law promotion strategies and (2) how do the EU and the OSCE seek to achieve their policy goals and avoid marginalisation in the midst of such power struggles in Central Asia?

Building on Schimmelfennig’s approach of comparing the development policies of major international donors (Schimmelfennig, 2012), this chapter breaks down the development policies of the EU, the OSCE, Russia, and China according to the contextual understanding, content, and approaches to promoting rule of law. Focusing on development assistance and, in particular, rule of law promotion initiatives in Central Asia will help build an understanding of the interests and objectives of actor engagement in development assistance.

## 5.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

### 5.2.1 *Conceptual Framework*

For the purposes of the chapter, the first category of focus actors is referred to as International Organizations (IOs) and “Western spirits” and includes the EU and the OSCE as organizations providing development assistance in the Central Asian region. Despite some parallels between the EU and the OSCE, there are fundamental differences. The OSCE, for example, does not have an international legal personality. Despite sharing such differences, the logic of promoting rule of law that is embedded in EU and OSCE development assistance has essentially similar objectives. These shared objectives *inter alia* include promoting a market-based economy, society based on respect for democracy and human rights. As a proponent of rule-based

multi-lateralism, the OSCE, in which all the EU Member States participate, thus holds similar values (Russell, 2021). The EU describes the OSCE as “a Europe-wide organization expanding into Central Asia with a transatlantic link.” (European External Action Service, 2017).

The second category of actors that the chapter focuses on includes Russia and China, which are referred to as emerging actors or the “Eurasian” and “Shanghai spirits” in the development assistance landscape of the Central Asian region. An important point in this context is that there are major differences between Russia and China in their foreign policies and development aid agendas. The Russian Federation is an accession country to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Although Russia is not a member of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), Russia is on the list of countries that report to the OECD on its development assistance financing. China, on the other hand, is not a member of the OECD, and has been able to increase its aid delivery to other developing countries on its own terms.

The study of IOs and emerging donor development engagement in Central Asia is important in the context of the changing international development assistance landscape. International development assistance is increasingly divided between donor countries that are members of the OECD DAC and emerging donors that are not members of or cooperating donors with the DAC. Understanding and comparing the aid policies of IOs with those of emerging donors thus helps to shed light on the rapidly changing international aid landscape.

There are, at present, almost no studies on comparative analysis of rule of law promotion (Schimmelfennig, 2012). The chapter thus addresses a gap in the literature by providing a comparative analysis of the rule of law reform programmes of international organizations and donors in Central Asia.

### ***5.2.2 Theoretical Framework***

In considering the theoretical framework, it must first be noted that Central Asia is in many ways challenging terrain for international organizations. Promoting rule of law in the region can be difficult for external donors and organizations confronted with strong and idiosyncratic authoritarian regimes from one side and regional powers such as Russia and China on the other (Axyonova, 2014; Sharshenova & Crawford, 2017). Promoting the rule of law has always been a transnational and international endeavour in which states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations seek to influence rule of law practices in other countries. The OSCE, which has been active in the promotion of rule of law and democracy in Central Asian since the early years of the states’ independence, has gradually reduced its attention to the region. The EU and other Western countries and organisations have been assigned additional political objectives that were once part of the OSCE’s mandate (Epkenhans, 2007).

The efforts of the so-called Western actors to promote the rule of law and democracy have been heavily criticised and described as ineffective. One of the reasons for these failed attempts to support democratic transition is seen to be the emergence of donors such as Russia and China, who undermine Western efforts through their hard and soft power (Tolstrup, 2009). The presence of Russia and China in Central Asia hinders Western efforts to build a democratic society. China has been found to indirectly undermine democratic transition by introducing “alternative development assistance and alternative normative framing of the nature of government, and an alternative development path, none of which place democracy at the core” (Sharshenova & Crawford, 2017).

The efficacy of the conditionality approach that donors attach to development assistance, for example in terms of respect for human rights, economic performance, and good governance, which is often used to promote democratic change in recipient countries, is questioned given the availability of alternative development assistance. Li argues that the impact of democratic change is weakened because conditionality only works when recipient countries do not have other alternative sources (Li, 2017). Generous Chinese financial investment has portrayed Western development assistance as weak, inadequate, and directly interfering in state affairs and violating the sovereignty of Central Asian states. Moreover, Russia and China, through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), are trying to create infrastructure in the semi-authoritarian states of Central Asia that will enable them to resist the European emphasis on transition to democracy. Studies have confirmed these findings and defined China as an alternative development model that competes with the Western model of combining liberal democracy and a market economy (Bader & Hackenesch, 2019). To examine such development models, Ahrens and Hoen rely on the Bertelsmann Foundation’s Transformation Index (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016) to show the high degree of similarity between the countries of Central Asia and China in terms of their political and economic realities (Ahrens & Hoen, 2019). Until recently, however, the general belief was that China was making a “peaceful return” and had no intention of influencing political structures, with no clear evidence of China’s influence on the political climate of recipient countries. However, since President Xi took office, there have been signs of a fundamental shift in Chinese foreign policy. The Chinese government announced a strategic shift in foreign policy goals and China’s willingness to share the experience of its own political model with countries in the Global South and beyond (Bader & Hackenesch, 2019). Further studies also presented interesting findings. One of these findings suggest that, although IOs and emerging donors are fundamentally different from each other, they all pursue similar and strongly interest-driven goals. The engagement of both IOs and emerging donors in aid is based on the idea of achieving stability in a given region, which can be realised through development assistance (Bossuyt, 2015, 2018).

### 5.3 Development Cooperation of IOs and Emerging Donors with Central Asia

Section 3 of this chapter provides an overview of the engagement of each focus actor in the development assistance landscapes of the Central Asian region. The section explores the understanding of the rule of law and the conceptual comparison between different actors with reference to legislation and official documents. As the meaning of the term “rule of law” remains contested temporally as well as culturally and geographically, understanding actors’ perspectives on the rule of law helps to unpack the rationale behind the rule of law promotion policies.

#### 5.3.1 *EU Development Assistance*

In 2007, the EU issued its first Central Asia Strategy, which identified seven priority areas for EU bilateral and regional cooperation with Central Asia ranging from Human Rights and Rule of Law, Good Governance, and Democratisation to Environmental Sustainability and Water (Council of the European Union. General Secretariat of the Council, 2009). Human rights, democracy, equality, and the rule of law are part of Europe’s comprehensive development packages and form the normative basis of the EU (Treaty on European Union, 2012, Preamble, Art. 2). According to the Treaty on the European Union, the Union’s external action is guided by democratic values and the rule of law (Treaty on the European Union, 2012, Art. 21).

The recently published EU Central Asia Strategy (2019) builds on previous strategy and achievements and introduces new areas and fields of cooperation (Council of Europe European Union, 2019). Democracy and rule of law are seen as both a goal and a prerequisite for meaningful EU cooperation with other countries. The EU’s attempts to promote democracy and the rule of law in Central Asia are therefore influenced by several factors. First, the EU is motivated by a desire to promote liberal democracy around the world (Kotzian et al., 2011) and to expand its normative influence outside its borders (Manners, 2009). The EU has created several instruments to promote democratic values in Central Asian countries (Kotzian et al., 2011). These cooperation instruments include search for development opportunities, closer cooperation, and trade privileges. In addition to cooperation instruments, the EU also mentions the possibility of using sanctions and critical statements, as well as normative approaches such as political dialogue (Axyonova, 2014; Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008; Warkotsch, 2009). EU development assistance is funded through a variety of budget lines, including the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) and the European Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), and is implemented by a variety of actors, including Brussels-based DCI and European External Action Service (EEAS) officials, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, and EU Delegations in specific countries (Urdze, 2011), as well as in cooperation with other actors such as the Council of Europe, UNDP, etc.

It is important to focus on the EU's understanding of the concept rule of law, which it promotes in other countries. The EU definition of the rule of law has been influenced by the previous conceptual work of other international organisations such as the Council of Europe and OSCE (Pech, 2013). EU instruments rarely clarify what law means, and when they do, definitions are often vague and contradictory (Pech, 2011). The lack of a coherent concept of rule of law in the EU's internal affairs, treaty provisions, and Court of Justice rulings leads to inconsistencies in the EU's external relations and no *acquis communautaire* for the partner state to adopt as in the accession context. The EU has been heavily criticised for not presenting a coherent and unified concept of the principle it seeks, which allegedly undermines the EU's efforts to promote rule of law (Kochenov, 2009).

The concept of the rule of law is outlined by the EU as follows and encompass the principle of "legality, which implies a transparent, accountable, democratic and pluralistic process for enacting laws; legal certainty; prohibition of arbitrariness of the executive powers; independent and impartial courts; effective judicial review including respect for fundamental rights; and equality before the law" (Commission of the European Communities, 2014).

### ***5.3.2 OSCE Development Assistance***

As the OSCE is not a donor organisation, but one which provides capacity building and training for civil society, security sector personnel, and policymakers, it places norms and values at the centre of its understanding of security, which includes the so-the called human dimension, the politico-military dimension, and the economic and environmental dimensions. In a broader sense, the politico-military dimension includes civil-military capacity building and transparency, the human dimension includes rule of law reform, which is a cornerstone of human rights and democratisation activities, and the final dimension supports sustainable economic development and environmental protection (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1975).

The OSCE's engagement with the Central Asian republics has been a rather difficult journey. Although all five states had committed to enhanced cooperation with the OSCE in the initial phase, none of the republics has been able to adhere to the OSCE's core principles. Weak OSCE presence is reflected in the lack of compliance, which is partly due to a lack of resources and capacity, as well as political will (Epkenhans, 2007). All OSCE activities require additional funding from its member states or other organisations, including the EU. At the same time, the political parameters of the OSCE in Central Asia have changed drastically since 2001. As a result of the September 11 attacks on the United States, this region, with its proximity to Afghanistan, became increasingly important in the foreign policy agenda of the United States, NATO, and the EU, which gradually began to encroach on areas that had previously fallen under OSCE jurisdiction (Epkenhans, 2007).

One of the most important definitions guiding the OSCE is a decision adopted by OSCE participating States on “Further Strengthening the Rule of Law in the OSCE Area” at the Ministerial Council Meeting in Helsinki (Organization for Security & Co-operation in Europe, 1990). The OSCE defined the concept of rule of law as not merely formal legality, but “justice based on the recognition and full acceptance of the supreme value of human personality, guaranteed by institutions providing a framework for its fullest development” and stated that “democracy is an inherent component of rule of law” (Organization for Security & Co-operation in Europe, 1990).

### 5.3.3 *Russian Development Assistance in Central Asia*

Russia continues to be present in all Central Asian republics in a variety of ways, including as a cultural, educational and linguistic, close economic, strategic and military partner, and as the provider of a possible political model for rule to Central Asian elites. Russia’s financial contributions to the OSCE’s official development assistance (ODA) have increased dramatically in recent years. President Vladimir Putin announced a turning point and major changes in the country’s foreign policy priorities in 2012. The updated the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2016) established active support for Eurasian economic integration as the main task of Russian foreign policy through the transformation of the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016a).

The subsequently adopted Concept of State Policy on International Development Assistance provides for the provision of technical, financial, humanitarian, and other assistance to foreign states with the aim of promoting the sustainable socio-economic development of recipient countries (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014). One of the provisions that fall under this concept is the debt relief package, which aims to reduce the burden on recipient countries. Under this system, Russia offers debt relief packages to debtor countries “by carrying out an exchange of debt for development assistance, provided that the debtor undertakes to use the released funds for the purposes of national socio-economic development” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014).

As far as the definition of rule of law is concerned, different terms are used in Russian legal literature when referring to rule of law, as the concept of rule of law (*pravovoe gosudarstvo*) used in Russian legislation suggests a broader concept than the concept of rule of law. The concept of rule of law lies at the core of constitutional theory, which was influenced by the German concept of rule of law (Chirkin, 2016). Article 1 of the Constitution states that “Russia is a democratic federal law-based State with a republican form of government.” (Конституция Российской Федерации [Constitution of the Russian Federation], 2020). The central features of the concept *pravovoe gosudarstvo* are the guarantee of human rights and freedom;

the limitation of the exercise of state power; the primacy of the most important law of the land, the Constitution; and the primacy of the law (*verhovenstvo zakona*).

### 5.3.4 Chinese Engagement in Central Asia

Although there are no detailed official reports or records of Chinese aid to Central Asia, numerous media reports, often mentioning billions of dollars, show that China's engagement in the region has grown exponentially in recent years, even prior to the official launch of its massive infrastructural development programme, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Information Office of China's State Council published its third White Paper on Foreign Aid on the beginning of 2021. The third White Paper provides a detailed analysis of the history and guiding principles of Chinese foreign aid, and aims to highlight the unique aspects of China's aid programme. The most striking feature of the White Paper is the introduction of the two primary concepts, namely the "global community of shared future" and the "Belt and Road Initiative" (The State Council The People's Republic of China, 2021). The White Paper notes that the BRI will serve as a major platform for China's foreign aid programme. The White Paper shows that, between 2013 and 2018, 80% of total aid is delivered to Africa and Asia. China also organized over 7000 short-term technical training courses for over 200,000 participants in the recipient countries (Zhang, 2021).

China provides foreign aid mainly in the form of low-interest loans, government-backed or subsidised investments in infrastructure and natural resources, cooperation in the development of technical and human resources, and the reduction or cancellation of recipient countries' debts (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2014). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization which includes Russia and the Central Asian republics, with the exception of Turkmenistan, is another important instrument for Beijing's expansion, covering economic and development aid (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020).

China's first Five-Year Rule of Law Building Plan (2020–2025) envisages a legal system based on a "socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics." In this light, Article 1 of the Chinese Constitution also emphasises the legal system (Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 2019). The Chinese Communist Party rejects elements such as an independent courts and the separation of powers, considering them to be a product of the Western system. Beijing is unwaveringly committed to spreading Chinese legal philosophy and practice around the world, creating new legal norms and using the law to achieve its goals (Rudolf, 2021). Chinese government officials through this Rule of Law Plan put strong emphasis on strengthening rule of law. However, direct translation of the term rule of law into Chinese language is challenging. The Chinese term *fǎzhì* is often accepted as an equivalent to rule of law in English language. However, Western scholars argue that this translation is not accurate and that the term should be translated as "rule by law" or "law and order" (Chen, 2017).



## 5.4 The Parallel “Spirits”

Different “spirits” prevail in the relations between Central Asia and external players in the region. One of the previously active players in the region, the United States, has tried at times to gain more influence in the region. The US involvement in Central Asia has declined with the gradual withdrawal from active missions in Afghanistan. As a result, the United States is not in a position to assert its great power ambitions in Central Asia. In the early 1990s, Turkey saw an opportunity to fill the power vacuum left by the Soviets Union. However, this heightened interest was met with outright resistance from the Central Asian authorities. As a result, Turkey later abandoned its previously ambitious foreign policy towards Central Asia (Fida, 2018).

The chapter examines the involvement of the EU and OSCE, which are still comparably visible as “Western spirits” via the IOs, and the “Eurasian and Shanghai spirits” represented by Russia and China. To this end, it scrutinizes how each of these spirits uses development assistance and promotion of the rule of law, and how these are influenced by their internal interests and political agendas.

### 5.4.1 *EU Rule of Law Promotion*

According to Article 42 of the “Legislative Cooperation” of the PCA, Uzbekistan has committed to approximate its existing and future legislation with that of the EU as “Uzbekistan shall endeavour to ensure that its legislation will be gradually made compatible with that of the Community” (The European Communities and their Member States and the Republic of Uzbekistan, 1992). The Enhanced Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with Kazakhstan, likewise, commits the countries to cooperate in establishing and strengthening democratic principles, rule of law, and human rights (Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1992).

The European Commission is responsible for rule of law promotion in the EU’s external assistance programmes while the Council is responsible for actions related to the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. The Commission is thus responsible for rule of law missions and the general promotion of the international rule of law. The Three Directorates-General of the Commission are involved in promoting the rule of law and responsible for relations with Central Asian countries (Axyonova, 2014). One of the Commission’s instruments for the rule of law reform agenda is “The Rule of Law Programme for Central Asia” (2020–2023). The Rule of Law Programme aims to support reforms in strengthening areas such as human rights, rule of law, and democracy in line with European and other international standards, based on a needs-based approach. In particular, the programme supports the improvement of the efficiency of local institutions and public administration. The programme also includes cooperation with national parliaments and support for the drafting and adoption of legislation to strengthen the rule of law, separation of powers, and justice



(Council of Europe European Union, 2020). The previous Rule of Law Platform in Central Asia, funded by the EU in 2015–2018, focused on supporting the building of a stable and democratic political environment by focusing on legal and judicial systems and the development of legislation and practices.

#### 5.4.2 OSCE Rule of Law Promotion

The OSCE is involved in rule of law reform activities through the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). A number of OSCE field operations are involved in rule of law reform efforts, including *inter alia* judicial and legislative reform, legislative drafting support, strengthening public administration, and capacity-building activities. The thematic compilations of OSCE commitments in the human dimension explicitly refer to a number of documents adopted at OSCE meetings and in agreements. For example, the compilation refers to Decision No. 9, Bucharest 2001, and focuses on police-related activities, reaffirming that effective policing is essential for the maintenance of rule of law and strengthening of democratic institutions. The OSCE has committed itself to exploring and developing the role of police training and the creation of effective police services, with particular focus on integrated police training, in the creation of police services in the OSCE area (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2005).

The ODIHR assists all Central Asian countries in raising awareness of difficulties and best practices in administrative justice reform and in ensuring the independence of administrative judges through the project “Strengthening inclusive and accountable democratic institutions in the OSCE region” (ODIHR Annual Report, 2019). The ODIHR thus provided comments and assessments on proposed electoral legislation and proposals for an anti-trafficking law in support of Uzbek authorities. Such drafting assistance led to the adoption of a new electoral law.

Another important instrument, and one of the ODIHR’s activities in Central Asia, is the Criminal Law Experts Forum, which is held annually. Since 2008, the ODIHR has organized the Criminal Justice Expert Forum in Central Asia as part of its Rule of Law Programme, focusing on criminal justice and judicial reform, human rights, and the right to a fair trial, as well as the harmonisation of national legislation with relevant international standards and OSCE commitments (Council of Europe European Union, 2020). Thus, the ODIHR, through its Rule of Law Programme implemented, aims to strengthen the capacity of the Supreme Judicial Council and judges, as they have committed to doing in Uzbekistan, to implement international standards for judicial independence and accountability (ODIHR Annual Report, 2019).

### ***5.4.3 Engagement of Western Spirits with Central Asia***

A focus on building the intensity and depth of relations between the Western spirits and Central Asian governments is relatively low on both the EU’s foreign policy agenda and the OSCE’s assistance goals. Both actors have very limited links to Central Asia and current engagement is often limited to funding projects and development initiatives in the region (Bailes & Dunay, 2017).

Behind the curtain of promoting the rule of law, each organization and donor is pursuing the goal of gaining more influence in the region and displacing neighbours who are also seeking more influence. The vague definition of the rule of law that the EU and the OSCE present, one which can change vis-à-vis the recipient countries, also shows that the contingency of their development aid is on thin ice and is employed as façade that hides internal motives.

The power struggle is also reflected in the EU Central Asia Strategy (2019), which includes “Partnering for Resilience” (European Commission, 2019). In line with these cooperation priorities, the new strategy is a tool for the EU to make its presence in the region visible, avoid marginalisation, and create a so-called balance of power. Under “Partnering for Resilience,” the EU has agreed to support the Central Asian countries in strengthening their resilience to challenges and threats affecting their socio-economic goals and security, and in removing obstacles to embracing change and modernization (European Commission, 2019). The Strategy is believed to be a signal to Russia and China that the EU has no intention of entering into geopolitical competition or rivalry, but instead to seek cooperation where possible. The new strategy expresses the EU’s intention to work with third parties in the region, especially Russia and China, but also with other neighbouring countries and international organizations.

### ***5.4.4 Russian Development Aid***

As was previously mentioned, Russia uses relief packages within its development assistance programme, which was implemented in 2017. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan received debt relief packages of USD 488 million and USD 865 million respectively to mark the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian states (Lavrov, 2017).

Russia does not have a specific document describing its Central Asia strategy. The Russian Council for International Affairs explicitly states in its report that Russia has failed to develop a comprehensive, long-term policy towards Central Asia (Russian Council for International Affairs, 2013). Despite the lack of such a Central Asia policy, and the fact that Russia is not the most important donor in Central Asia, Russia has remained the most powerful strategic partner and economic actor in the region.

Its main economic contribution to the Central Asian republics is the remittances from millions of Central Asian migrant workers living and working in Russia.

As for Russia's promotion of the rule of law, Section II of the Russian Concept on International Development Assistance sets out the objectives of Russian development assistance. Among the objectives is the promotion of "good governance based on the principles of democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights in recipient states and the promotion of the self-reliance of the governments of these states in dealing with emerging problems, provided that they respect the international law principle of the responsibility of states for their domestic and foreign policies towards their citizens and the international community" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014).

#### ***5.4.5 Chinese Development Aid***

Contrary to popular belief that China is reluctant to engage in legal reforms in recipient countries, Chinese investors are keen to circumvent local laws. Chinese investments are usually protected through various means, such as extra-legal and unofficial practices (Erie, 2021). One study concludes that China places more emphasis on internationalising legal standards and promoting the horizontal rule of law,<sup>1</sup> related to its goal of economic cooperation and development, and securing its investments in a region (Kwan, 2021). Scholars have discussed the emergence of a new Chinese economic legal system characterised by China's decentralised method of trade governance based on soft law and norms-based networks, as well as China's pragmatic development policies (Gu, 2021).

In addition, Chinese-sponsored training programmes for Central Asian officials have an impact on the legal systems of the republics. China, for example, is pursuing assistance in adopting a "smart court" system through programmes which target the judges of Central Asian republics (Yau, 2021). The Chinese Supreme People's Court' "Opinion on Accelerating the Construction of Smart Courts" adopted in 2017 encourages courts to use artificial intelligence in litigation services and provide smart trials. This Opinion states that such practices will assist to make the litigation process transparent and deliver impartial justice (Supreme People's Court, 2017).

#### ***5.4.6 Engagement of the Eurasian and Shanghai Spirits in Central Asia***

Since China is not a member of the OECD, it is not bound by the DAC's foreign aid guidelines. It also lacks a clear definition of its foreign aid policy. When it provides access to natural resources or contract packages in recipient countries, Chinese aid

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<sup>1</sup> The law regulating interaction between citizens.

often falls between development loans and foreign investment. This is one of the differences between Chinese aid and Western aid, and poses a challenge in terms of its categorisation under development assistance. It has been argued that the evolution of Chinese aid towards being “demand-driven, project-based, and flexible in modality” indicates that the Chinese prefer to seek win–win cooperation when calling their economic programmes development aid. Therefore, Chinese aid is different from other types of development assistance. In particular, it differs from that of IOs in terms of the content, objectives, and practices of development assistance (Tian, 2018).

Despite the increasing importance of Russia and China as donors of development assistance, data on Chinese and Russian aid is limited and difficult to verify. Due to the lack of information on Chinese development assistance and the peculiarities of China’s understanding of development assistance, it is difficult to determine the exact amount of financial support China has provided to Central Asia. Neither Russia nor China can be classified as rule of law reform actors, as the EU and the OSCE are. However, both Russia and China have openly stated their views on the rule of law and international law in their foreign policies. The text of the joint “Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of International Law” to the United Nations, addressed to the Secretary General can be used as an illustration. The Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China express their full support for the principle of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal or external affairs of states (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b). The Declaration reflects the general legal views of the individual powers and sets out their priorities in promoting international law. These views can also be traced in Russia and China’s foreign policy and development assistance to the Central Asian region. China’s extensive and unconditional financial assistance to the Central Asian republics, which does not focus on democratisation, the rule of law or human rights, is an indicator of China’s general view of law.

In contrast to the efforts of the Western spirits to promote rule of law systems, which emphasise *inter alia* privatisation, market economies, liberal democracies, and the rule of law, among other things, Russia and China focus on state capitalism, infrastructure development, and authoritarian legality.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Promotion of the rule of law, based on a widespread conviction that it is a desirable and an essential component of the economic and political transition to liberal democracy, has become an undisputed norm in Western development assistance. This conviction is also reflected in the foreign and development policies and objectives of IOs and its inclusion as a conditionality for aid is one of the tools used to influence legal and institutional practices in recipient countries.

As can be seen from the above analyses of different perspectives and approaches taken to rule of law and rule of law reform in the Central Asian region, IOs and emerging donors have varying interests and degrees of engagement in the region.

Although both IOs and emerging donors pledge to modernise and reform the Central Asian republics, development assistance including rule of law promotion is a façade behind which certain motivations for involvement exist.

Behind rule of law promotion initiatives, both IOs and emerging donors pursue regional influence and seek out or create ‘like-minded allies’ where possible by introducing their local context, understandings, and institutions. The approaches to achieving this goal are fundamentally different. While IOs seek stability through inclusive and sustainable development, emerging regional powers pursue development through economic expansion supported by better infrastructure. While IOs emphasise democratic governance, rule of law, human rights, and market economies as central development ideals, China, for example, with its “no political strings attached” aid, adheres to the concept of non-interference and therefore does not support the development of rules regarding governance and institutional strengthening. IOs and emerging donors thus employ various instruments and approaches in achieving their foreign and development policies, despite having similar goals.

The presence of emerging donors in Central Asia currently differs from that of Western IOs in terms of the level and manner of development assistance. However, recent changes announced by the leaders of Russia and China regarding the taking of a more active role on an international stage and their closer cooperation with the countries of Central Asia might change the current multi-vector strategy of the “Central Asian spirit” and the parallel development assistance landscape.

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# Chapter 6

## Central Asia's Security Provider and Peacekeeper? Assessing Russia's Role After the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Beyond



Elena Zhirukhina

### 6.1 Introduction

The 2021 Russian National Security Strategy authorized by Presidential Decree 400 states that the changing nature of the international system, its norms and rules, produce not only challenges and threats but also opportunities (President Decree 400, 2021). The Russian government has traditionally sought to strengthen its international positions whilst acting upon various international crises. Over the past decades, this has created a space to shape a new reputation and enhance its international influence. In its current vision of national security, the government emphasizes issues of collective security, strategic stability, and multi-beneficial cooperation (President Decree 400, 2021). Non-interference in internal matters and prevention of “colour revolutions” stands out in its domestic and foreign policy. Moreover, Russia reinforces its positions as a security provider for partner states and seeks to further develop cooperation in defence, security, and law enforcement. Countering transnational organized crime, illegal migration, and terrorism in particular is listed among priority tasks home and abroad (President Decree 640, 2016; President Decree Pr-2976, 2014).

The official policies envision the country as an active and capable member of international society, emphasize its mission as a peacekeeper, and see the country

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This chapter was written before the Russian ‘special military operation’ started in Ukraine in February 2022. An early version of this paper first appeared in the ISPI Dossier ‘Peacekeeping: The Russian Way.’ Elena Zhirukhina, “*The Afghan Crisis: A Chance to Strengthen Russia’s Security Influence in Central Asia*,” *ispionline.it*, 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/afghan-crisis-chance-strengthen-russias-security-influence-central-asia-32117>.

This chapter uses the terms security provision, peacekeeping and peace enforcement as they appear in the legal and strategic documents of Russia and the CSTO, as well as in their official discourse.

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as tasked with conflict resolution in neighbouring territories. In its legal documents, peacekeeping and peace enforcement are voluntary actions in the framework of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), regional international organizations, and bilateral and multilateral agreements (FL 93, 1995; President Decree 2976, 2014). Peacekeeping and peace enforcement cover measures to engage in monitoring and controlling ceasefire, interposition as a buffer, disarmament and disengagement, refugee assistance, humanitarian aid, security provision in a law enforcement role, and the provision of technical, medical, and logistic assistance among other things (FL 93, 1995). Furthermore, the Kremlin's national security and foreign policy objectives coincide in prioritizing good relations with the post-Soviet states, including in CA, as well as development of regional groupings such as deepening integration via the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and regional cooperation via the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (President Decree 640, 2016).

Russia's CA policy has long relied on pragmatism and flexibility (Laruelle, 2010). Scholars have described a special bond between CA states and their northern neighbour, including via regional groupings which feature "protective integration" that unites states in safeguarding sovereignty and regime security as well as providing political legitimacy (Allison, 2018); Russia's attempts to become 'the system-forming power' in the post-Soviet region (Sakwa, 2010); and the functioning of the CA subregional security complex as part of broader Russian regional security complex (Nygren, 2010). Building strong relations in multiple vectors with CA has been important for Russia but security reasoning has somewhat prevailed as the provision of security assistance to CA has contributed to Moscow's own security against non-traditional threats (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2013). In turn, CA states, to various extents, have looked to the Kremlin as a security provider (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2013) even when it came at the price of increased Russian influence (de Haas, 2017). Russia and the states of Central Asia (CA) enjoy a "natural" long-standing cooperation in fighting irregular threats in the light of shared concerns related to terrorism, extremism, separatism, and transnational organized crime, as well as shared approaches to countering these. The collapse of the Afghan government and the return of the Taliban (FSB, 2021), designated as a terrorist organization by Russia, poses exceptional challenges of instability and uncertainty. Although CA is relatively stable, each country has a history of dealing with terrorist threats, and the risks of domestic and international terrorism long present in the region are particularly acute. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and the entering of a new stage of instability in that country, the CA governments expect potential spill-overs of violence, penetration of borders by terrorist groups, and intensification of transnational criminal activities. Moreover, the civil unrest in Kazakhstan in early 2022 embodied the long-standing fears of "colour revolutions" expressed by regional governments. Mitigating such hazards requires regional cooperation and opens up a window of opportunity for Russia to strengthen its role as a security provider for the CA region and beyond (Davidzon, 2022). It can also help to repair the damage done to Russia's reputation among CA governments by certain foreign policy decisions in

the near abroad, and particularly, by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Guliyev & Gawrich, 2021; Kropatcheva, 2016).

This chapter highlights and contextualizes Russia's pragmatic and assertive security actions in CA after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. These are consistent with the Kremlin's long vision of its regional and global role as security provider and peacekeeper. Russia seems to fully utilize the opportunity to project itself as reliable partner for CA regimes and demonstrate a more active security standing in the region, both in bilateral cooperation and in multilateral format via regional groupings. International regional organizations such as the Russia-led CSTO and the Russia- and China-led SCO can now also demonstrate their practical relevance to CA.

## 6.2 Russia's Bilateral Security Cooperation with Central Asia's Partners

Russia's internal and external policy, has developed an extensive counterterrorist expertise by confronting domestic terrorist threats, including in the North Caucasus. Considering this, Russia has claimed its capacity to export this expertise in the years following 9/11, indicated security provision as an important foreign policy objective, and promoted its expertise in counterterrorist interventions abroad—most recently in Russia's military campaign in Syria. Such interventions, especially in Syria, have allowed Russia to train personnel in counterterrorist operations and to test new military equipment and weaponry, and could prove useful in training Russia's CA partners to face a potential spill-over from Afghanistan. Russia visibly intensified its bilateral and multilateral military cooperation with the CA states in readiness for the consequences of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021.

For instance, in August 2021 Russia conducted a joint military training exercise with Uzbekistan (Sputnik, 2021) at the Uzbek border with Afghanistan, involving over 1,500 personnel, as well as another with both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (CIS, 2021) at the Tajik section of the Afghan border, engaging over 2,500 personnel and military aviation. Joint exercises aimed at protecting state borders and targeting adversaries from the air heavily relied on Russia's Syrian experience (Izvestia, n.d.). These were in addition to the regular military exercises that Russia holds at its military bases in Central Asia. For example, large military trainings at the 201st Russian military base in Tajikistan, aimed at improving coordination and targeting illegal armed groups breaking through the state border, took place in November 2021 (TASS, 2021) and January 2022 (RIA, 2022b). Recent aviation training occurred at the Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan in January 2022 (24KG, 2022).

Moreover, the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan has served as a legitimate and welcome pretext to strengthen and better equip Russian military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Claiming that the large 201st military base in Tajikistan is "a guarantor of stability on the southern borders of the CSTO" (*Russia Today*, 2021), it received

new antitank missile systems to target armoured vehicles, helicopters and drones, as well as firearms and portable anti-aircraft missile systems (DW, 2021). In 2020, the military base in Kyrgyzstan was equipped with military drones of small and medium coverage employed in intelligence gathering and armed combat (Azattyk, 2020).

Additionally, the Afghan factor has increased the value of the Russian military presence for its local hosts and reinforced Russia's position as a security guarantor and a loyal partner. Russia's proactive standing in CA serves to reach a number of key objectives, including improving Russia's position in CA, ensuring the security of the regional borders against diffusion of political violence and drug trafficking, and dealing remotely against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State which are both designated as terrorist by Russia (FSB, 2021). Progress on these objectives can be made also through regional organizations, like the CSTO and the SCO.

### ***6.2.1 Cooperation Under the Collective Security Treaty Organization Framework***

The CSTO promotes the agenda of regional security and stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty, and ways of countering terrorism and extremism, and illicit trafficking in drugs and weapons (CSTO, 2002). Its guiding principles include independence, voluntary participation, equality, and non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states (CSTO, 2002), and most importantly, the principle of collective self-defence. Collective self-defence activates in case of aggression against a member state defined as “an armed attack menacing to safety, stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty” or a threat thereof and presupposes a joint response ranging from consultations to military assistance at request of a member state (CSTO, 1992). Three out of the five CA states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—are members.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—the two remaining CA countries—have bilateral agreements with Russia covering strategic partnership and military cooperation. Tashkent and Moscow agreed upon a number of dimensions in security cooperation, including military and military-technological cooperation such as arms trade and supplies, staff training and research, military drills (FL 30, 2001), and military technical assistance (FL 67, 2017). They also developed strategic partnership to ensure regional security through political consultations, cooperation, and coordination between national responsible agencies to fight non-traditional threats (FL 180, 2004). Most importantly, these two states agreed upon the use of armed forces in the interest of security (FL 30, 2001). The use of armed forces beyond the territory of both states shall be in compliance with the UN Charter and international and national law (FL 30, 2001). Uzbekistan and Russia went as far as accepting a collective security principle in case of aggression by a third state or group of states against either of them according to article 51 of the UN Charter (FL 64, 2006).

The nature of the security arrangements between Turkmenistan and Russia is different in consideration of Turkmenistan's status of neutrality (FL 135, 2002).

Ashgabat and Moscow restricted cooperation to promises not to harm each other, committing not to allow the use of the territory of one state by third parties against the other, and political negotiations and consultations as security risks emerge (FL 135, 2002). The two countries agreed *inter alia* to coordinate their fight against non-traditional threats such as domestic and international terrorism and transnational organized crime (FL 135, 2002; FL 355, 2020).

Russia sees the CSTO as a major instrument of ensuring collective security provision in the post-Soviet space (President Decree 640, 2016; President Decree Pr-2976, 2014). It also helps to communicate Moscow's role as a security provider for the CA region (Allison, 2008). Being the driving force of the CSTO does not imply, however, that the organization can be used solely as a Russian instrument (Sakwa, 2010). Neither does it mean that Russian foreign policy decisions are automatically supported by the CSTO member states who have positioned themselves rather cautiously in cases related to the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in another former Soviet Republic, namely Georgia, as independent states, or the Crimean peninsula as part of Russia (Davidzon, 2022). Russia, nevertheless, employs the CSTO to reach a set of regional objectives in strengthening the country's power grip, deepening its influence, and channelling Russian national political, economic, and military interests in CA (Kropatcheva, 2016).

As stated in Russian strategic documents, as well as is evident from recent regional practice, Russia has sought to enhance the CSTO's military capabilities and diversify its functions in Central Asia (President Decree 640, 2016; President Decree Pr-2976, 2014). One such dimension has been in peacekeeping. The emergence of the CSTO's peacekeeping function dates to 2004 when the organization developed a vision for peacekeeping in the respective Concept (CSTO, 2004), and to 2007 when the Peacekeeping Agreement was signed (CSTO, 2007). From its onset, CSTO peacekeeping was aimed at serving as an early warning system for the resolution of emerging conflicts as well as an instrument to promote political and military approaches and the interests of the CSTO and its member states (CSTO, 2004). In line with the scope of identified threats, the CSTO envisioned the confrontation of terrorist groups, illegal armed groups, and sabotage groups in its peacekeeping operations.

As stated in the CSTO documents, peacekeeping operations shall be authorized by the decision of the CSTO at the request of a member state for the resolution of a conflict on its territory or based on a UNSC decision beyond the CSTO area (CSTO, 2007). Thus far, no official peacekeeping mission has been taken place beyond its area of responsibility. The UNSC must be informed about planned peacekeeping operations in a CSTO member state or called upon to authorize such an operation in a third country (CSTO, 2007). The organization has used its peacekeeping forces only once so far: in Kazakhstan—within “the area of CSTO responsibility”—and never beyond it.

To implement military its ambitions, the CSTO required trained personnel, equipment, and coordination. In recent years, the CSTO has developed its military capabilities. With 20,000 personnel in its Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, 5,000 in the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces, and a peacekeeping force of 3,000 military and 600 law enforcement personnel, the CSTO seems to have accumulated the means

to mitigate regional challenges. In 2021, the organization significantly intensified its activities in the CA region, particularly in Tajikistan, in response to the situation in Afghanistan. Later, in early 2022, during the civil domestic unrest and revolts in Kazakhstan, it took the unprecedented step of sending approximately 2,500 troops into a member country.

### 6.3 Response to the Crisis in Afghanistan

The unfolding takeover of the Taliban and subsequent crisis in Afghanistan has, to a large extent, shaped the CSTO's agenda in CA. The CSTO declared that the organization plans to use its full capabilities to protect its member states from the diffusion of violence from Afghanistan to CA, as well as from penetration of terrorist groups and criminal networks (CSTO, 2021b, 2021e). This does not mean, however, going to war with Afghanistan. Hence, no interventions are envisaged beyond the borders of the CSTO member states (CSTO, 2021f; Interfax, 2021). Ensuring the border security of, foremost, Tajikistan and, of course, other member states has presented itself as priority mission (CSTO, 2021f). Indeed, the CSTO enhanced its collective preparedness by organizing collective training at the political and operational levels. The CSTO conducted several rounds of an Afghanistan-themed business game aimed at developing collective political and military response to normalize the situation (CSTO, 2021a). In September 2021, the organization implemented the final stage of the joint counterterrorist training under the title "Rubezh-2021" in Kyrgyzstan aimed at eliminating an illegal invasion of armed groups into a CSTO country (CSTO, 2021d). Another joint training mission "Thunder-2021" took place later that month in Armenia, in the Caucasus, focusing on anti-drug operations in mountainous terrain (CSTO, 2021i). Many more such initiatives and joint manoeuvres followed, and by late October 2021, Tajikistan hosted the massive "Combat Brotherhood-2021," a joint strategic and operational military drill that involved over 4,000 personnel and 500 military vehicles (CSTO, 2021h). This drill combined three separate military training exercises: "Echelon-2021" which focused on providing logistical support to a military operation; "Search-2021" which was tasked with gathering, analysing, and sharing intelligence to be later used in fighting an adversary; and "Interaction-2021" which was aimed at evacuating civilians, engaging with adversary groups, and restoring control over a state border (CSTO, 2021j). In November 2021, the CSTO held yet another tactical training in Tajikistan, named "Cobalt-2021" and focused on securing border areas and liquidating illegal armed groups. It brought together special police regiments, interior forces, national guards, drug control agencies, border guards, and military personnel (CSTO, 2021c, 2021g). A rather active autumn ended with exercise "Unbreakable Brotherhood-2021," conducted in November 2021 in Kazan, Russia; it engaged over 1,800 personnel and 300 vehicles. Building on Russian experience earned in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, participants practiced various assignments associated with peacekeeping operations, including hostage release, and humanitarian and refugee assistance (CSTO, 2021i, 2021k).

The CSTO emphasized the development of peacekeeping as a priority dimension of collective security, to be soon performed in Kazakhstan.

#### 6.4 The 2022 Response to the Crisis in Kazakhstan

Early 2022 was marked by civil unrest in Kazakhstan which began as protests over doubled fuel prices in Zhanaozen. These further spread countrywide, combining economic and political demands. The government claims that the involvement of “terrorist” groups turned it violent. While the nature of the events requires further investigation, it is evident that the situation quickly spiralled out of control, featuring attacks on governmental buildings and critical infrastructure, the burning of cars, and looting. President Tokayev requested CSTO assistance in restoring internal order by framing the events as “foreign aggression,” an “attack of international terrorists trained abroad,” and an “attempt at coup d'état” (RBC, 2022b). Recalling article 4 of the Treaty (CSTO, 1992), the CSTO responded urgently and, within days, had deployed 2,500 peacekeepers to guard key infrastructure and support Kazakh law enforcement (Lenta, 2022).

The CSTO's first ever mission presents an important development as the CSTO had often been criticized for failures to engage (Allison, 2018; Guliyev & Gawrich, 2021; Kropatcheva, 2016) and ineffectiveness (Davidzon, 2022). Even after having been asked to do so by its member states, the CSTO had avoided deploying military forces within its area of responsibility until 2022, referring to either the lack of necessity or non-applicability of its mandate (Cooley, 2022). The CSTO's reluctance to participate in multiple regional conflicts can be linked to several factors. First, difficulties in reaching consensus among member states regarding conflict situations blocked the CSTO involvement. Second, Russia's policy preferences had a direct impact on its decision-making; at times Russia lacked the interest to engage (Kropatcheva, 2016) and at others the specific geopolitical context suggested that Russia would perform best as a solo player in peacekeeping. Hence, the CSTO forces as an instrument were not used.

Nevertheless, the potential to do so has always been there. A broad approach to what constitutes terrorism and extremism, as well as external interference, left room for connecting the actions of domestic groups found to threaten stability, integrity, or sovereignty to the CSTO mandate to intervene (Allison, 2008). Although the CSTO invested in disassociating itself from interference in domestic matters in discourse and in practice (Allison, 2008), this opportunity remained open and was finally employed in Kazakhstan.

The events in Kazakhstan prompted a reaction that will likely change the CSTO's reputation and future actions. In addition to the recognition of Kazakhstan's explicit appeal for external support, the decision to deploy a peacekeeping mission can be explained via the following reasoning.

First, Russia could not risk instability in Kazakhstan, a country that shares with the Russian Federation the world's longest uninterrupted land border. Destabilization of



Kazakhstan would have been disastrous, especially considering the growing tension at the other Russian border, the border with Ukraine, and prospect of escalation there.

Second, Kazakhstan has been Russia's strategic partner for years. Their economies are naturally interlinked (Laruelle et al., 2019), particularly within the regional integration project of the EAEU. Losing these economic ties could lead to unpredictable consequences as popular uprisings in the post-Soviet space proved able to cause trouble for the Russian political and economic interests.

Third, violent protests in Kazakhstan fed the Russian government's own fears, widely shared by CA governments, of uncontrolled social movements and "colour revolutions" (Allison, 2008).

Fourth, it was strategically important for the mission to be perceived as a CSTO multinational peacekeeping mission rather than a Russian intervention. Russia's contribution, although kept confidential, could be calculated as most of the 2500 men sent to Kazakhstan. Armenia deployed 100 (RBC, 2022a), Kyrgyzstan 150 (RIA, 2022a), Tajikistan 200 (RIA, 2022c), and Belarus an estimated 100 soldiers. The multinational nature of the CSTO peacekeepers, nevertheless, contributed to diverting attention from the long-standing anxiety surrounding potential Russian interference in Kazakhstan's domestic matters connected to the large Russian minority in the north of the country (Laruelle et al., 2019) which was particularly pronounced after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Kropatcheva, 2016).

Fifth, as a side effect, the peacekeeping mission had the potential to act as a reminder to the government of Kazakhstan that Russia and allies had helped in time of crisis and might, to a certain extent, be counted on to shift priorities towards Russia in Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy.

The CSTO peacekeeping mission in Kazakhstan opened a new chapter for the organization. It signalled the readiness of the organization to operate not only as a political platform that limits its use of military and law enforcement force to joint drills. Significant aspects of the mission were its short-term length, from the 6 to 19 of January 2022, and the immediate return of personnel to home countries upon its termination. This demonstrated to the member states and other interested stakeholders that the organization can be trusted to leave once the job is done.

## **6.5 Cooperation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Framework**

The SCO, founded in 2001 and in which four out of five CA states are members alongside Russia and China, aims to ensure peace, stability, and security, as well as good neighbourliness and multi-dimensional cooperation (SCO, 2002). Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan cooperate under the framework of the SCO, and thus present another priority task for Russia (President Decree 640, 2016; President Decree Pr-2976, 2014). The multilateralism of the SCO provides better chances

for CA states to channel their national interests (de Haas, 2017). Moreover, CA represents “the heart of the SCO,” and hence, the organization prioritizes CA’s needs in security and development (Norov, 2021). Created on the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, respect for sovereignty and independence, non-interference in internal affairs, and non-aggression and non-use of force, the SCO was envisioned to primarily be a political platform allowing for the negotiation of joint approaches and coordination of actions that are security related in the region (SCO, 2002). Countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism stand out among the SCO areas of interest, manifest in both the SCO Charter (SCO, 2002) and Convention (SCO, 2001) on combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism, and implemented through the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS).

Fighting “three evils” occurs by means of information sharing, the development and implementation of measures to prevent, identify, and suppress these “evils,” and by means of capacity building measures for competent authorities of member states (SCO, 2001). Afghanistan, which has observer status but failed to become a member of the SCO, today poses the risks of exporting instability, terrorism, and drugs and, thus, is a natural agenda item for this organization, especially so after the launch of the process of Iran’s accession (Norov, 2021) as a member. Following Iran’s accession, all of Afghanistan’s neighbours with the exception of Turkmenistan will be members of the SCO. The crisis in Afghanistan is thus of grave concern for the SCO’s CA members, especially for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. As of the time of writing, the SCO approach to mitigating the crisis is aligned with its mandate and cannot go beyond political efforts, including via the SCO-Afghanistan contact group, and preventive and capacity building measures (SCO, 2021a). The organization positions itself as a platform for cooperation and dialogue and cannot be perceived or used for confrontation (Norov, 2021). As discussed at its Summit in September 2021, the SCO sees its role in developing coordinated policies towards Afghanistan via the organization of humanitarian relief, support for an inclusive peace process, and the blocking of terrorism, drugs, and violence from crossing international borders (SCO, 2021b). Russia plans to be very active in that regard (Putin, 2021). To that cause, in September 2021, the SCO organized the antiterrorist training exercise “Peaceful Mission 2021,” aimed at containing spill-over of terrorism from Afghanistan and held in the Orenburg region of Russia with the participation of military from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Belarus (Lavrov, 2021). When it came to the events in Kazakhstan in early 2022, SCO reaction was limited to expressions of concerns regarding destabilization, trust in the government of Kazakhstan to restore internal order with the help of the CSTO, and offering RATS assistance upon request (TASS, 2022).

## 6.6 Conclusion

Although Russia still faces competition from US security assistance initiatives and EU-led security projects, Russia’s increasing involvement in capacity-building

measures to counter irregular adversaries is evident in CA. Russia began using emerging opportunities to strengthen security cooperation with CA governments and reclaim its leadership role in the region long before the 2021 crisis year. Russia seeks to portray itself as a reliable partner available in times of need. As the CSTO Secretary General, in commenting on “Combat Brotherhood-2021,” declared, “the CSTO collective forces demonstrated to the whole world, including our adversaries, that Tajikistan is well protected and will never be left alone facing threats” (CSTO, 2021f).

Containing the diffusion of the 2021 crisis in Afghanistan to its borders and the reaction towards regional instability will test not only operational capacity but also CA states’ abilities to negotiate a joint response among themselves and with the Russian government, as well as to act as a united political front through regional organizations like the CSTO and the SCO.

As Russia seeks to enhance its reputation as a security provider in Central Asia and beyond, one of the instruments at hand to implement this objective is the authorization of the use of its forces in peacekeeping operations. The Russian government has not only advanced its role via military operations such as in Syria, and promoted itself as a regional peacekeeper in solo missions such as in Nagorno-Karabakh, but has finally used the Russia-led CSTO mechanism, activating its “peacekeeping potential” in Kazakhstan.

Indeed, the CSTO peacekeeping mission in Kazakhstan opened a new chapter for the organization. The CSTO demonstrated that it can be trusted to deploy forces, efficiently implement the mission, and leave. These actions support Russia’s regional security and foreign policy objectives as well as those of the CSTO. They create a path towards a more established global standing; the CSTO has long envisioned its involvement in UN peacekeeping worldwide.

By engaging in resolving conflicts and performing peacekeeping functions, by investing in multiple military drills, as well as security and law enforcement training via bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, Russia signals its military capacity and capabilities, and efficiency and speed of operations. Power demonstration becomes useful as risks of conflict escalation emerge close to Russian borders. Furthermore, well justified security cooperation in CA over the crises in Afghanistan and Kazakhstan serves a communicative purpose in the face of growing tensions over Ukraine.

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# Chapter 7

## Securitizing and De-securitizing Actors of the OSCE: The Case of the Western Balkan Region



Eni Lamçe

### 7.1 Introduction

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has played a very important role in addressing a series of conflicts and concerns in the Western Balkan region, particularly during the mid- and late 1990s. This research, through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) introduced by the Copenhagen school, examines the role that the main actors among the participating States of the OSCE play in promoting or discouraging security and cooperation in the six Western Balkan countries of today, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia. During the mid-90s, the six Western Balkan countries, which currently hold the status of a candidate or potential candidate country in the integration process of the European Union, were faced with numerous conflicts which were both political and military in character.

RSCT, which is well-known for best describing the structures of international security with a particular focus on regional security, in its fourth level of analysis, explains the relationship between the global powers in the region. In this regard, the chapter investigates the role that the main regional actors, namely the United States of America, European Union, and Russian Federation, have played in addressing these concerns in the region. Their role, however, cannot always be considered positive, rather this varies with the periods of historical developments one is looking at as well as on which approaches are used to assist or rather pull these countries in various directions. “One of the purposes of RSCT is to combat the tendency to over-stress

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This research was conducted based on approximately 550 statements, 131 OSCE decisions and declarations, 13 Annual OSCE Reports, and more than 100 other relevant documents collected at the OSCE Documentation Center in Prague (DCiP) in the capacity of Researcher-in-Residence. <https://www.osce.org/documentation-centre-in-prague>.

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the role of the great powers, and to ensure that the local factors are given their proper weight in security analysis.”<sup>1</sup>

In this regard, the research also points out the new narratives that have affected the region within the timeframe starting from 2015 when Serbia was the first Western Balkan country to chair the OSCE, until 2020 and the Albanian OSCE Chairmanship. In its two main paradigms, RSCT explains securitization as the process of turning subjects of concern into matters of security threats through the involvement of instruments provided by international organizations in an authority relationship, and de-securitization as a process of minimizing matters of concern through political dialogue and consequently also minimizing the involvement of international organizations in addressing these concerns, sometimes to the point where they appear to vanish completely.

This study is based on official document analysis. Primary data was collected at the OSCE Documentation Centre in Prague (DCiP) through mixed research methods. The qualitative analysis was conducted by investigating the frequency of common keywords referred in statements, reports, and other official documents reflecting the role of the main actors over developments in the Western Balkan region. The quantitative analysis illustrates statistically, through graphs and tables, the empirical evidence found to support the arguments presented by the study. Consequently, the research points to the fact that these countries, which during mid 90s and early 2000s were striving for an eligible seat in the Organization, have now achieved significant progress in contributing to promoting security and cooperation not only domestically but also on a larger scale by chairing the world’s largest regional security organization.

## 7.2 OSCE Decisions and Activities in the Western Balkan Region

This chapter looks into three OSCE decision-making bodies, namely the Ministerial Council, which gathers at the end of each year and brings together Ministers of Foreign Affairs; the Permanent Council, which gathers every Thursday and brings together the Permanent Representatives based in Vienna; and the Forum for Security and Cooperation, which gathers every Wednesday and brings together representatives from the Ministries of Defence of the participating States and Asian and Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation. These bodies play an important role in shaping the effectiveness of the organization.

Table 7.1, compares the role of the OSCE decision-making bodies across two periods, that from 1995 when the OSCE was established until 2001 when the turmoil in the Western Balkan region came to an end, and that from 2015 when Serbia was the first Western Balkan country to chair the organization until 2020 and the Albanian OSCE Chairmanship. This latter period is evidence indicating a dramatic transformation in regional development. During the first timeframe there were a high

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<sup>1</sup> Buzan and Waever (2003, p. 43).

**Table 7.1** OSCE decisions on the Western Balkan region

Time-frame	Securitization 1995–2001		De-securitization 2015–2020	
Decisions	No	Focus	No	Focus
MC	7	Peace & Stability in BiH, Implementation of Article II, IV & V Annex 1-B DPA, MC Statement on Kosovo, Vienna MC declaration on role of OSCE in SEE, Oslo Declaration & Bucharest MC Statement	1	2018 decision on Albanian OSCE Chairmanship 2020 2020 Decision on North Macedonia Chairmanship 2023
PC	96	Establishment & <i>monthly</i> extension of mandates Approval of budget proposals on OSCE activities Openings of additional branches of field Missions Development of multi-ethnic police FRY Voluntary contributions for peace/elections in BiH Emergency in Kosovo	25	<i>Yearly</i> extension of Missions mandates (10/25 decisions taken under Serbian and Albanian Chairmanship) 2019 supplementary budget for Mission in Kosovo
FSC	1	Concluded negotiations Article V Annex 1-B DPA	–	Continued discussions & projects on SALW

*Note* This table illustrates the results of the analysis of 131 relevant OSCE decisions on Southeast Europe collected at the Documentation Center of the OSCE in Prague (DCiP)

number of decisions addressing a series of conflicts in the region, matters of urgency aimed at preventing further escalation. These include, for instance, decisions taken with regard to the case of the Kosovo crisis<sup>2</sup>; the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)<sup>3</sup>; the domestic unrest in Albania<sup>4</sup>; and the inter-ethnic conflict in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM<sup>5</sup>).

In contrast, the second period and the nature of the decisions made proves that these countries had become eligible not only to Chair the organization successfully and contribute to promoting peace and cooperation internationally but also to approve decisions on improving the democracies of one another. This can be seen in the Ministerial Decision taken under the Albanian 2020 OSCE Chairmanship on putting forward the candidacy of North Macedonia to become the Chair of the Organization in the year 2023,<sup>6</sup> as well as in the Permanent Council decisions taken

<sup>2</sup> OSCE (1998a).

<sup>3</sup> OCSE (1995c).

<sup>4</sup> OSCE (1997b, p. 2).

<sup>5</sup> In 2019, the nation changed its name from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) to North Macedonia in line with the Prespa Agreement negotiated with Greece.

<sup>6</sup> OSCE (2021).

both under Albanian Chairmanship and the Serbian 2015 OSCE Chairmanship on putting forward decisions on the approval of the annual extension of the OSCE Field Mission's mandate in the Western Balkan region, which indicates efforts to strengthen further the security not only regionally but also in an international security context.

When considering the role of the OSCE in the region, it is crucial to mention that, first and foremost, this is an inclusive regional security organization covering a vast geographical area stretching “from Vancouver to Vladivostok,” and which includes key global actors such as the EU, United States of America, and Russia. It thus holds its utmost strength in its continuous efforts towards crisis management, conflict resolution, conflict prevention, and post-conflict rehabilitation on the ground through the work of its Field Missions.

As illustrated in Table 7.2, evidence shows that the dates of the establishment of the Field Missions varied with the escalation or de-escalation of conflict. In the cases of the Presence in Albania, Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mission to Montenegro, and Mission to Serbia, the Field Missions were established after the conflicts had started to de-escalate and were mostly aimed at developing activities supporting democratization, human rights, and the rule of law, in which the assistance of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has been immeasurable. In the cases of the Mission to Skopje and Mission to Kosovo, however, the Field Missions were established as the conflicts began to escalate, and were primarily aimed at conflict prevention and crisis management.

Moreover, Table 7.2 illustrates the differences between the activities of the Field Missions during the first timeframe compared to the second. In the timeframe of 1995 to 2001, the evidence shows more emphasis was put towards activities related to addressing politico-military issues, such as arms control, policing, Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), and border management. In the second timeframe, from 2015 to 2020, by contrast, evidence shows that activities promoted by the Missions in all six Western Balkan countries were implemented more uniformly, placing a special focus on the third dimension of the OSCE, the Human Dimension, which covers democratization, rule of law, human rights, media freedom, etc. Therefore, with regard to the role that the OSCE Presence and Missions have played in the Western Balkan region, evidence shows a clear focus on OSCE efforts towards conflict prevention, conflict resolution, crisis management, and post-conflict rehabilitation during the first timeframe, and more of a comprehensive and inclusive approach in addressing the standing challenges in the region during the second timeframe. This shift can be considered further evidence of the normalization of the situation in the Western Balkan region.

### **7.3 Securitization in the Politico-Military Dimension**

The politico-military dimension in the OSCE context refers to the organ of the Organization which deals with political and military affairs. The meetings of the Politico-military dimension, or the so-called first dimension of the OSCE, usually

**Table 7.2** OSCE activities in Southeast Europe

Field missions	Year	Activities 1995–2001	Activities 2015–2020
Presence in Albania	1997	Electoral process/rule of law/judiciary/human rights/Civil society/media/election and border monitoring/Weapons collection programme/Field Stations etc.	Democratic governance/Rule of law/justice electoral reform/anti-corruption/border management/TNT/human rights/media/youth/gender etc.
Mission to Bosnia Herzegovina	1995	Conflict prevention/CSBMs/Elections/Human rights/democratization/media/regional stabilization/arms control/military stability etc.	Democratization/Rule of Law/non-discrimination /religious dialogue/anti-comjption/reconciliation/arms control/VERLT/youth/gender etc.
Mission to Montenegro	2006	2001 Mission to FRY then Mission to Montenegro: CSBMs/arms control/politico- military issues etc.	Democratic governance/Rule of law/Elections/youth/combating trafficking/media/gender etc.
Mission to Serbia	2003	2001 Mission to FRY then in 2003 Mission to Serbia: Democratization/rule of law/media/CSBMs/politico-military/policing etc.	Democratization/Anti-corruption/rule of law/anti-discrimination/youth/gender etc.
Mission to Skopje	1992	From 2001 special focus on implementation of Ohrid Agreement Border monitoring/CSBMs/elections/policing etc.	Democratic governance/Early warning/rule of law/trial monitoring/election/media/youth/gender etc.
Mission to Kosovo	2000	Initially Mission to Kosovo, Sandjak and Vojvodina: Border management/Democratization/human rights/policing/rule of law/elections etc.	Democratization/rule of law/Inter-community dialogue/youth/elections/media/VERLT/gender etc.

*Note* This table illustrates the results of the analysis of most frequently referred to keywords selected from the publicly available OSCE Annual Reports at the official website of the OSCE, <https://www.osce.org/annual-reports>

occur within the umbrella of the Forum for Security and Cooperation (FSC), which is also considered to be one of the main decision-making bodies of the OSCE. This dimension is one of the most important dimensions of the OSCE, the main organ that provides a platform for dialogue between the 57 participating States on military aspects of security, aiming to prevent conflicts and resolve crises. Based on the qualitative and quantitative research conducted, the two main areas where securitization could be tackled in debates on the politico-military dimension of the OSCE during the period of 1995 to 2001 were arms control and border management. Therefore, this section will analyse the securitization approach in the fields of arms control and border management in the Western Balkans, as well as the role of the main regional actors in addressing these concerns.

In the arms control field, which is key to securitization in the region, the OSCE Framework on Regional Arms Control aimed towards promoting cooperative efforts in preventing the abuse of the military sphere by improving the prospects for conflict prevention or crisis management. Through its platform for dialogue, this Framework provided a process which aimed to build trust between states, to increase transparency on their militaristic capabilities, and to promote cooperation between armed forces of different entities. In the Western Balkan sub-region during the period from 1995 to 2001, the OSCE efforts focused mostly on controlling the power of former Yugoslavia to prevent further conflicts from taking place. These efforts were most visible in the Dayton Peace Accords, with Article II of Annex 1–B, which focused mainly on negotiations towards CSBMs; Article IV, which focused on negotiations on sub-regional arms control agreements; and Article V, which focused on negotiations on establishing peace and stability in the whole region. The negotiation of Article II and Article IV of the DPA were concluded in 1996<sup>7</sup> while the negotiations for Article V, aimed at building peace and stability in the entire Southeast Europe sub-region, only entered into effect in 2002 after the start of implementation of the 2001a Ohrid Framework Agreement in the FYROM as well as after welcoming once again into the OSCE the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia which due to gross violations of human rights had been expelled from 1992 until 2001 through ‘consensus minus one’.<sup>8</sup>

The debate over arms control triggered by the Forum for Security and Cooperation did not focus solely on the Western Balkan sub-region but on the entire OSCE region. Likewise, the Forum did not represent the main actors of the region, United States of America, the Russian Federation, and the EU, as solely OSCE actors, but rather as actors which belonged to the big umbrella of international organizations, such as the United Nations Peacekeeping forces, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union Monitoring Missions, etc., which had come together at the OSCE to discuss political ways to develop further arms control policies in relation to the developments happening in the Western Balkan region and beyond. However, this was not, and is still not, an easy task, particularly when the actors each promote different perceptions on arms control approaches.

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<sup>7</sup> OSCE (1997b, p. 15).

<sup>8</sup> OSCE (1992).

Moreover, the CSBMs played an effective role by involving the external powers in seeking a solution to Yugoslavian conflicts. Initially, these were introduced as a framework of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) agreed to in 1975 with the CSCE founding document, the Helsinki Final Act. Then, in 1986, in Stockholm, they transformed into CSBMs, adding broader and more comprehensive security approaches to the measures.<sup>9</sup> The main role of the CSBMs was to create conditions for a common understanding of the political culture, as well as for neighbouring countries of antagonistic states to assume the responsibility to find solutions as to how to solve conflict. This was exactly the case with the involvement of the FYROM, Albania, and Montenegro with the aim of reducing tensions raised in the Kosovo crisis and to stop the aggression of the FRY under Milosevic's regime from further escalating. Moreover, for arms control to be operational, there must be measures establishing limitations, reductions, and restriction of certain kinds of weapons to limit or reduce potential conflicts. These can be operationalized through increasing transparency on military capabilities and building of mutual trust to avoid misperceptions, as well as through the control militaristic activities through additional training and mobilization exercises. The CSBMs not only encourage participating States towards sharing information with one another but also help understanding their behaviours as simplified in Article II of the DPA.<sup>10</sup>

It is of the utmost importance to underscore that the platform of the OSCE on CSBMs has been a successful attempt at reducing tensions in the Western Balkans. One good example is the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which following the conclusion of Article II in 1996, showed increased progress towards building stability in the region as indicated in the OSCE Annual report in 1997 which states that "The climate of more openness, confidence and transparency and progress in the balance of forces in the sub-region have been achieved thanks to the efforts and resolve of the representatives of the Parties."<sup>11</sup>

Another aspect of securitization in the OSCE region is border management, and many examples from the coordinated work of Field Missions prove the organizations effectiveness in conflict de-escalation. In 1995, OSCE efforts to establish early warning, conflict prevention, and crisis management were not yet operational in the Mission to Kosovo, Sandjak, and Vojvodina due to the refusal of FRY to cooperate with the OSCE because of its expulsion from the debate. This non-operationality continued until 1998 when the decision was made to establish the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM), with headquarters in Pristina, which aimed to coordinate activities with other International Organizations such as the UN and NATO, "in carrying out their functions – for instance, in the humanitarian field. Of particular importance will be relations with NATO, which has agreed with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to carry out an air surveillance mission. NATO has also drawn up plans for supporting the KVM if the urgent extraction of verifiers should become necessary."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> OSCE (1986).

<sup>10</sup> OSCE (1995a).

<sup>11</sup> OSCE (1997a, p. 12).

<sup>12</sup> OSCE (1998b, p. 26).

According to the OSCE Report of 1999, the KVM, which was withdrawn on March 20, 1999, before the NATO intervention, operated in five regional centres with about 2000 international staff. These were unfortunately not successful in addressing the security situation due to the complex nature of the Kosovo crisis. Aiming to assist with the refugee crisis, around 250 staff were divided into two task forces located in Albania and Skopje.<sup>13</sup>

The OSCE Presence in Albania, established in 1997, and the Spill-over Mission to Skopje, established in 1992, played an important role in their mutual attempts towards reducing tensions and improving crisis management in the framework of regional cooperation, particularly during the Kosovo crisis. The Spill-over Monitoring Mission to Skopje, currently located in North Macedonia, “maintained an enhanced effort observing and reporting on all aspects of the crisis as they affected the Mission area, including the physical, political and psychological elements of ‘spillover,’ actual and potential: inter alia, border security, refugee flows, public reactions, impact on inter-ethnic relations, relations with neighbouring countries and socio-economic consequences.”<sup>14</sup> However, even though the crisis in Kosovo de-escalated dramatically after NATO involvement in the FRY, the challenges between the Spill-over Mission to Skopje and its external borders continued until 2001 particularly in the areas of Kumanovo and Tetovo, causing serious security threats to the FYROM. Therefore, as indicated in the Permanent Council decision in 2001, a further “enhancement of the Mission by a further 159 international staff, including 72 confidence-building monitors, 60 police advisers, 17 police trainers and 10 support staff, with a mandate that runs until end of 2001” was adopted.<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the OSCE Presence in Albania also played a crucial role in border monitoring, particularly regarding the Kosovo crisis and the refugees influx. “In March 1998, the Permanent Council widened the mandate of the Presence to include the monitoring of the Albanian border with Kosovo (FRY). Consequently, eight temporary field offices have been set up in north-west Albania.”<sup>16</sup> The border monitoring established by the OSCE presence in Albania initially aimed to manage the tensions at the borders with Kosovo, Montenegro, and the FYROM, but due to the increased number of the refugees and the worsening of the situation in Kosovo in 1999 the Presence’s primary focus was Kosovo. However, as in the Spill-over Mission to Skopje, “following the end of NATO air action in June 1999 and a Security Council Resolution establishing an International Administration under United Nations auspices in Kosovo...” the requirement for border monitoring diminished as did the Presence in Albania and the focus shifted more into monitoring smaller towns and villages and building smaller border monitoring offices.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, various OSCE cross-border projects aimed at increasing cooperation between the countries in the region have played a crucial role in achieving this. One

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<sup>13</sup> OSCE (1999, pp. 21–22).

<sup>14</sup> OSCE (1999, p. 24).

<sup>15</sup> OSCE (2001b, p. 31).

<sup>16</sup> OSCE (1998b, p. 25).

<sup>17</sup> OSCE (1999, p. 12).

of the biggest projects was the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI), launched in 1996, which was initiated jointly by the United States of America and the European Union in cooperation with the members of the Stability Pact, the United Nation, and other international organizations such as INTERPOL and the World Customs Organization. The focus of SECI was to promote a more comprehensive approach to security with respect to various cross-border projects in areas of trade, transport, and infrastructure development. It aimed not only to prevent and investigate trans-border crime but, most importantly, to develop a viable economy in the region.<sup>18</sup> This important and innovative initiative set forward the OSCE's further efforts to implement more projects of this character which would assist in and promote cooperation not only in the Western Balkan region but also in other conflict areas where the OSCE is located.

## 7.4 De-securitization in the Human Dimension

De-securitization depends largely on the role of political actors in the region and their engagement with the OSCE. Hence, the role of the main actors in the region during the conflict period must be under scrutiny, as is their role during the period when, through the progress achieved towards establishing democratic structures in their societies, the Western Balkan countries became eligible to chair the organization, starting with Serbia in 2015 and continuing with Albania in 2020. The qualitative analysis resulted that the two key areas that captured the attention of the main actors during the second timeframe, from 2015 to 2020, were democratization and the rule of law. Both democratization and the rule of law, according to the OSCE structures, belong to the Human Dimension. They touch upon efforts towards establishing democratic institutions, enhancing democratic governance, and promoting the need to strengthen the rule of law in all areas of concern. The activities by the OSCE ODIHR in the Western Balkan region, particularly regarding the democratization process, have historically been very inclusive.

Since, during the period of 2015 to 2020 indicated in this research, these democratizing activities were very broad in nature,<sup>19</sup> and this section will underline some of the most important recent developments highlighted in the OSCE Annual Report of 2020. For instance, the continued efforts of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina in working towards achieving the long-term goals of helping to foster a stable, secure, and democratic society<sup>20</sup> by conducting a comprehensive needs assessment aiming “to enhance a cross-dimensional approach to addressing security sector priorities.”<sup>21</sup> The report also highlights OSCE efforts in assisting Montenegro in the area of democratization through support for institutions to establish “effective

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<sup>18</sup> OSCE (2000).

<sup>19</sup> See Figure 2 entitled “OSCE activities in Southeast Europe,” page 4.

<sup>20</sup> OSCE (2020, p. 63).

<sup>21</sup> OSCE (2020, p. 37).



and results-oriented programmes: from supporting electoral reform, strengthening democratic institutions and promoting gender equality, to building a free, resilient and professional media landscape...<sup>22</sup> Most importantly, even though in OSCE debates, the voice of the Russian Federation is completely absent with regard to developments in Serbia, the Report highlights the vital assistance provided by the Mission in Serbia, “The Mission worked in partnership with the host country’s institutions, media and civil society to foster an inclusive, rule-based democratic system accountable to its citizens.”<sup>23</sup> As continuously pointed out in the Annual Reports from 2015 until 2020, the OSCE placed high importance on the promotion of consolidating democratic structures in Serbia in the second timeframe. However, empirical evidence shows that the OSCE’s inclusive approach to promote democratization activities in all six Western Balkan countries is not comparably reflected in the debate of the regional actors over the developments in the region.

Another key area of importance tackled in the de-securitization process of the main regional actors during the timeframe of 2015 to 2020 was the rule of law. Without rule of law, there is no democracy and, consequently, no securitization of the region. This is the vision that the OSCE bases its assistance towards for all the OSCE participating States. Hand in hand with the democratization process, the rule of law in the OSCE’s conception plays the role of the cornerstone in its efforts and activities towards strengthening human rights, democratic structures, and good governance in the whole of the OSCE area, including in the Western Balkan countries. The OSCE Annual Report for 2020 also highlights the work of the Missions located in the Western Balkan region on strengthening the rule of law—another OSCE endeavour which is also treated in a very comprehensive manner. In the OSCE context, law-making is either democratic or anti-democratic; therefore, it is highly important to ensure the implementation of good laws.

One way in which the OSCE plays a crucial role in promoting democratization norms and values is by ensuring the effective performance of the national and local elections and monitoring the elections through the assistance of the ODIHR. Free and fair elections in the OSCE context are only to be ensured when a set of preconditions is fulfilled, this includes election laws, provisional rules, and voter registration through the assistance of the Parliamentary Assembly in close cooperation with the Council of Europe. However, democratization in the OSCE context not only includes free and fair elections but also a pluralistic civil society, good governance, accountability and transparency of the democratic institutions, and an independent judiciary which can promote the rule of law and relevant legislation laws.

The OSCE Annual Report for 2020, with regard to the developments in the area of the rule of law, stressed once again its assistance in Serbia; “It assisted in strengthening the rule of law and separation of powers; fighting organized crime and corruption; reforming the security sector; promoting human rights, good governance, the integration of national minorities, gender equality and regional connectivity; and

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<sup>22</sup> OSCE (2020, p. 67).

<sup>23</sup> OSCE (2020, p. 69).

fostering media freedom, ethics and professionalism.”<sup>24</sup> This OSCE endeavour highlights the important role of the Organization in fighting the silencing introduced by some political actors in the OSCE debate—a form of de-securitization “where an issue disappears or fails to register in the security discourse.”<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, some of the concerns that tend to be prone to silencing for political reasons or interests tend to be the concerns that really require serious attention. In this regard, it is important to explain that the efforts of the OSCE Missions in Southeast Europe towards ensuring the establishment of democratic structures and implementation of good laws are placed in a very inclusive and comprehensive manner towards all six Western Balkan countries, regardless from the intention of some participating States wishing to remove these issues completely from the security discourse.

## 7.5 Further Discussion and Conclusions

As illustrated throughout this Chapter, the OSCE’s role in the Western Balkan region has been vital during both timeframes highlighted in this research; however, when analysing the debate among the regional actors, the evidence shows when comparing both timeframes of this research that the differences in the perceptions of the East and West are still present today. This can be seen particularly in the approach of these actors in choosing whether or not to promote securitization during the first timeframe as well as in their approach to democratization in the second timeframe. While the European Union and the United States of America see the democratization process in the Western Balkans as a system that will enable security, stability, and prosperity in the region, the Russian Federation saw it as a “bargaining chip”<sup>26</sup> and “external influence”<sup>27</sup> from the West.

With regard to securitization in the politico-military dimension, the evidence shows that the areas of arms control and border management were the focus of the efforts in promoting security during the conflictful events of the past. Moreover, the evidence, as illustrated in Graph 7.1, shows that United States of America played a leading role in promoting security and cooperation in the Western Balkan region during the period from 1995 to 2001. Both the EU and US addressed concerns in the region in an inclusive and comprehensive manner in all the Western Balkan countries, whereas the Russian Federation’s voice was absent in domestic or cross-border concerns but more present in opposing the military intervention in the FRY by NATO allies—a decision made after all diplomatic efforts put into place were ignored by the Milosevic regime. This evidence brings into question the stance of the Russian Federation on arms control. In a general context, if one cares about a cause, in this

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<sup>24</sup> OSCE (2020, p. 69).

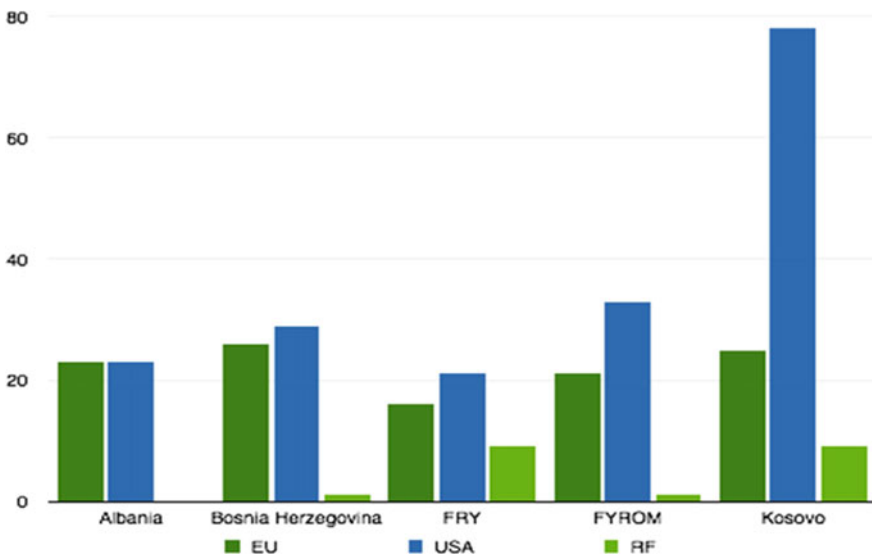
<sup>25</sup> Hansen (2012, p. 539).

<sup>26</sup> OSCE (2019).

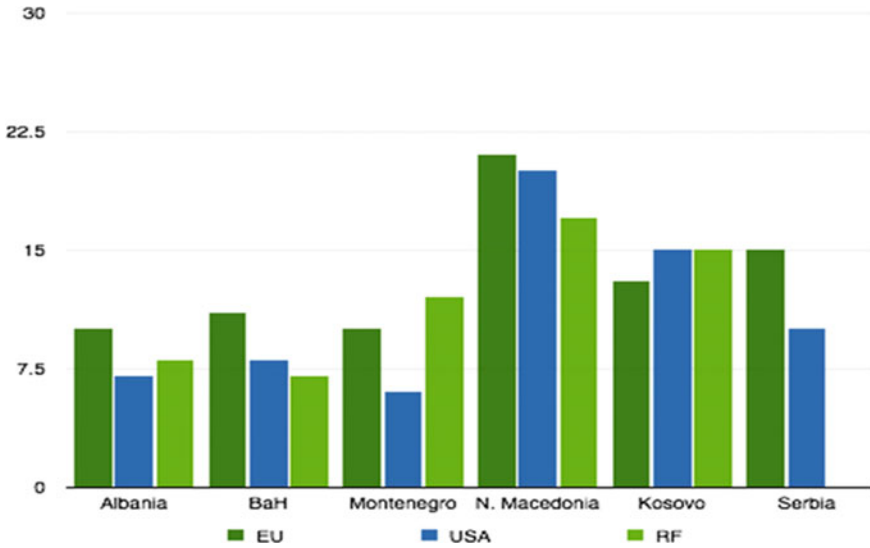
<sup>27</sup> OSCE (2017).

case arms control, and if one believes in the principles and commitments associated with it, then why would one's voice be absent in mitigating cross-border and domestic unrest? The approach of the Russian Federation thus appears to contradict its position on arms control.

In the second timeframe, the fact that the Western Balkan countries were able to give back to the organization and promote peace and stability in a regional and international context is a clear proof of the prevalence of democracy in these countries and, most importantly, their firm commitment towards the European integration path. Evidently, further progress is needed in democratization and rule of law, and other important areas mentioned briefly in the research to reach the European standards. Nonetheless, these goals do not seem to be too far from reach if all the main actors are in agreement in their approach towards the Western Balkans. The evidence, as illustrated in Graph 7.2, shows that the European Union took a leading role in the Western Balkans in the second timeframe as compared to the first, where United States of America was more dominant in promoting security in the region. This can also be associated with the declining role of United States of America under the Trump Administration. The evidence for this timeframe once again shows that, though the interest of the Russian Federation is dramatically increased regarding developments in the region, its approach in the region still does not reflect inclusiveness and comprehensiveness towards all the Western Balkan countries, particularly due to the absence of its voice on developments concerning Serbia.



**Graph 7.1** Total statements, 1995–2001 (Note Graph 7.2, entitled “Total Statements 1995–2001” illustrates the results of the statistical analysis, reflecting the percentages of the total statements found at the OSCE Documentation Center in Prague with regard to the debate on cross-dimensional issues concerning the Western Balkan region during the period of 1995 to 2001)



**Graph 7.2** Total statements, 2015–2020 (*Note* This graph illustrates the results of the statistical analysis, reflecting the percentages of the total statements found at the OSCE Documentation Center in Prague with regard to the debate on cross-dimensional issues concerning the Western Balkan region during the period of 2015 to 2020)

In this regard, it is important to underline that the Helsinki Final Act, the founding document of the OSCE, and the 10 Decalogue’s that it promotes, which were agreed upon by the majority of these three main actors in 1975, emphasizes the need for cooperation of all the actors in addressing regional concerns in the OSCE area. This is a document which, according to the Political Scientist Dr. Heinz Gärtner, “does not identify enemies, nor even opponents or adversaries. It calls for co-operative security and concludes that security is indivisible.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it is vital that these three main actors come to an agreement and look forward towards solutions based on shared norms and principles to address, in conformity and in an inclusive and comprehensive manner, the standing issues in the Western Balkan region. It is time for the regional actors to recall the lessons learned from the past and regard multilateralism as the only way forward in addressing the current and future security challenges. Multilateralism based upon the agreed shared principles and commitments is the only way to reach concrete solutions and establish security, prosperity, and stability in the region.

<sup>28</sup> Yearbook on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), OSCE Yearbook (2019), compiled by the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH), p. 52.

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# Chapter 8

## Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans



Noela Mahmutaj

### 8.1 Introduction

Russia has played, and continues to play, a key role in the stability and development of the Balkan region as it is an important international actor and with a voice in this part of the globe. It should also be noted that the Balkans and Russia have historical, cultural, and religious ties, which enable Moscow to be more active in the region. The Kremlin eagerly plays on such shared cultural ties and to support Russian commercial efforts to deepen economic and trade relations in key strategic sectors such as energy, banking, and real estate to create Balkan political and economic dependence. Russian influence operations boost ties between people with the aim of creating Russia-friendly constituencies and levers of influence that could allow Moscow to hinder further Balkan integration into Western economic, political, or security structures (Stronski & Himes, 2019).

In the 1990s, the Western Balkans region suffered from significant conflicts, and it has come a long way in the democratization process since, though negative political and economic consequences continue to be present, even today. During the 90s, the region experienced major changes and challenges as a result of integrated government reforms in the Western Balkans, reforms which have played an important role in the further development of the region. Shifting from a communist regime to a new system of governance has historically required sufficient time for states to adapt and progress. This explains why the Balkans continue to have sensitive and delicate problems with roots in the past, including ethnic conflicts, the issue of the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, the lack of cooperation between countries in the region (i.e. in the political, economic, and socio-cultural spheres), a lack of trust in states, etc.

Such problems hamper cooperation between countries in the field of politics, but also in economy, trade, tourism, security, stability, and regional development.

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In addition to these problems, the Balkan states continue to have internal problems stemming from poor governance of political elites and recurring cyclical crises such as high-level corruption, organized crime, money laundering, and other phenomena which from time to time provoke instability as well as crises of various formats in the region. All of these issues open the door to the possibility of increased influence from other actors in the region.

## 8.2 Russia and Other Actors in the Western Balkans

After the fall of the communist regime, the countries of the Balkan Peninsula made consistent efforts to integrate and strengthen their position in the Euro-Atlantic structures of NATO and the European Union.

Due to its geographical position and its resources, the Balkan region had found itself at the centre of attention of many international actors, especially the Great Powers (such as the US, EU, China, and Russia) which play an important role in establishing the balance of power under the general equilibrium principle in modern international relations. Today, the balance of power is the main instrument for ensuring international security and stability. It is important to highlight that, for the Great Powers, geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic interests will always be among their interests (Petrillo, 2013), and that this is acceptable for small states in terms of gaining mutual benefit (including for the Balkan countries). Thus given its geographical location, the region is important to the Great Powers, who view the economic and political prospects and future of the Western Balkan countries as key priorities.

Geopolitics and the history of the Balkans are historically intertwined due to the deep legacy of rivalry and recurrent warfare on the Balkan Peninsula. The subject and these states are also closely related to each other as, not only has the history of the Balkans influenced the development of studies in geopolitics, but geopolitics itself has sometimes found, in the Balkans, the best ground to see how theory turns into practice. The great European powers, the US, and especially Russia have all shown interest in the Balkans.

After the fall of the communist regime and the Yugoslav wars during the 1990s, the region was at the forefront of debates on critical issues such as transatlantic relations, EU security and defence policy, and even NATO and EU enlargement, which continue to this day. The Western Balkans is an integral part of Russia's strategy to establish itself as a first-class player in European security issues, a match for other major powers such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. To have a foothold in the Balkans means to have a say in those strategic issues, which have direct consequences for Russia. Moscow's interest is thus driven by geopolitics, alongside other concerns such as economic interests and historical ties to the Slavic and orthodox nations. Moscow sees the Balkans as an important periphery to Europe, where the Kremlin can maximize its influence vis-à-vis the West (Bechev, 2019).



Therefore, the geopolitical tendencies of powerful states, reflected in their strategies, aim to maintain and strengthen their position as a major power, but also as a blue sea power, as it is important to note that the power of the sea (Sea Power) is a necessary condition for the approximation of the status of a “world power.” We can emphasize here the fact that Russia, due to its geographical position by the sea, has been privileged to remain an important global actor. This fact is clearly expressed by English geographer and academic Halford Mackinder, who was one of the founding fathers of geopolitics and geostrategy in the twentieth century. In his main work “*The geographical pivot of history*,” Mackinder wrote that, in the world, Russia occupies the central strategic position held by Germany in Europe (Mackinder, 2004).

The Balkan countries, being geographically located in Europe, are closely linked politically and economically to the European Union, one of the strategic partners of the region. Therefore, everything that happens in the political and economic sectors of the Balkan states, in reality, is directly related to what happens at the headquarters of the European Union itself.

We can highlight that the cooperation between these actors depends on the internal processes taking place in the country, but also on the interests that the parties have in relation to one another.

In order to interact and share common interests, countries (especially the Great Powers) present a series of specific or strategic initiatives to other countries, which can choose to accept or refuse these. Powerful states, through this process, in addition to exerting political control, exert ideological control. In addition, there are powerful states that might, under certain circumstances, become destabilizing factors (Cooper, 2011).

It is important to understand that the position and history of the Balkans affords other states’ rights on strategic issues that are also directly related to them. For Russia, in addition to the geopolitical factor, an important factor (to some extent a secondary factor) is economic interests, as well as its historical ties with Orthodox countries (Bechev, 2019). This has been clearly demonstrated by numerous studies. Russian historian Elena Guskova, who has devoted her research to the history of Slavic states in the Balkans, believes that the Russian leadership sees its place in the region in strengthening Russia’s economic presence (Guskova, 2019).

Russia, as a key actor, plays an important role in cooperation between the countries of the region. The Russian market is of great importance for all countries in the region, and its potential can aid countries to cooperate and further progress in various fields, such as economy, energy, and infrastructure. In fact, this kind of perspective is clearly demonstrated in the section dedicated to relations with the Balkans in the Foreign Policy Concept approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin in 2013. Specifically, paragraph 66 in this Kremlin document states, “*Russia aims to develop comprehensive, pragmatic, and equal cooperation with the countries of South-Eastern Europe. The Balkan region is of great strategic importance to Russia, including as a major transportation and infrastructure hub through which oil and gas are distributed to European countries* (Foreign policy concept of the RF, 2013). This clearly states the strategic interest of the Moscow government in the Balkan

region. The Concept is a systematic description of the basic principles, priorities, objectives, and goals of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

Meanwhile, Russia's new foreign policy—in contrast to Soviet policy—is based not on global ideology but on domestic needs. Accordingly, Russia gives priority to geo-economics over geopolitics and defends the interests of the new Russian business elite over abstract theoretical notions with little impact on life at home, such as fighting the first stage of NATO enlargement (Simes, 1999), or the EU enlargement, even as Moscow opposes these in principle. The start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 was exactly one of the main reasons for Moscow's opposition to NATO and the EU enlargement. It is clear from official Kremlin statements that NATO and the EU enlargement is not welcomed by Moscow and is perceived by it as a threat to Russian national security. Normally, Putin's policy has been harshly criticized by many countries in the world regarding the current events in Ukraine, but in fact, we can understand that Russia wants NATO to return to its pre-1997 borders (i.e. by removing military infrastructure from member countries that joined the alliance in 1997). We can also add that today it is difficult to give a concrete forecast or conclusion as to what will be the policies that will be pursued in the development of relations between Russia and NATO and EU countries during this period or after the end of the war as the war in Ukraine is still ongoing, with no clear way out, but it is important to reach a negotiated and long-term solution between the states.

Author Leon Aron in his article “The Putin Doctrine - Russia's Quest to Rebuild the Soviet State” explains that Kremlin foreign policy rests on three geostrategic imperatives: that Russia must remain a nuclear superpower, that Russia must remain a great power in all facets of international activity, and that it must remain the hegemon—the political, military, and economic leader—of its region (Aron, 2013). In practice, the loss of geopolitical space is not a characteristic or feature of the great powers, as they always aim and seek to maintain their influence and authority in strategic regions (as in the Balkans).

Accordingly, Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, in their article “Russia's Game in the Balkans,” argue that, for Russia, the Balkans have important historical, cultural, and religious ties—common ties that are actively spread, and sometimes exaggerated by, the efforts of Russian public diplomacy and media narratives (Stronski & Himes, 2019). The geostrategic location of the region between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, as well as its proximity to the Middle East, is also important to Moscow. The Black Sea provides Russia with access to warm water ports, the search for which has been a historical instigator of Russian diplomatic and military activity in Southeast Europe (Stronski & Himes, 2019).

Albanian historian Paskal Milo says that Kremlin foreign policy has historically been present in the Balkans, and it was and is in Slavic countries, especially in Serbia. In these countries, Russia is present with significant economic investments, and with traditional cultural and political influence. Russia also maintains more complex and closer relations with Serbia, which do not exclude the aspect of military cooperation and a clearly structured alliance. Moreover, Serbia has always been, and continues to be, at the centre of Russian influence in the Balkans. Russia, through Serbia, seeks

to maintain power in the Balkans and to spread it as much as possible throughout the region (Mahmutaj, 2020).

Historically, Russia has had particularly warm relations with the Balkans. The great mediaeval Slavic empires of Serbia and Bulgaria had enormous influence in shaping Russian culture by transmitting much of the civilization of the Greco-Roman World in a Slavonic idiom into Russia, particularly from the 13th to the fifteenth centuries (Gvosdev & Marash, 2013) and those that followed.

Some Albanian researchers, however, have harshly criticize Russian policy regarding the Balkans, calling it unfair and un-strategic. Former Albanian diplomat and researcher in international relations, Shaban Murati, says that Russian diplomacy is in a rush and does not have the time and patience to hide its ambitions in the region (Murati, Russian influence in Albania, 2016) so much so that it has tied Serbia too strongly to its interests, and that Belgrade has no choice but to obey Moscow (Murati, Lavrov's threat against Vuçi is not only at the state level, but also personally, 2020). The rush of Russian foreign policy to secure its influence in the Balkans can be seen in its energy project, where the Balkan region plays the role of the final stage of Russian oil and gas distributions (Blank, 2013), and policy, based on the idea that the battle for oil and gas will be one of the key battles of the future between Great Powers. "Today's Russia, which is rising aggressively in the international arena and aspires to become a world superpower, claims to occupy the same place in world affairs as the Soviet Union in the past" (Murati, Lavrov's threat against Vuçi is not only at the state level, but also personally, 2020).

In his book "Balkan Russia," Murati argues that Russia's actions in the Balkans are focused on targeting former Soviet and Slavic states with a view to reactivating a common Slavic umbrella (joint military manoeuvres with Serbia, creation of the Panslav Forum in Slovenia), as well as on targeting the axis of Balkan Orthodox States as instruments to spread Russia's influence in the Balkans (Murati, Balkan Russia, 2014).

The same opinion is shared by the Albanian diplomat, Lisen Bashkurti, in his article "Russia's direct and indirect influence in the Balkans," in which he writes that it is now an indisputable fact that the Russian presence and influence in the Balkans is evident and on the rise. This is not surprising, as Russia has been looking out of the Balkans for more than two centuries in order to use this area of Southeast Europe for its geopolitical and strategic interests (Bashkurti, 2020).

At the same time, Russia is not always interested in changing its laws to more closely harmonize with EU standards (Gvosdev & Marash, 2013). In this case, we can add that Russian policy sees the Balkans as a vulnerable periphery of Europe where Russia can build a foothold, recruit supporters, and ultimately maximize its leverage vis-à-vis the West (Bechev, 2019).

In summary, the various geopolitical or even geo-economic movements in the Balkan Peninsula from the Kremlin, as is clearly seen in the Concept of Russian Foreign Policy and stated by various scholars, is not something unknown or new, nor should it be considered something surprising, as it is simply the extension of Russia's interests, as for the other Great Powers.

### 8.3 The Russian Presence on the Balkan Peninsula

Russia has historically played, and will continue to play, a key role in the Western Balkan region. Russia's presence continues to be significant in historical and cultural terms, but above all, it manifests itself in the areas of security, economy, trade, and energy, which are important for the region and vice versa. It is also important to note that some of the factors mentioned above indicate that the Russian presence in the Western Balkan countries will always be visible. Although Moscow's presence in fields such as trade, economy, and energy is not as pronounced as that of the European Union, it has been able, through its strategic policies, gain the perception that it is a strategic and serious partner for the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as more willing than Brussels to take care of issues of importance in the region.

Indeed, a concrete and clear example is the new gas project in Serbia, the agreement for which was signed in 2017 between Russia's largest company, Gazprom, and that of Serbia, Yugorosgaz (Serbia, Gazprom ramping up gas supplies to, 2017). According to data on the company's official website, in 2018, Gazprom sent 2.2 billion cubic metres of gas to Serbia (Oil and gas exploration, production, processing, and storage in Serbia, 2018). Certainly, through these ambitious and promising future projects, Russian Gazprom has gained more ground in recent years. This has normally enabled Moscow to act wisely, aiming to secure its sphere of economic, but also political, influence through bilateral pipeline agreements. Here, we can also add that the Russian government is further strengthening its dominance in the Balkans by having Serbia as a "key" to its strategies in the implementation of projects that are important even for the development of the Balkan region.

Meanwhile, there is no doubt that Belgrade, under this Russian presence and influence, has recently emphasized its foreign policy based on two key vectors, which we can call "Euro-Russian Serbia". The clarification of this two-vector Euro-Russian policy by Serbia can be clearly seen from the visits of senior leaders of the Serbian and Russian governments, where such visits at a high state-level consolidate the cooperation between Belgrade and Moscow, as well as cooperation in the political, diplomatic, economic, commercial, cultural, and spiritual fields. Meanwhile, regarding Belgrade's policy towards Brussels, we see that Serbia has hesitated to take any step that would harm its EU accession prospects or openly distance itself from the EU's general foreign policy.

In addition, the Russian presence and influence in the Balkans are greatly favoured by the hybrid transition environment of the countries of this Peninsula. In fact, in the Balkans, we have several types of states in terms of the formation of institutional functioning, stability, and democracy. For example, we have new states, including Kosovo<sup>1</sup> which gained independence on 17 February 2008 and is recognized by

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<sup>1</sup> This is the date of the declaration of independence by the Republic of Kosovo, whose sovereignty is not recognized by Russia. Moscow, not recognizing the independence of Kosovo, stated that this crisis should be resolved through dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, under UN Security Council Resolution 1244. Thus, resolving the Kosovo issue is one of the key factors in changing the vector of cooperation between the Balkan countries (which, unfortunately, still impedes the

117 countries (International recognitions of the Republic of Kosovo, 2021) (International recognitions of the Republic of Kosovo, 2018), facing challenges of state formation and functioning; we have weak states, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, facing difficulties in terms of existence and functioning as a whole (Kivimäki et al., 2012), and finally, we have countries in political, legal, economic, and administrative transition, including Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia.

Despite the number of states, the characteristics of the Western Balkan region in its transition phase make the systems of these countries relatively hybrid. This means that in the Western Balkan countries, in addition to the Western elements of liberal democracy, relapse into the old systems of Eastern origin, so that these systems continue to coexist. These two elements exist and rival each other in political settings, legal systems, institutions, and economic settings. As these elements have a significant impact on the Balkan states, we can define them as problematic elements that affect or attract the presence of other actors, a presence that opens the door and increases the opportunities for these actors to expand their influence in the region.

#### **8.4 The OSCE and the European Union's Special Missions**

Opposition to Russia's policies has been shown openly in major organizations in terms of cooperation, security, and democracy. This has particularly been the case in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) where members continue to harshly criticize Moscow's behaviour. Addressing recent events (such as the events in Georgia, the conflict in Ukraine, the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, the "Skripal case" or "Chemical attack on Great Britain" in 2018, the Navalny case) has become one of the main priorities of these organizations as they play an important role in resolving conflicts, as well as in preserving the fundamental rights of individuals.

It is important to note here that relations between the OSCE and Russia have also affected relations between the countries of the Balkan region and Russia, as the countries of the Western Balkans (except Serbia) have followed the policy of OSCE countries. For example, the conflict in Ukraine has made the countries of the Western Balkans also respond to Moscow for the invasion of Ukraine by imposing severe sanctions on Russia. Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia ban Russian overflight of their airspace and access to their airports, prohibit transactions with Russia's Central Bank, and suspend the broadcasting of Russian state-owned media (Russia Adds Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia to 'Enemy' List, 2022). In fact, today the OSCE has grown in profile, but its mission has become increasingly challenging and complex. Given that the OSCE is the forum favoured by Russia to deal with European issues, this has also hampered the fulfilment of its role in preventing conflict.

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progress of the region). Therefore, Kosovo as an independent state is a factor of stability in the region and beyond.

The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine has found, and continues to find, violations by Russia; this is specifically stated in the OSCE reports on Ukraine. According to daily, weekly, and local reports from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (Daily and spot reports from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, 2014–2022 [HYPERLINK "sps:refid::bib6|bib6"](#) ), there are continuing violations of the ceasefire established between Kyiv and Moscow via the mediation of France and Germany, which have undertaken a peace process called the Minsk protocol. The Minsk protocol was drawn up by the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine in 2014, which consisted of representatives from the OSCE, Ukraine, and Russia (Press statement by the Trilateral Contact Group, 2014).

In fact, the uneasy relationship between the OSCE and Russia comes as a result of the foreign policy that Russia has pursued towards the OSCE, which has been frequently criticized and continues to be criticized by the Kremlin. Specifically, Russia has criticized the OSCE for being irrelevant or imbalanced (Morozov, 2005) in terms of bias and partiality or current policy, and the OSCE needs reforms based on realities (Lavrov, 2005).

During the 2018 elections in Russia, there was a generally positive report from the ODIHR stating that the elections were transparent, but were tightly controlled. The Director of the OSCE ODIHR, Michael Georg Link, during a press conference in Moscow, said that Cooperation with Russian officials has been transparent, professional, and credible, but that the lack of competition in the electoral race was one of the shortcomings of the whole electoral process. Other shortcomings he mentioned were related to the definition of freedom of speech (Russian presidential election well administered, but characterized by restrictions on fundamental freedoms, lack of genuine competition, international observers say, 2018).

The attitude of the Russian Federation towards the OSCE has undergone a major and significant change in recent years as Russian foreign policy itself has changed in relation to other actors and vice versa. This kind of policy change comes as a result of international developments and the reality facing actors. The current events in Ukraine explain the changing development of relations between the states (including here the relations between the OSCE and Russia).

However, it is important to note, today, strengthening cooperation between Russia and other forces is necessary, as they are key actors and play an important role in the field of security and democracy in the international arena, where they will undoubtedly affect not only the progress of relations with each other but also in the further perspectives of the regions.

At present, relations between Moscow and Brussels are in open confrontation, as Russia and the European Union define their positions in specific problematic situations based on often profoundly opposing views (e.g. in the case of Kosovo or the crisis in Ukraine) in terms of the problems of global politics, the content, the driving forces, priorities, and the desired model of the future world order.

Here, we must emphasize another important moment regarding the recent influence of Russia in the Balkans, which has also “awakened” the EU interest by making its policy towards the region more active. As a concrete example of the “Brussels awakening,” we can bring the Kremlin’s offer that the countries of the Western

Balkans become part of the Eurasian Economic Union,<sup>2</sup> which came at a particularly inopportune moment for the countries of the Western Balkans, as they had just received negative responses to the opening of negotiations in the EU. This offer from the Kremlin prompted Brussels to take further steps for the countries of the region by promising again to open negotiations as soon as possible.

The European Union has provided various programs for the development of the region and the countries of the Western Balkans, providing funding and support. In fact, economically, the EU is the largest trading partner for the Western Balkan countries, the main source of foreign direct investment, and the main destination for external labour migration. Many European countries have a significant Western Balkan diaspora. Although the slowdown in European Union enlargement has raised uncertainty among Balkan countries about the credibility of the European Union, it continues to be the most important economic actor in the region.

Based on European Commission statistics, it is clear that there is EU cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans region, including Serbia which (although it has openly expressed cooperation with Russia) continues to lead first among the countries of the region. The growth of Serbia's exports between 2010 and 2020 in absolute terms was the largest of the six partners in the Western Balkans, as was its average annual growth rate (6.5%) (Western Balkans-EU—international trade in goods statistics, 2021) making Serbia the largest trade partner of the EU in the Western Balkans.

## 8.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that Russian foreign policy plays a very important role in maintaining stability and peace in the Balkan region. Resolving problems or obstacles between states is currently an important step for the region's progress, and Moscow, as the leading global actor in that international arena, plays a role in establishing the balance of forces. Therefore, cooperation between the Russian Federation and the countries of the Balkan region allows us to assert that Moscow plays a key role in the region's stability and development. Moscow's presence has always been visible and like other states, Russia has its own interests (Simes, 1999) in the region.

Russia understands that, as it is no longer the superpower of Soviet times, it must play a major role in international affairs in a multipolar world. How Russia will react to international affairs, or to its commitments, is an enigmatic factor for the future. This is also explained by recent events between Ukraine and Russia from February 2022. The war in Ukraine has undoubtedly brought a new transition for the Kremlin

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<sup>2</sup> The Eurasian Economic Union is an international organization for regional economic integration for countries located in northern Asia and southern Europe. It is led by Russia and ensures the free movement of goods, services, and capital and labour. It also pursues a coordinated, harmonized policy within the sectors defined by the Treaty and international agreements within the Union.



itself, but also an attempt to create a new world order, which could also change the foreign policy perception of key international actors.

It is also important to note that the relations between states in the international arena will be influenced by the realities they will face in the future. This means that, with the development of technology and globalization, the relationships between states will likely change. The influence of external actors in the Balkan region will be determined on the basis of international developments. More important will be the contribution of these actors to the stability and development of the region, as well as the alignment of their foreign policy with that of the region. This means that Russia will probably need a new policy towards the Balkans, one more focused on a combination of “hard” and “soft powers” i.e. “smart power.”

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# Chapter 9

## Social Security of States with Limited Recognition: A Case Study of the Republic of Kosovo



Paulina Szeląg

### 9.1 Introduction

In recent years, the phenomena of unrecognized states and/or states with limited recognition have been the subject of interest of many scholars. Nikolaos Tzifakis (2013), George Kyris (2018), and Gergana Noutcheva (2018) have been analysing the relations of these countries with the European Union (EU). Some other researchers (Cooley & Mitchell, 2010; Berg & Pegg, 2018; Ker-Lindsay, 2015) have been publishing on the outcomes of research related to the concept of *engagement without recognition*. Experts (Caspersen, 2012, 2015; Fabry, 2010; Florea, 2014; Visoka, 2017, 2018) have also been conducting research on the functioning of the above-mentioned entities in the international community. Although many works on states with limited recognition have already been published, too little has been said on the social security of these countries.

Social security is defined as any programme of social protection established by legislation, or any other mandatory arrangement, that provides individuals with a degree of income security when faced with the contingencies of old age, survivorship, incapacity, disability, unemployment, or child rearing (The International Social Security Association, 2021). In addition, social security usually offers access to curative or preventive medical care.

It should be emphasized that the first social security programme, which was based on compulsory insurance, was created in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Since

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the twentieth century, national security programmes have been developing globally, related to the process of decolonization, the end of World War Two, and the establishment of various international conventions and legal acts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (The International Social Security Association, 2021).

Nowadays, social security seems to be one of the fundamental human rights. In some countries, such as Germany and Brazil, social security is guaranteed by the Constitution. In others, social security systems were established by the legislative powers. Nevertheless, it is estimated that, in the twenty-first century, around fifty per cent of the global population has access to some form of social security, while only twenty per cent enjoy adequate social security coverage (The International Social Security Association, 2021). This indicates that social security needs to be extended in all regions of the world.

The aim of this article is to analyse the evolution of social security in states with limited recognition. The case study for this article is the Republic of Kosovo, taken as an example of the *de facto* state.

The article consists of three main parts. First, it provides the reader with an overview of the development of the macroeconomic situation and social security systems in Kosovo, particularly since its declaration of independence. It then presents the evolution of the social security system since the end of the war in Kosovo. Lastly, it presents the activities of selected subjects of international relations, such as the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and the United States of America (US), in connection with the evolution of both the macroeconomic situation and the social security system in Kosovo. The article argues that the scale of engagement of international entities makes the evolution of social security in states with limited recognition visible and inarguable. However, Kosovo, as a state with limited recognition, remains unable to provide its inhabitants with a full social package. This is mostly related to the poor macroeconomic indicators of the country. Analysis shows that the most significant influence on the social security system in Kosovo came from the UN, the EU, and the World Bank, while the OSCE and the US had indirect impacts on the social situation in Kosovo.

## 9.2 The Recognition of Kosovo

With a unilateral declaration, the Republic of Kosovo proclaimed its independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008. Over the following weeks, several governments announced that they would recognize Kosovo. These included the US, the most significant members of the EU (Britain, France, Germany, and Italy), and several other Western European and allied countries, such as Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Korea (Economides, Ker-Lindsay & Papadimitriou, 2010). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of the Republic of Kosovo (2022), the state received 117 diplomatic recognitions. It should be noted that Kosovo was recognized by the

**Table 9.1** Kosovo—GDP, GDP growth, GDP per capita, 2004–2008

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
GDP (€ million)	2,348	2,384	2,341	2,474	2,684
GDP growth (%—change compared with previous year)	3.2%	−1%	2.6%	2.8%	5%
GDP per capita (€)	1,195	1,143	1,152	1,197	1,277

Source International Labour Organization. ILO Sub-Regional Office in Budapest. (2010). *Profile of the Social Security System in Kosovo (within meaning of UNSC Resolution 1244 [1999])* Retrieved from <http://www.ilo.org>. Accessed August 3, 2021

vast majority of the members of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In addition, this country was recognized by 34 out of 47 members of the Council of Europe and all the countries of the Group of Seven (G7) (Pawłowski, 2018). According to Marcinkowska (2016), with the support of the US and the EU Kosovo was able to become a member of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Council of Europe Development Bank. Despite this, Kosovo has not been collectively recognized by the EU and the UN, regardless of its membership in most important international, regional organizations, such as the Council of Europe. What is more, this country was not recognized by Russia, as well as a number of EU member states such as Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Cyprus, and Greece.

As a result, the international position of Kosovo remains weak. The fact that two UN Security Council permanent members, Russia and China, do not recognize Kosovo as independent state makes it most unlikely that the country will not become a member of either the UN or the EU.

According to the International Labour Organization, in 2004–2008, Kosovo made major progress in its transition to a market economy. As shown in Table 9.1, in these years GDP growth and GDP per capita were progressive (International Labour Organization, 2010).

Since 2008, the macroeconomic situation of Kosovo has been unstable. The GDP growth in Kosovo was five per cent in 2008. Since that time, GDP growth has been alternately slower and faster. In 2009 and 2010, GDP growth was 3.6% and 3.3%, respectively, while in 2014 and 2015, it was 1.2% and 4.1%, respectively. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, GDP growth shrunk in 2020 to −4.1% (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2021). International financial institutions expect Kosovo's GDP to grow between 3.5 and 4.5% in 2021 (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

With respect to GDP per capita in Kosovo, in the years 2008–2019 it has increased from 2.258 million euro to 3.835 million euro. However, in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it decreased slightly to 3.375 euro (Focusconomics, 2021; Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2021).

During those same 12 years, the inflation rate for consumer prices in Kosovo was shifting. In 2008, it was 9.34%. In 2009, the country experience deflation, at −2.40%. For 2020, an inflation rate of 0.2% was calculated (WorldData.info, 2021).

At the end of 2007, the population of Kosovo was 2.13 million, with an ethnic composition of ninety-two per cent of Albanians and eight per cent other minorities (International Labour Organization, 2010). In recent years, however, the total resident population has diminished from 1,804,944 in 2014 to 1,798,188 in 2020 (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2021). The main reasons for this trend are the poor economy of Kosovo and the young population of this country.

In 2008, it was estimated that fifty per cent of the population of Kosovo was under the age of 25, and forty per cent under the age of 18 (Kita, 2008). At the same time, the unemployment rate was around forty-five per cent, and youth unemployment rate around seventy-six per cent, with fifteen per cent of the population living in “extreme poverty” and forty-five per cent living in “poverty” (Ivlevs & King, 2009). Although the unemployment rate has been decreasing since 2008, in 2020 it remained at 27.2% (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2021) with the youth unemployment rate at 49.9% (Trading Economics, 2021). Since 2008, young citizens of Kosovo have been emigrating for economic reasons in search of better fortunes. In addition, those who emigrated were better educated and had higher incomes (Ivlevs & King, 2009). What this means is that the Kosovar government has faced high pressure to provide work and mobility for its youth; hence, its integration into the OSCE and alliance with the EU are pivotal for the years to come.

### 9.3 Social Security in Kosovo

Before 1990, the employed population of Kosovo was insured under the pension system of the former Yugoslavia. The pension amount was determined according to the number of contributory years and wages. The Autonomous Office of the Pension Fund of Kosovo was the administrative agency which collected contributions and paid benefits. This institution was closed in 1990 and its authority was transferred to Serbia (International Labour Organization, 2010). The collapse of the pension system in Kosovo was an outcome of the armed conflict in 1999 which resulted, among other things, in the damage or loss of pension insurance contribution records. As a result, a reform of the social system to provide basic income covering the whole population was a must. The most urgent need was to address pensioners under the former Yugoslav pension system whose pensions had not been paid since 1999, as well as war invalids who had not reached retirement age but were incapable of working, and unemployed persons who had lost their jobs due to the war or privatization (International Labour Organization, 2010). Just before the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) Operation Allied Force ended on 10 June 1999, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1244 (for more on the NATO intervention in Kosovo see Henkin, 1999; Judah, 2002; Moravcevic, 1999; Posen, 2000; Sahin, 2013; Vickers, 1998; Wolfgram, 2008). This act placed Kosovo under the temporary administration of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) (for more on the activities of the UNMIK see Cocozzelli, 2013; Gow, 2009; Harland, 2010; Ker-Lindsay, 2012;

Visoka, 2017). In 2001, the UNMIK, in cooperation with various international organizations, began to develop a new pension system in Kosovo within the framework of the stabilization and integration reforms. The basic legislative framework of the pension system of Kosovo was provided by Regulation 2001/35 “On the Pension System in Kosovo.” In 2005, this Regulation was amended by Regulation 2005/20. The method for determining the level of basic pension every year was defined by the Law on the Methodology for the Determination of the Level of the Basic Pension in Kosovo (2002/1), while the Law on Pensions for Persons with Disabilities and Totally Disabled Persons in Kosovo (2003/23) stipulated the eligibility criteria, the procedures for establishing disability, the role and obligations of medical commissions, the benefit amount, and the rules for the administration of the budget. As a consequence, a new pension system was formulated based upon three pillars (Shaipi, 2005, p. 2), namely basic pensions for all residents of Kosovo in old age and with an incapacity to work, mandatory savings pensions for employees, and voluntary supplementary pensions.

The first pillar covered all citizens permanently resident in Kosovo. Benefits were financed by transfers from the general budget and were flat rates. The basic old-age pensions were paid to persons over 65 years of age, whereas the basic invalidity pensions were paid to persons between 18 and 64 years of age certified by a medical commission (Abels, 2016). The basic invalidity pensions were not paid if the beneficiaries received pensions from the veterans’ scheme or received social assistance benefits as dependent family members. In December 2008, 6.4% of the population received the old-age pension, and 0.9% of the population received the basic invalidity pension. It might seem that these indicators are quite low. However, they reflect the age structure of the inhabitants of Kosovo. In 2008, among the inhabitants of Kosovo, only approximately six per cent were aged 64 and over (Statistical Office of Kosovo, 2009, p. 11). By contrast at a similar time, the Republic of Poland, another Eastern European country, had a population in which twenty-four per cent were old-age pensioners (Central Statistical Office, 2009, p. 25).

In 2008, based on Decision 13/277, the Favourable Pension Insurance Scheme was implemented. It provided additional pensions for the citizens of Kosovo over 65 years of age if they could prove that they had been pensioners or had paid contributions for at least fifteen years under the former Yugoslav system (Republic of Kosovo & Study for Poverty Profile in European Region, 2010, p. 28).

In 2008, old-age pensioners received a monthly basic pension of €40, and invalids received €45. As the average monthly wage in 2008 was €237 in the public sector and €248 in the private sector, a basic pension was equal to only sixteen or seventeen per cent of the average wage. The monthly pension amount covered by the Favourable Pension Insurance Scheme was a flat rate of €35, which was paid in addition to the basic old-age pension (International Labour Organization, 2010, p. 22). Comparing the indicators for 2008 Kosovo with 2008 Poland—a country that had just entered the European Union four years earlier—it is evident that Kosovo’s basic pensions were low. In Poland, in fact, the relationship between average monthly gross retirement pay from the non-agricultural social security system and monthly average gross wages

and salaries in the national economy was 59.1% (Central Statistical Office, 2009, p. 25).

The second pillar, the savings pension system, covered employees and other economically active persons over 18 years of age. This system included a mandatory contribution for all the workers who were born after 1946 and a voluntary contribution for those who were born before 1946. The mandatory savings system provided pensions to supplement the basic pension. The contribution to the mandatory saving system was set at ten per cent of wages, shared equally between employers and employees. Employees, who chose to pay voluntary contributions, could pay a maximum of fifteen per cent of their wages themselves (International Labour Organization, 2010, p. 25).

When it comes to the third pillar i.e. voluntary supplementary pensions, this system was based on a voluntary private pension organized on an individual or enterprise basis. It supplemented the first pillar and the second pillar (International Labour Organization, 2010, p. 27).

The pension system covers not only the general population, but also employees of selected sectors. In 2004, a provisional scheme was introduced for workers who were let go from the Trepça mining complex at the end of the Kosovo war in 1999, and in January 2009, a pension scheme for members of the Kosovo Protection Corps was established (Republic of Kosovo: Study for Poverty Profile in European Region, 2010, p. 28).

The above-mentioned pension system was supported by other programmes of social protection. One of these was the overall social protection system in Kosovo, which consisted of social assistance and social and family services.

Social assistance is payable to eligible low-income families. Members of the family must be permanent residents of Kosovo. Social assistance is addressed to two categories of families. The first is low-income families whose members were unable to work, while the second category includes the families whose members are able to work but are unemployed (International Labour Organization, 2010, p. 33).

The social and family services covers direct social care, counselling, and, in special cases, material aid for people in need (International Labour Organization, 2010, p. 34).

It should be noted that, apart from the social protection system, Kosovo provides individual income support for those people who took part in the war and became invalids, as well as for civilians who have become invalids as a consequence of the war. Total expenditure on the war invalids scheme in 2008 amounted to €17.88 million, compared to €9.17 million in 2007, marking a steep increase of ninety-five per cent (International Labour Organization, 2010, p. 33).

After the war, Kosovo required a health care system. The Law on Health (2004/04) specified that all the citizens of Kosovo were entitled to receive health care. Although health services were provided free of charge in public institutions for certain groups such as children up to 15 years of age, students, and persons over 65 years of age, patients were obliged to pay for some medical services. Some of them also made informal payments to doctors and other medical personnel. In 2003, approximately



fifty-three per cent of Albanians in Kosovo paid informally for health services (International Labour Organization, 2010, p. 35). Although the passage of time and health care reforms were ambitious, in 2008 citizens of Kosovo still did not have social health insurance. There was also no unemployment insurance scheme, maternity benefits scheme, or family benefits scheme for children.

A clear legal framework for Social Protection in Kosovo was established after 2008. These legal acts were adopted by Kosovan institutions supported by international donors (Tahiraj, 2016, p. 19). Along with legal acts, new institutions responsible for social protection in Kosovo were developed. The most important of these is the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW). The main body within the MLSW responsible for the design and implementation of social policies is the Department for Social Policy and Family. In 2009, the transfer of competences and responsibilities of social services and social assistance to the local level began. Policy on social protection remained in the hands of the MLSW in the evolving decentralized social services administration, while social protection delivery was the remit of municipalities (Tahiraj, 2016, p. 21). In 2009, specific assistance of €100 per month for families of children up to 18 years of age with a permanent disability was introduced. Furthermore, emergency aid (of €100–300) was available for families in exceptional circumstances (Tahiraj, 2016, p. 26). However, the system of social protection still lacked the schemes for unemployment benefits, universal child allowances, and health insurance.

The approach of the authorities of Kosovo to social security system shifted in 2014, when, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the Law on Health Insurance, which gave all citizens of Kosovo the right and obligation to have a mandatory “basic package” health insurance covering emergency, pregnancy and childbirth, and other essential healthcare services, was created. Nevertheless, to this date, the Law on Health Insurance has not been implemented (Privacy Shield Framework, 2021). The main obstacles to making the Health Insurance Fund detailed in the Law on Health Insurance fully operable are the lack of the necessary infrastructure and high unemployment rate. Resolution of latter would fund the Health Insurance Fund almost entirely. As a result, in 2016, about six per cent of Kosovars purchased private health insurance. The rest of the country’s population was left without any health insurance to help alleviate the cost of services (Brizendine, 2020). This situation has not changed, even since 2017 when the Ministry of Health adopted the National Health Sector Strategy 2017–2021, aimed at improving the sector through better financing plans and by enabling marginalized groups to have better access to health institutions in Kosovo (Brizendine, 2020).

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that social security in modern Kosovo has changed since 2008, and in 2016 comprised the types of pensions, such as: Basic pension, Contributory pension, Disability pension, Work disability pension, Family pension, Trepca early pension, and Kosovo Pensions Saving Trust. However, it should be emphasized that these financial backings were addressed mostly to the citizens of Kosovo, who were above 65 years of age and the benefit amounts varied and started from flat rate of 75 € (for more on types of pensions see Abels, 2016).



Analysing the social protection in Kosovo, it is evident that families, mothers, and children enjoy special protection and care in Kosovo (Robaj, 2019, p. 100). This norm was guaranteed by the Law on Social and Family Services of 2012. Special attention in this matter is also paid to martyrs, invalids, veterans, and former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) members (for more on the KLA see Duclos, 2020; Mulaj, 2008). Robaj (2019, p. 101) points out that the social insurance scheme in the Republic of Kosovo is not defined by a special law, but by a set of laws. According to Law on Pension Funds of Kosovo of 2012 and 2016, pensions are provided by Basic Pensions (provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare), Individual Savings Pensions (provided by the Kosovo Pensions Savings Trust), Supplementary Employer Pension Funds, and Supplementary Individual Pensions. Nowadays, any permanent resident of Kosovo who has reached retirement age is eligible to receive the basic pension. The Law on Insurances of 2015 states that each person has the right to be insured for supplementary individual pension by a licensed insurance company.

Due to political instability and the COVID-19 pandemic, the MLSW updated its Concept Document only in July 2020. The aim of this document is to reorganize the Social Assistance Scheme (SAS) in Kosovo (Haxhikadrija, 2020). The SAS is the second-largest social protection programme in Kosovo after the already-mentioned basic old-age pensions and the only cash transfer programme. This reorganization is a must to provide protection against poverty in this country. However, its potential to protect the poor has consistently declined due to inadequate and outdated eligibility criteria (for more on these criteria see Haxhikadrija, 2020). According to the World Bank (2019), coverage of the poor with the SAS is low. In 2016, about two-thirds of the poorest quantile did not receive any SAS benefits. On the other hand, in 2017, SAS benefits represented about forty per cent of the average food expenditure per household (World Bank, 2019, p. 31). The reorganization of the SAS would be a fundamental step towards revising the legal framework, removing the category-based filters, and establishing a new poverty test for future beneficiaries. The new reform would also increase the child allowance from €5 to €10 per month for every child under the age of 18 and would allow people who are engaged in a public employment programme, vocational training, internship, etc. to receive SAS benefits for a certain period of time depending on certain conditions.

The new reform of the SAS is a meaningful process. The Concept Document proposed by the MLSW followed the recommendations of the assessment carried out by the World Bank in 2019. The main aim of this reform is to reduced poverty in Kosovo. According to available data from 2015, about eighteen per cent of Kosovars lived in poverty and five per cent in extreme poverty. In 2017, forty-three per cent of households in Kosovo could not afford to pay for utility and other bills at least twice during the year (World Bank, 2019, p. 10).

Poverty in Kosovo is currently estimated based on the price of an equivalent minimal basket of food, i.e. 2,100 cal of food per day. Nevertheless, this method of calculation, as well as the lack of automatic price indexation, has made SAS payments are low in comparison to rising market wages. As a result, SAS payments

have been declining their effectiveness in reducing poverty in Kosovo. Therefore, the SAS as it is inefficient (Haxhikadrija, 2020).

## 9.4 Kosovo and the Engagement of the International Community

UN Resolution 1244 formally brought Kosovo under international control. The temporary administration of the UNMIK was divided into two components. The first, the military one, was led by NATO. The second, the civil component, was led by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and consisted of four pillars. The United Nations was responsible for civil administration; the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was active in matters related to humanitarian aid; the OSCE concentrated on democratization and institution-building; and the EU was tasked with economic reconstruction (Narten, 2007, p. 122). As a result, in the first years after the war in Kosovo, the international community was responsible for providing social security on its territory. The UNMIK promulgated a series of laws regulating social security in Kosovo. In addition, the Mission reactivated the Centres for Social Work (CSW). Since 2000, these centres, established by the municipalities, had been providing social protection. Funds for their activities were provided by the municipalities. After the adoption of the Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government in Kosovo, the MLSW was created (Ristic, 2014).

The UNMIK cooperated with other international organizations, particularly with the World Bank, to create sets of basic social security guarantees, financed through government revenues, involving modest social services, a highly targeted social assistance programme, highly targeted allowances for invalids and victims of war, a flat-rate small universal pension for old age, and a similar pension for individuals permanently disabled. The remaining social protection was expected to be provided by the market, including in the form of mandatory pension savings and private health insurance. On 31 July 2002, the UNMIK announced the introduction of the basic pension plan at the level of €28 per month (Press Release UNMIK/PR/794). The cost of the average consumer basket of goods for subsistence was €52 per month (Archer, 2003). After 2008, the World Bank also supported the government of Kosovo in adopting a law introducing social health insurance. However, its implementation has not yet commenced (Mustafa & Haxhikadrija, 2019, p. 6).

In the first years after the war in Kosovo, the UNMIK and the World Bank took the first steps on the path to creating a social security system in Kosovo. It should be emphasized that the other international organizations supported this process. One of these was the OSCE.

The OSCE Mission in Kosovo was established once the war ended on 1 July 1999, on the basis of OSCE Permanent Council Decision No.305. According to this Decision, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo took the lead role in matters relating to

institutions, democracy-building, and human rights, and co-operated with intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations in the planning and implementation of its tasks (OSCE, 1999, p. 1).

Analysing the actions taken by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, it is evident that, until the announcement of the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo, the Mission worked to rebuild and strengthen institutions of security and rule of law. What is more, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, as other OSCE Missions located in other countries of the Western Balkans since 1999, has been engaged in the development of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Mastrorocco, 2020; Visoka, 2017). By 2018, the number of registered civil society organizations (CSOs) in Kosovo was more than 9,500. The sector is dominated by CSOs based in Pristina or major cities in Kosovo (Kosovar Civil Society Index, 2018). These NGOs have been active in various fields such as democratization, post-conflict, and rule of law. They have also been promoting social rights and social protection.

Although the actions taken by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo connected with providing social security were limited in the years 1999 to 2020, support for the CSOs in Kosovo by this Mission had an indirect but significant impact on strengthening debate, policy analysis, and legal acts on social rights and social protection in Kosovo.

Another international organization that had an impact on the development of social security in Kosovo was the European Union. As was already mentioned, the EU, under the UNMIK, was responsible for the economic reconstruction of Kosovo. The European Commission (EC) and the World Bank prepared a reconstruction and recovery programme. This programme aimed to develop a market economy to support the restart of public administration and create effective and sustainable institutions (Nezaj, 2015, p. 10). The EC, with the EU presence in Kosovo, has supported the European perspective. Since 2000, Kosovo has benefited from the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization (CARDS) with the main goal of creating an institutional and legislative framework to underpin democracy, reconstruction, sustainable economic development, and market economy-oriented reform (Nezaj, 2015, p. 11). In 2004, the EU established the European Union Liaison Office in Kosovo. The purpose of its creation was to promote closer ties between Kosovo and the EU. In the following years, Kosovo has been implementing the European Partnership short-term and medium-term priorities, which have included political and economic criteria, as well as the EU standards (Nezaj, 2015, p. 12). In 2007, CARDS was replaced by the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). Within the IPA, the EU has provided Kosovo with financial assistance for transition and institution building, cross-border cooperation, and regional development.

The position of the EU in Kosovo has been strengthened since 2008. On 17 February 2008, and after many diplomatic conflicts, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia. On 4 February 2008, the Council of the European Union adopted the Joint Action on the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) (for more on the EULEX see Greiçevci, 2011; Pond, 2008; Tzifakis, 2013). On 9 December 2008, the EULEX entered into its operational phase. Over the next six months, ninety per cent of the UNMIK's personnel departed from Kosovo, and on 6 April 2009, the EULEX gained full operational capacity (Harland, 2010, p. 92). Since that time, the

European Union has been deepening its ties with Kosovo. On 11 July 2008, the EC in Brussels organized a donor conference in support of Kosovo's socio-economic development. The EC presented the economic strategy and investment priorities of Kosovo.

In 2008, during the above-mentioned donor conference, the pledges exceeded the EC's target of 1 billion euro for the period of 2009–2011 for Kosovo's development. The majority of the 1.2 billion euro was used for investing in infrastructure, improving the conditions for education of the young population, and developing Kosovo's institutions to consolidate democracy and rule of law (European Commission, 2008). In 2014–2020, the European Union allocated 602.1 million euro within the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, 2021). EU economic support in Kosovo was crucial to the budget of that country.

It should be noted that the EU also had a direct impact on social security changes in Kosovo. First of all, the EULEX, since 2008, has been supporting legal changes in Kosovo. These are also related to the acts connected with fundamental human rights. In addition, the EU has been taking part in actions and programmes aimed at assisting other organizations in providing social security. Already-mentioned Social Dialogue Program was recommended in the Progress Reports of the EC for Kosovo as the EC wanted to improve social dialogue in Kosovo. In addition, since 2013, the project "Supporting Social Partners—PPS" has been operating, supported by the European Union and led by IKS (Kosovar Stability Initiative, 2021).

In 2016, the EU accepted proposals for a programme entitled "Support for better social services for the most vulnerable groups" with the aim to support NGOs engaged in social provision in enhancing social and economic inclusion of vulnerable communities such as children with disabilities, children in need, elderly persons, persons with long-term sickness, persons with disabilities, and victims of domestic violence in Kosovo (European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, 2021). The programme was created to contribute to the effective transformation of the social service system in Kosovo. The programme lasted from April 2017 to October 2019 (European Centre for Social Welfare and Research, 2021).

Although the US has been engaged in Kosovo since 1999 (for more on U.S. engagement in Kosovo, see Jacobson & Keep, 2014; Layne, 1999), its engagement in social security in Kosovo been indirect. The US has been providing financial support to Kosovo. Since 1999 the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has invested over \$ 1 billion in the reconstruction of Kosovo and its development . These funds were used to improve the rule of law, increase economic development, and promote regional stability (USAID, 2022). Although, since 2008, US assistance has been declining (in 2008 US assistance was more than \$150 million, while in 2020 this assistance was around \$40 million), the US still plays a significant role in financially supporting transparent and responsible governance in Kosovo (Garding, 2021, p. 14). In 2017, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the Government of Kosovo signed a \$49 million Threshold Program to implement policy and institutional reforms in two areas critical to economic growth and poverty reduction (Millennium Challenge Corporation United States of America, 2021). The assistance under the

MCC was suspended temporarily in 2020 due to Kosovo's refusal to lift tariffs on goods produced in Serbia (Bytyci, 2020). Taking into account that social programmes are mostly financed by government revenues, the US has an indirect impact on the social security of Kosovo.

## 9.5 Conclusion

Analysis of social security system reform in Kosovo shows that the system has been evolving since 1999. However, Kosovo, as a state with limited recognition, did not have the ability to change this system without international community engagement. As was already mentioned, the UN, the EU, and the World Bank had the most important impact on this process. These organizations have been providing financial, as well as institutional and legal support. The OSCE and the US have had an indirect impact on the social situation in Kosovo. These entities did not take part in the institutional process of rebuilding the social security system in Kosovo.

It should be emphasized that, although the security system in Kosovo has been evolving due to the support of the international community, Kosovo, as a state with limited recognition, still cannot provide its inhabitants with a full social package. This is mostly related to the poor macroeconomic indicators of the country.

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# Chapter 10

## Peacebuilding in the OSCE Region: An Analysis of the Juxtaposition Between the Conflict Prevention Centre with the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund



Ulviyye Sanili Aydin

### 10.1 Introduction

This article focuses on the possibility for peace and cooperation in the South Caucasus region. The aim of the study is to describe possible regional cooperation between three states. A conflict-torn region, the South Caucasus features three breakaway territories: Nagorno-Karabakh (between Armenia and Azerbaijan), and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which de facto split from Georgia in 1992–1993 and were recognized as independent by Russia in 2008. These conflicts make the South Caucasus an unstable and geopolitically fragmented region.

The collapse of the Soviet centralised economy and the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh played a significant role in the isolation of these countries from one another. Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region has not yet been politically or economically integrated. Georgia and Armenia have made a clear choice in terms of their geopolitical orientation. The first has made Euro-Atlantic integration, with membership of the EU and NATO, a priority (Gamkrelidze, 2021; Romanovskiy, 2021). The second has joined the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation and, more recently, the Eurasian Economic Union. Azerbaijan has pursued a balanced foreign policy and multi-vector cooperation (Habibbeyli, 2017, p. 32).

My hypothesis was formulated as follows: despite the historical absence of regional integration, recent threats could push Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to cooperate and could make regional partnerships possible in the South Caucasus

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in the medium and long term. While the main reasons behind the region's fragmentation are undoubtedly internal, certain external players have also acted to maintain the status quo as this allows them to maintain a strong influence there.

Following the introduction, the first section of this study presents the panorama of the South Caucasian region, explaining the current situation and analyzing the role of regional and non-regional actors there. The second part of the study evaluates the opportunities for regional cooperation between the South Caucasus countries under the current conditions for building a common future. The final section provides conclusions.

## 10.2 Low Cooperation Intensity

The South Caucasus region displays a low intensity of integration in terms of human contact, trading, business activities and investment, environment, health, economy, politics, and security (Alieva, 2009; German, 2012).

Traditional external actors, such as Russia and Iran, have not readily accepted the inclusion of new players in the region. Russia not only uses its historical economic and cultural advantages in the region in order to maintain its influence (Sadiyev et al., 2021), attempts by the South Caucasus countries to deepen their relations with the EU have been confronted with concrete reactions from Russia which have escalated the armed conflicts already present. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Ukraine is a message to the countries of the South Caucasus about what a rapprochement with the West will cost them. Ethnic-based conflicts remain on Russia's agenda (Makarychev, 2015) and, not receiving support from Western countries and NATO to deter Russia's aggression, the South Caucasus countries have made pragmatic choices in terms of security and economic considerations.

Iran is interested in hindering the integration of the South Caucasus as well (Paul, 2015b). Although Iran has similar concerns with Russia in the region, the role of the internal dynamics in shaping the South Caucasus policy of Iran is also important. First of all, the Iranian Azerbaijanians represent a giant minority in Iran itself (Koknar, 2006). Second, international sanctions against Iran have narrowed its room to manoeuvre. Nuclear activities and the support given to certain terrorist groups weakens Iran's position in the international system. These factors limit Iran's ability to act as easily as Russia in the region.

The third main player, Turkey, has started multidimensional economic and political relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Ethnic ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia's fickle relationship with the West has provided significant advantages for Turkey, which has used its NATO membership and EU candidacy (Alipour, 2015). Mutual efforts to normalize Armenian-Turkish relations did not yield any results in the early 2000s. Although the borders between the two countries are officially closed, connections between Turkey and Armenia are provided through Georgia and Iran (Sputnik Turkiye, 2021). In an interview with BBC Turkiye in 2010 while he was still Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that 100,000 Armenian citizens

work informally in Turkey (BBC Turkce, 2010). While there is a potential to create an important income source for both Turkish and Armenians, especially those living in the eastern regions of Turkey, the economic relations between the two countries have been overshadowed by political conflicts.

The South Caucasus is also in the radar of influential non-regional actors. The EU, the US, and China are relatively newcomers to the region. The EU gradually established ties with the South Caucasus states with its eastern enlargement as the region underwent major changes such as the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2008 Russian-Georgian War (Paul, 2015a, p. 77). Transportation, trade, and energy-centred economic cooperation, accompanied with normative foreign policy instruments of the Union, have formed the basis of EU-South Caucasus relations.

The US has developed a focused foreign policy in the South Caucasus. The US approaches the region—situated between three regional powers—Russia, Turkey, and Iran—from a more general perspective, focusing on energy and geopolitics (Gafarli et al., 2016). The objective is to block the re-establishment of dominance in the region by Russia and Iran. Thus, so far, the US has backed Turkey, a NATO member state (Baban & Shiriyev, 2010). Ensuring the independence of three South Caucasus countries, sustaining democratization, and promoting regional integration in the long term may be considered as the overlapping strategies of the US and the EU in the region.

China is a more active player in the South Caucasus. While the EU is dealing with crises inside and the US is trying to adapt to the challenges of a multipolar world and global geopolitical recalibration, China is operationalising its geoeconomic tools to fill the power vacuums in the South Caucasus (Popkhadze, 2021).

In the economic map of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, Chinese activity is gradually increasing. Overlapping economic interests are facilitating China's rise in the region (Rolland, 2018). China has signed several official documents with Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan on their participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. China's free trade agreement with Georgia of 2017—the first in the post-Soviet area—is notable in this sense (Aliyev, 2020). Bilateral trade between China and the Caucasus region almost doubled from 2016 to 2020, from \$1.9 billion to \$3.6 billion (Yau, 2021).

The increased visibility of China is not limited to its economic activities in the South Caucasus. China has sponsored several humanitarian, cultural, and education projects in the Southern Caucasus countries, using its primary soft power tools, the Confucius institutes (Aliyev, 2020). These initiatives by China have also received positive responses from the peoples of the South Caucasus who are tired of ethnic problems and seek social welfare. The social base supports this cooperation (Rolland, 2018).

In fact, the rapid rise of China as a global economic power since the beginning of the 2000s and its transformation into one of the actors able to influence the course of global governance indicate that Russia, Turkey, and Iran should revise their South Caucasus policies.

### 10.3 Building a Common Future in the South Caucasus

The South Caucasus region remains disintegrated and characterized by a lack of trilateral contact and communication, as well as most types of economic activities. While global, regional, and local factors have prevented regional integration, certain mutual interests have pushed certain countries to cooperate bilaterally. The Azerbaijani-Georgian cooperation represents a good example of this trend. As an economic leader of the region, Azerbaijan has succeeded in establishing close multi-dimensional relations with Georgia. Azerbaijan's energy wealth and its need to access the world energy markets are the main determinants of this policy. The two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in 1996. Table 10.1 shows the trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Georgia in last seven years.

Georgia and Armenia—with their relatively narrow-scale economies—have limited cooperation among themselves. The Free Trade Agreement of 1998 between Armenia and Georgia promoted free trade in goods by eliminating tariffs, customs duties, and quantitative restrictions on export and import of goods originating in the territory of the countries (Table 10.2).

The tables indicate two important facts. First, trade relations between the countries of the South Caucasus at the bilateral level are steady. While trade volumes

**Table 10.1** Azerbaijani-Georgian trade turnover (thousands of USD)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total trade	623.437,9	564.189,4	468.108,3	561.905,5	592.324,2	659.027,0	536.218,1
Azerbaijan's export to Georgia	529.549,1	496.196,8	416.644,0	487.757,2	498.250,6	586.904,1	461.924,6
Azerbaijan's import from Georgia	93.888,8	67.992,6	51.464,3	74.148,3	94.073,6	72.122,9	74.293,5

Source The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2022)

**Table 10.2** Armenian-Georgian trade turnover (thousands of USD)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total trade	498.230,3	355.209,2	369.582,0	494.885,2	621.709,5	700.239,1	609.882,2
Georgia's export to Armenia	288.093,3	180.154,2	152.745,6	213.550,1	286.334,8	432.560,3	187.481,5
Georgia's import from Armenia	210.137,0	175.055,0	216.836,4	281.335,1	335.374,7	267.678,8	422.400,7

Source National Statistics Office of Georgia (2022)

have not reached significant growth levels, potential growth could motivate regional cooperation in the future. Second, all three South Caucasus countries are directly and indirectly affected by oil prices. Fluctuations in prices are reflected in trade volumes.

The restriction of traditional economic activities during the COVID-19 pandemic further caused the depression of most economic indicators, a reduction in trade volume, and an increase in social problems (Uste & Aydin, 2020). When the Azerbaijani-Armenian war broke out in September 2020, the pandemic was still ongoing, and impacts mixed with the violent conflict.

The difficult situation, however, also presents various opportunities for regional cooperation between the South Caucasian states. Local non-governmental organizations could lead the way for contact, bringing together the mothers of the soldiers involved in the conflicts, establishing dialogue and explaining the pains to different segments of society in order to prevent similar losses in the future. Although such initiatives by international organizations have been appreciated since the beginning of the conflict, it has been seen that they are insufficient in terms of leading to permanent results and solutions. For these reasons, it should be ensured that the conflicting parties participate more actively in new dialogue platforms and take more initiative and responsibility. Direct communication channels between communities should be opened with the support of international organizations.

A similar situation is valid for Georgia. It is very important to keep direct communication channels open between the central Tbilisi administration and the separatist regions. The pandemic period can be seen as a particular opportunity in this sense. The COVID-19 pandemic requires cooperation regardless of ideology, identity, ethnicity, and religious beliefs (Uste & Aydin, 2020). None of the South Caucasus countries or separatist regions have the capacity to overcome this crisis on its own. In this context, both civil society organizations and political leaders should enlighten their communities regarding regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. As political leaders are agenda-setters, their speeches and statements are particularly important. In order to motivate the societies of the South Caucasian countries towards regional cooperation, a two-dimensional working model can be developed by the political elites to operate first at the official level and second via civil society organizations at the public level.

The role of women in the South Caucasus could be key to achieving peace, prosperity, employment, and opportunities in the region. Currently, the Gender and Development approach has become an integral part of development perspectives and policies (Atakan, 2016, p. 4). In this context, peace in the international arena can only be possible if women and men, who are important stakeholders of peace in countries, ensure peace based on equality of access to resources and opportunities. Due to poor economic conditions in the region, there are significant numbers of female emigrants from all three countries. Considering the importance of women in peacebuilding, their economic inclusion—central to realising women's rights, gender equality, and meaningful participation in peace and transition processes—increases the durability and quality of peace.

Climate change and environmental problems threaten countries and societies seriously. In particular, the agriculture and food sectors are adversely affected by this situation. Experts have indicated that there will be food shortages in the near future

due to climate change and environmental problems. The South Caucasus countries, known for their fertile lands, can cooperate with respect to food and agriculture among themselves. In addition, activation of railways in the region will create environmental benefits (Waal, 2021).

The public and private sectors, involving civil society organizations as well as non-governmental organizations, can work together to develop these types of sustainable solutions. The improvement of inter-communal dialogues should be supported simultaneously with cooperation policies implemented from above.

## 10.4 Conclusion

Regional cooperation could have a beneficial effect on political stability and prosperity in party states as a result of growth in trade and investment volumes (Strachan, 2018). Schiff and Winters (2002) attracted attention to the role of international institutions in the construction of trust, the creation of financial resources, and the provision of professional consultants when there is a lack of trust between bordering states due to the past problems.

There are various arguments regarding the establishment of regional cooperation among the countries of the South Caucasus. On the basis of these views, there are debates whether the South Caucasus should even be considered a “region” (German, 2012, p. 138). According to some views, the South Caucasus countries, which do not have anything in common in terms of language, culture, and tradition, do not constitute a region even though they are in the same geographical location (Iskandaryan, 2008). This has led to a lack of “regionalism” and “regional cooperation” between the countries. Regional cooperation initiatives are instead promoted by external actors seeking stability in the region, rather than being internally generated by the three South Caucasus states (German, 2012, p. 148).

As emphasized in the previous sections, current and predicted threats for the near future may pave the way for regional cooperation focused on economic needs. Coordinating existing bilateral agreements between three countries on a tripartite basis may be a pragmatic start in the first stage. The need for peace, security, and economic welfare can motivate and shape the next phases of regional cooperation.

A trilateral partnership within the framework of the emerging new world order would give the South Caucasus qualitatively different characteristics and would make the region more interesting and appealing to external, particularly Western, investors. It would not be realistic to expect full integration in a short time, but a basic or limited level is possible.

Considering the current escalation of global threats such as pandemics, droughts, floods, fires, and extreme temperatures, societies will need each other much more in the future, regardless of identity. Common interests could emerge according to this conjuncture. The existing global, regional, and local situation could be a catalyst for peace and cooperation in the South Caucasus.

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# Chapter 11

## Women's Transformative Power in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict



Claudia Ditel

Women often see beyond the 'abstractions and deceptions' of borders and boundaries which enflame the intertwining, swirling circles of violence and are able to identify overarching symbols of unity and shared values that transcend those artificial divides. (Afshar, 2004, p. 55)

### 11.1 Introduction

The process of securitization in Armenia and Azerbaijan, following the protracted ethnic conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, has made the military sphere the mainstay of the political and economic system of the two countries. According to securitization theory, threats to national security are not necessarily given but rather constructed through discourses and practices (Buzan et al., 1998). Feminism entered the debate about securitization by stressing that gender does not play a neutral role. Rather, securitization and militarization policies reflect a masculine agenda and generate many sources of insecurity for women (El-Bushra, 2018; Hansen, 2000). A militarist culture affects people's lives, especially women's, in the form of a patriarchal and restrictive society that imposes strict gender roles. As stressed in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325/2000, which inaugurated the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, women are disproportionately affected by conflict and, for this reason, they should be involved in building sustainable development and peace (United States Institute for Peace, n.d.).

This paper focuses on women's experiences of conflict and of militarist culture. As their role as peacebuilders is usually overlooked not only by their own society but by the international community at large, comprehending the local dimension of the conflict and understanding how it intersects with gender might engender new forms of Confidence- and Security-building Measures (CSBMs). The central point of this

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study is that, drawing from personal experiences of the effects of militarism and the protracted war on everyday life, some women are likely to build a counter-narrative to the conflict and to promote a culture of peace. These narratives are based on the refusal of patriarchal values and, as such, on the deconstruction of militarist discourses. For this reason, women are well placed to work in promoting dialogue, cooperation, and the establishment of communities of practices in development projects across borders. Such a perspective is relevant in a post-conflict scenario like the Armenian-Azerbaijani one. There, the governments' top-down conflict management has limited the space for dialogue between the two societies, generating two crystallised and isolated communities. It is important to break through this isolation and implement spaces for women's agency. The literature on gender and conflict suggests that shifting the paradigm from "women as victims" to "women as agents of change" is not only a matter of justice, but also an opportunity for development and conflict resolution.

The following section describes the relation between militarism and patriarchy and the modalities by which this relation affects women's rights. The third paragraph illustrates the processes by which some women in society react to the restrictions given by militarism and embrace an inclusive perspective of conflict resolution. Relying upon select case studies from around the world, I also explain how the Azerbaijani-Armenian case is encompassed in a global dynamic, by which conflict affects gender roles and vice versa. Accordingly, the third paragraph proposes several scenarios and perspectives regarding the design of bottom-up processes that might contribute to both women's empowerment and conflict resolution. In the final paragraph, after reviewing the OSCE's historical mandate in the region and its current tasks and responsibilities there, I refer to gender-based policy reforms and new perspectives that the OSCE and ODIHR can adopt to implement bottom-up and gender-sensitive projects in the specific case of Nagorno-Karabakh. Even though the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the focus of this paper, the concluding remarks allow for the possibility of generalizing results with regard to the OSCE region at large.

## 11.2 Gender Based Militarism in the OSCE Region

Militarism consists in the constant maintenance of a strong military capability and preparation for defence against enemies. Militarization consists of the progressive centralization of the military sector in society. This process is reflected in increasing military spending at the expense of other sectors and, on a rhetorical and ideological level, in a *securitization* process, that consists of the daily instigation of the conflict. Governments that are engaged in protracted conflicts, such as in Armenia and Azerbaijan, perpetuate military discourses and practices in society through public events, mass media, and historical textbooks. This process also entails actions of ostracization and labelling as "anti-patriotic" opinions that encourage a peaceful settlement of the conflict. According to Akhundov (2020), in Azerbaijan, the militarization

process happens along ideological, sacred, and practical trajectories. The ideological trajectory consists of the dissemination of national-moral values and of a specific historical, cultural, and religious narratives; for example, the teaching of youths how to conform to the role of a “real patriot.” Young students are reminded daily of their duty to combat enemy forces and to sacrifice their lives for a better future for the nation. The ideology is formed especially in schools and civil society organizations controlled by Government-organized Non-governmental Organizations (GONGOs). The sacred trajectory entails the creation and sanctification of symbols of the motherland through representations and rituals. Examples are the cult of dead heroes, facilitated by the Shiite culture in Azerbaijan, and the consecration of the trinity by the state, the army, and the people. The practical trajectory is constituted by trainings, such as the participation of youths in military-style drills, military-sports games and military-patriotic camps (*ibid.*).

Armenia, despite stronger independent civil society institutions than Azerbaijan (Civicus, n.d.), is not unaffected by the process of militarism. Slightly before the breakout of the 2020 war against Azerbaijan, and following the heavy fighting in 2016 and the new tensions in the summer of 2020, the Armenian government launched a proposal to create a nationwide voluntary militia to supplement the national army that would be open to both women and men. Back then, local media broadcasted plenty of reports about volunteers ready to join the front. Another parallel programme for young women was promoted by the First Lady Anna Hakobyan in September 2019 as a precondition for joining the regular armed forces. As a consequence, some civil society organizations feared that the programme might herald a new militarization process in the country. Those fears were not groundless. According to the Bonn International Centre for Conversion, as of 2018, Armenia was ranked as the third most militarized country in the world (Mejlumyan, 2020).

Adding gender quotas to the army has little to do with promoting women's rights in a conflict-affected scenario as this formula still perpetuates a militarist society with all the consequences that come with it. According to feminist theory, militarism is a hegemonic process, influencing not only geopolitical dynamics, but also the intimate sphere, exacerbating gender stereotypes in society through the promotion of a patriarchal culture. As argued by feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe, militarization consists of the “diffusion of military ideas into popular culture” (Enloe cited in Shouten & Dunham, 2012, p. 10). Militarist ideas centred on glorification of violent masculinities encroach on women's and men's everyday lives in the form of a patriarchal and restrictive reality that intensifies in times of conflict. In societies in which militarism is the ordering principle, gender and conflict intersect to create structural inequalities (Lauren & Betancourt, 2018; Rooney, 2018). Indeed, gender stereotypes and militarist ideas are in a mutual reinforcing relation that determines a “continuum of violence” for women at both a physical and psychological level during the conflict as well as after the cessation of violence (Cockburn, 2012). Understanding this intersectionality is useful in comprehending the local and internal dimension of the conflict, in addition to the geopolitical considerations. This would allow us to understand how women become victims not only of the direct effects of the war (e.g. loss of loved ones, displacement, destruction of properties and resources, presence of mines, and

pauperization), but also of the indirect effects of the protracted conflict over time, namely patriarchal society.

Patriarchy assigns specific roles to women and men within society which function to maintain a strong military apparatus. Such distinctions include that men's role is to defend the homeland from a constant enemy and, accordingly, women are in need of protection as they are needed to give birth to future soldiers. In many romanticized representations of people's collective imagery, the nation is always embodied by a female figure and never by a male one. According to this vision, women are perceived of as passive *incubators* that must perpetuate and maintain the ethnic purity of the nation. Indeed, both Armenia and Azerbaijan rank as two of the top-ten positions worldwide for sex ratio at birth, revealing a clear son-preference at birth (The World Bank Data, 2019). The vision also entails that son's sacrifice in war is the price many Armenian and Azerbaijani women must be willing to pay for the homeland, as they must choose to be "mothers of the nation" over "mothers of a soldier" (Twum et al., 2019, p. 26).

Among the negative effects of patriarchy on women's economic and social security, Handrahan (2004) outlines the limited possibility for women to access proper education and Lauren and Betancourt (2018) stress how women fall victim to the black market and illegal activities to escape economic insecurity. The pauperization of women due to war exacerbates the marginalized position of women conflict scenario. The lack of resources adds to the general subordinated status of women to men. In patriarchal contexts, widowhood downplays women's status and their possibility for a stable income (Handrahan, 2004). In Armenia and Azerbaijan, women who became the only provider of a single-headed household following the loss or injury of men are forced to turn to survival strategies (Twum et al., 2019, pp. 27–28). There are indeed testimonies from local residents in both countries regarding "cotton buses" that instead recruit young girls for the sex trade (ibid.). Armenia and Azerbaijan are classified by the IOM as tier 2 countries. This means they do not meet minimum international standards to protect people from falling victim to trafficking. It is for this reason that many families decided to marry off their daughters, even at an early age, as parents perceive marriage as the only way to guarantee their daughters economic security. Once again, this practice is facilitated by a patriarchal culture that persists in the everyday life in the Caucasus, especially in rural areas (Twum et al., 2019, p. 26). According to a report from UNFPA Azerbaijan, the minimum age at marriage for men and women is currently 18. However, this may be reduced by a year if permission is granted by the local executive power. According to the state statistics agency (SSCRA), the number of married underage girls is on the rise (UNFPA Azerbaijan, n.d.). According to a similar report from Armenia, the legal minimum age for marriage is 18 for both men and women. However, it is possible for underage adolescents to get married once they have permission from their parents or a legal guardian. According to the official Demographic Survey, girls aged 15–19 made up 7.9% of all married women in 2010 (UNFPA Armenia, n.d.).

Women's physical security is affected by a general environment of impunity against perpetrators of violence. As the entire system is male centred, and both the production and the decision-making sectors are male dominated, violence against

women and domestic violence are not priority issues in the government agenda. Rather, domestic violence is perceived of as a private matter and, in some cases, even justified as men's duty to demonstrate their authority within the household. Neither Armenia, nor Azerbaijan, nor many other conservative countries have thus far ratified the Istanbul Convention Against Violence Against Women. The convention obliges signatories to prevent violence against women and to protect and support them, and the conservative fringes of the society still oppose its ratification (JAM News Editorial Staff, 2020). Nonetheless, both countries show high rates of domestic violence and require concrete steps to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) (UN Women, n.d.).

It is also important to mention that economic and physical security are indirectly affected by the large number of resources that are periodically diverted from the welfare state into the military budget. Healthcare and education—sectors that employ mostly female workers and which represent important sources for the prevention of violence and protection women from abuses—are affected by such expenditure cuts to the welfare sector (Pankhurst, 2004). In Azerbaijan more than in Armenia, as the former has focused mostly on oil production, GDP expenditures for health care are half of the GDP expenditures for military, and, in general, the military is larger than the welfare sector (Institute Stockholm International Peace Research, 2021; The World Bank Data, n.d.).

### 11.3 Challenges for Peace Building

Understanding the relationship between gender and conflict in unstable contexts is fundamental to understanding certain dynamics that remain often overlooked but which can contribute to formulating effective trust-, security-, and confidence-building measures in divided places. The protracted ethnic conflicts of Nagorno-Karabakh have generated a sense of constant existential threat. The failure of international community to build peace in the region has thus far instilled in the local populations the idea that a zero-sum game is the only solution to the conflict. As long as the international actors involved in the process overlook the importance of bottom-up dynamics and the urgency of giving locals greater ownership over the peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh, the security dilemma will persist. This persistence inevitably leads to new tensions, prevents Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from coming back to their houses, and impedes the construction of crucial infrastructural projects in the South Caucasus.

Given the premises illustrated in the previous section, it is reasonable that some women in society are likely to develop an anti-war narrative in such a conflict scenario. Women do not oppose militarism because they are “beautiful souls” or “peaceful by nature,” but because they must refuse militarism to the extent that they refuse patriarchy (Afshar, 2004; Handrahan, 2004). Women from Armenia and Azerbaijan, given their similar experiences of the conflict, represent an important glue for the creation of spaces for cooperation and dialogue across borders. Addressing

the gender dimension of the conflict from a constructivist rather than an essentialist perspective can shed some lights on how women are potential agents of change and representatives of a culture of peace.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, in 2019, the Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation published a report entitled “Listen to Her,” which is the result of ambitious work in the field which collected a series of oral accounts from women in Armenia and Azerbaijan (Twum et al., 2019). The report outlines the commonalities in women’s narratives about the rejection of a war that is no longer worth it, and the advantages of cooperating with the other side instead of fighting. In the region, women are leading informal humanitarian initiatives, with little engagement at the official negotiations level (Avonius et al., 2019, pp. 28–30). Evidence from the region shows that women are increasingly active in assisting victims of GBV. They also improvised service delivery and shelter management during the COVID-19 emergency. In Azerbaijan and Armenia, women volunteered in shelters for victims of violence and in bordering communities to provide basic services to women and children in need in order to fulfil the vacuum left by the state authorities (Nemsitsveridze-Daniels et al., 2020). As Irina Grigoryan, President of the NGO Artsakh Institute of Popular Diplomacy, mentioned in an interview for Community of Democracy, many women participate in regional and local initiatives in the Caucasus, such as trips, training sessions, seminars, and social initiatives, to create confidence building between Armenians and Azerbaijani (Community of Democracies, n.d.). Local NGOs address multiple levels of issues affecting women in the post-conflict scenario. As indicated in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, women mobilize across borders to improve their peacebuilding skills and combat violence against women (ibid.).

Women in Armenia and Azerbaijan have developed similar coping strategies in times of conflict to cope with the distress generated by the war. These vary from dancing to drinking tea together, or to providing food for the entire community. During conflicts, women become responsible within their community for restoring and maintaining traditional patterns, taking care of vulnerable persons such as the elderly and children, and even providing the latter with education. In IDP settlements in Azerbaijan, some women have started small-scale businesses, such as preparing yoghurt or tea and teaching music or selling clothes, recreating a sense of “normality” amidst desperation (Twum et al., 2019, p. 17).

It is not surprisingly that many women advocate for peace and the cessation of violence in the region. In Armenia, the anti-militarist feminist platform *Women in Black* used regular peaceful vigils in front of government buildings and public events with the aim of raising awareness of women’s potential agency in the construction of peace (Tenuta, 2016). They stress the disproportionate impact of the war on women and girls in terms of gender inequality and the exacerbation of violence.

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<sup>1</sup> According to an essentialist perspective, certain categories have a set true nature that can be observed directly. This vision, applied to feminist studies, necessitates that women be characterized by inner features, such as for example “empathy” due to motherhood. Constructivist feminists conversely believe that women’s features are modelled on the basis of identities and discourses generated by society. Hence, these characteristics may be contested and may change over time.

This evidence suggests that women, when it comes to issues of common concern, tend to develop solidarity that sometimes transcends national borders. This solidarity can have an impact on building trust and peace across communities. An example is *Women of South Caucasus for Peace*, a regional initiative that unites 13 women's groups dealing with peace building initiatives in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (ibid.). These organizations advocate for the ratification of the UNSCR 1325 in each country, build dialogue across the different nationalities, and assist female survivors of conflict-related sexual violence with legal, psychological, and training support (ibid.).

The international community should take into consideration the impact of these initiatives and support them with resources and training. It is necessary to involve the population in projects of common interest so as to establish forms of cooperation and dialogue that enhance reciprocal trust, as well as to empower women and to combat women's economic insecurity. During conflicts women take on many responsibilities while men are away, but their role is often minimized with the cessation of violence and the restoration of traditional gender roles (Justino, 2018). Including women's narratives for peace in confidence-building measures, apart from being effective in the construction of a sustainable peace, would mean giving a sort of continuity to women's agency, ensuring that there is structural change after the conflict rather than a simple relaxation of roles.

## 11.4 The Role of the OSCE

The potential of women's agency in confidence-building measures has not been prioritised in the OSCE agenda for conflict resolution (Avonius et al., 2019), yet the OSCE is in position to mainstream gender approaches in peacebuilding in conflict-affected scenarios, including in Nagorno-Karabakh. The OSCE has a long tradition of mediation activity dating back to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. In addition to this, the Organization uses a comprehensive approach to security that cuts across three dimensions: politico-military, economic and environmental, and human security. Mediation activity is implemented in Nagorno-Karabakh through the Minsk Group, which is co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States, and has the scope of finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict (OSCE, n.d.). Nonetheless, the OSCE Minsk Group's role as mediator, formulator, and facilitator of the peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh has progressively decreased in the last years due to its failure to have its proposals implemented. From the Package Plan to the Madrid Principles, none of the several formulas proposed by the OSCE Minsk Group between 1997 and 2007 have found fertile ground for implementation. One of the reasons for this is that the populations were never prepared for peace or involved in bottom-up peace initiatives and so were unwilling to accept top-down peace solutions.

Women's agency can be at the centre of bottom-up approaches for conflict resolution. Gender mainstreaming which cuts across the three dimensions of security could constitute an essential part of the attempt to reassert the OSCE's pivotal role in



Nagorno-Karabakh. Gender equality is a cross-dimensional issue within the OSCE that should be applied when it comes to the implementation of concrete security-related measures in a conflict-affected scenario and, in particular, for arms control, CSBMs, and the protection of human rights (Loshchykhin et al., 2019).<sup>2</sup>

The OSCE Minsk Group could break through the political impasse with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by depoliticizing the peacebuilding process and investing in informal activities of confidence building. This can be done by creating, as well as monitoring, safe places for humanitarian and community-driven projects that put emphasis on women's agency at a Track III level. Community-driven projects are the ideal base to implement gender-sensitive projects according to John Paul Lederach's multitrack approach to conflict resolution and the social theory of Communities of Practices (CoPs). Together, these two approaches embody a connection between the official and unofficial processes of negotiations.

According to the ideas of sociologist John Paul Lederach, peacebuilding can be reassumed as "a long-term and systemic transformation from war to peace" (Paffenholz, 2014, p. 15). This can be realized if communities involved in joint initiatives of common interest and mechanism of mutual accountability are established. According to this multitrack approach, the reconstruction scenario is conceived as a three-level pyramid. In this, the top leadership (governments and IOs) operates at the Track I level, the middle-level leadership (NGOs, academics, religious leaders, and any influential individuals in society) acts at the Track II level, and the grassroots population (common people including IDPs, women, children, and elderly people) operates at the Track III level. The essential point of Lederach's model is that the three levels are interconnected, every transformation at one level generating a transformation at another. In this perspective, community-driven projects act as a platform for cooperation at an informal level, keeping the reconciliation process going despite stalemates at the official level of peace negotiations.

Zooming in on the small-scale processes happening at the Track II and III levels, the CoP theory suggests the form these kinds of cooperative projects should take. CoP model is, in itself, transformative and inclusive. Developed by the anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger as a learning theory, a CoP is composed of "people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In other words, a CoP consists of a group of people that share a concern for a certain issue and, through repeated interaction,

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<sup>2</sup> Gender-based approaches in conflict resolution are supported by a specific legal framework within OSCE. On the heels of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325/2000, which launched the UN agenda on Women, Peace and Security, the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality and the OSCE Ministerial Council Decisions No. 3/11, 14/04 and 14/05 treat gender mainstreaming as a cross-cutting issue in conflict prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict reconstruction. Other documents reinforce the legal framework. The Mediation and Dialogue Facilitation in the OSCE includes a gender perspective, as do the OSCE Guidance Note on Gender-Responsive Mediation 2008 and the Gender and Security Sector Reform Toolkit (Avonius et al., 2019; Loshchykhin et al., 2019, p. 89). Other complementary decisions of the OSCE are Ministerial Council Decision No. 7/09 on *Women's participation in political and public life*, No. 10/11 on the *Promotion of equal opportunities for women in the economic sphere*, and No. 7/14 on *Preventing and Combating violence against women* (Loshchykhin et al., 2019, 90).

learn how to manage it better. The core elements which must be present for a CoP to be defined as such are: the *domain*, an interest shared by a great part of the community so that most individuals are willing to comply with specific tasks; a *community*-based approach, namely a group of people held together by interaction, accountability, and mutual learning; and a *practice*, or repertoire of shared knowledge, practices, and experiences built by the community for the community itself.

The potential of this model has already been investigated with regard to the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, though without any reference to the gender dimension. Broers already contested the liberal and post-liberal approaches perpetuated by the West which caused the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to be stuck in a “post-liberal limbo” (Broers, 2019, p. 6). He suggests that the ineffectiveness of Western approaches does not lie in the scarcity of funds and numbers of peacebuilding projects but, rather, in the obduracy of the liberal peace paradigm which insists on the export of models of democracy, rule of law, market economy, and human rights as instruments to build peace (Broers, 2019). Conversely, Broers affirms the importance of so-called hybrid peace models and community-driven peace models as an alternative to liberal approaches (Broers, 2019, p. 15). Romashov et al. (2019) too have hypothesized the application of the CoP model as a peacebuilding strategy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They suggest that CoPs based on projects of common interest could be the lynchpin for engaging the populations in confidence-building activities. So far, instead of proposing solutions to tackle the basic needs of the population in a post-conflict scenario, the international community has opted for elite approaches, such as the organization of international meetings and conferences among civil society actors, academics, and journalists. These have fallen short of addressing the everyday problems and have not invited the grassroots population to build confidence and trust (ibid.). Romashov et al. (2019) have, to prove the effectiveness of the CoP theory, cited some positive experiences of Azerbaijani and Armenians living peacefully in the Southern villages of Tsopi and Shulaveri in Georgia. There, the heritage of the collective farms of the USSR incentivized people to cooperate on everyday issues, from reconstruction of infrastructure to weddings and funerals, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In other words, people there maintained the former intercommunal bounds and were able to create their own spaces and points of belonging to provide for their economic security through joint everyday practices. Those experiences of CoPs happened at a Track III level, and their strength lies in the fact that they remained depoliticized while focusing on basic needs at the grassroots level.

This would be facilitated if more women were included at the different levels of negotiation. According to Walsh (2014), the OSCE Minsk Group, still characterised by traditional state-centric diplomacy, has failed to centralize women's agency in security-related matters. For example, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office (CiO) of the Minsk Group for Nagorno-Karabakh should promote the inclusion of more women representatives within the mediation team.<sup>3</sup> The CiO could also establish a women's

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<sup>3</sup> In the framework of the OSCE Minsk process for Nagorno-Karabakh, the CiO (Chairperson-in-Office) can appoint special and personal representatives dealing with conflict management that

delegation or a representative council of women to coordinate groups from civil society and the grassroots community in a multitrack perspective.

Alongside the OSCE Minsk Group, the ODIHR can play a role in enhancing gender-sensitive approaches in post-conflict reconstruction. Specific attention is devoted to the dimension of gender equality within the ODIHR's mandate, as it aims to increase women's participation in politics, as well as at the level of civil society, and to encourage women's recruitment in security ranks (ODIHR, n.d.). As such, the ODIHR is in the position to offer support to the Minsk Group and to coordinate its efforts in gender mainstreaming. With the support of the ODIHR, the OSCE should promote safe and neutral places to increase the participation of women from Armenia and Azerbaijan in combating gender-based violence and women's marginalization in social, economic, and political life. Projects in this direction, based on assessing basic needs at the community level, can encourage the formation of CoPs and can provide immediate relief to women.

In sum, initiatives should be concrete and prioritize the basic needs of the grassroots population in a post-conflict scenario, rather than being limited to influential actors in civil society or academia. There are many priority issues, in and outside of the post-conflict scenario, which can present a platform for the OSCE to design feminist peacebuilding projects.

## 11.5 Ending Gender Based Violence

Women in civil society can significantly contribute to diminishing episodes of violence, support victims of such episodes, and contribute to peace dialogue. However, the civic space in Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially for women, is restricted. Ultra-nationalist anti-gender groups discredit women peace activists as "traitors" of national and traditional values (Nemsitsveridze-Daniels et al., 2020). In addition, women from Azerbaijan in particular face general restrictions on civil society groups imposed by the government (ibid.). Moreover, services for victims of violence lack sufficient resources to function effectively (Twum et al., 2019). International humanitarian projects can fill this vacuum by creating opportunities for women to be engaged in managing shelters and hotlines for victims of domestic violence or supporting an early warning system to prevent violence. Women should also be provided with safe spaces for dialogues and for the exchange of information and good practices across borders.

Economic insecurity is another form of violence against women as it affects women disproportionately. Access to agriculture and water resources are of the utmost importance for women, especially during and after a conflict. Women are usually in charge of providing water and food to the household. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan, mostly in rural settlements, suffer from lack of water and, accordingly, an

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directly report to the CiO and can suggest confidence-building and humanitarian measures (Avonius et al., 2019, pp. 12–15).

inability to cultivate lands (Twum et al., 2019). The Kura-Araks river, whose basin is an important source of water in the wider region, is one of many cross-border natural resources that have remained affected by the conflict dynamics (ibid.). As access to resources is a matter of concern for many women from Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, joint management of resources might constitute another platform for cross-border cooperation.

The presence of mines too can limit the access to supply of resources as well as access to arable lands for many women. Indeed, the issue of mines is gendered: although men and boys are the main victims in mine explosions, women are affected by the presence of mines in different ways. Women's freedom of movement is further restricted and their economic insecurity, due to the impossibility of accessing mined lands, increases. The presence of mines hampers agricultural and farming activity and access to essential resources for women. In addition, in patriarchal societies, female victims of mines have less access to medical assistance and are more exposed to stigmatization from the community than men are. Evidence from humanitarian de-mining projects show that women involved in de-mining activities might report additional areas for prioritization with respect to men, enhancing the effectiveness of humanitarian mine action programmes (UNMAS, 2019). As of today, Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the most mined areas in the world (Mine Action Review, 2020). After the latest war, the number of mines has further increased to a level that is currently unknown. Although de-mining activity lends itself to cross-national confidence-building intervention, the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan are treating the issue on an individual basis. Apart from the handover of maps from Yerevan to Baku in change for the release of some Prisoners of War (POWs), the two governments have not developed any kind of joint action to speed up the de-mining process, not even in the form of exchange of information and good practices (Herszenhorn, 2021). Thus, de-mining activities in Nagorno-Karabakh can be an occasion to involve civil society at large, including women (Clifford, 2018). According to a study from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies of Geneva conducted in Lebanon and Colombia, women who participated in de-mining activities felt empowered and acquired decision-making power not only within the respective communities but also within the household (Ehlert et al., 2015).

Another peacebuilding and gender-sensitive potential action would be to combat the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) as part and parcel of the patriarchal traditions of militarism. SALW proliferation, and the glorification of gun possession, corroborates the glorification of violent masculinities that justify a range of violent practices that are considered signs of manhood and pride within the community (Farr et al., 2010). Even after the cessation of violence, SALWs circulate due to diversion from the state stockpile to non-state actors. High numbers of SALWs possessed by members of a community, which tend to increase in proximity to a conflict, are associated with copious episodes of domestic violence and an increase in human trafficking of vulnerable persons, especially in the sex trade (Frey, 2018). Combatting the proliferation of SALWs is usually considered to be a male prerogative while the influential role of women in this issue is undervalued. However, in small-town in Uganda, women were involved in advocacy programmes

to combat the proliferation of SALWs. Ugandan women raised awareness regarding the nexus between gun possession and the glorification of violent masculinities, as well as regarding the risk this represents for the security of the entire community, eventually convincing some members to give up their weapons (Frey, 2018, p. 372). While there is no definite evidence that it is the case, given the consistency of the trend in conflict-affected scenarios, it is quite likely that a greater number of SALWs are circulating in Armenia and Azerbaijan following the last conflict. This topic requires greater investigation, especially in consideration of the alarming rates of GBV in the countries and the scarcity of services for victims of domestic violence.

Those are just few examples of practices that show how the paradigm of “women as victims” in conflict-affected scenario can be turned into “women as agents of change.” Apart from providing for their own security, women can be central actors in promoting a culture of peace and combatting gender stereotypes in patriarchal cultures. Every time International Organizations treat women as victims in need of protection, they reproduce a male-centred approach to peacebuilding. The OSCE could make a difference in the approach to conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh by appointing more women in leading positions and by cooperating with women in charge of peacebuilding practices at the civil society level. Instead of concentrating efforts on giving immediate relief to women so as to just “heal the symptoms” of the conflict, international organizations should target the root of the conflict, namely the aggressive nationalism and the glorification of violent masculinities that perpetuate the notion of a zero-sum game as a solution to end the conflict. Women are fundamental actors in this perspective and future research should be oriented towards detecting other potential cross-the-border platforms for cooperation between women in conflict scenarios.

## 11.6 Concluding Remarks

Militarism and gender are two sides of the same coin. Militarism reproduces gender stereotypes and gender stereotypes reinforce militarism. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the patriarchal system is the direct consequence of the protracted ethnic conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh which is perceived to be existential and is fuelled by governments through the constant representation of a *dehumanized* enemy. Elites in power maintain authoritarian monopoly over the management of the conflict and gain legitimacy from the rhetoric of securitization. Any attempt at reconciliation by civil society actors is condemned as treason, not only by governments but also by large parts of the population that reproduce nationalist discourses. Among civil society actors, women are further marginalised due to the spread of patriarchal culture.

Still, stories of resistance against militarist culture often feature women as protagonists. Some women contest the militarist culture as this affects their lives via support for a patriarchal society that forces them into restrictive gender roles. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, some groups of women have proven to be powerful agents of change of the conflict rhetoric and representatives of a culture of peace. When it comes to

common issues of concern, such as GBV and economic hardship, women show a kind of solidarity that breaks through nationalist boundaries. More or less voluntarily, these women are able to create confidence-building measures in a conflict-affected scenario, with great potential for the implementation of a multitrack perspective for the resolution of the conflict.

However, many are the limits to women's bottom-up peace initiatives. The intersection of male-centred politics, authoritarian management of the conflict, repressive environment for civil society, and scepticism towards the potential for a peaceful resolution of the conflict all play against the success of feminist initiatives. Indeed, few are the resources that are allocated to feminist projects, which then suffer from lack of safe spaces and continuity overtime.

Including a gender perspective in the design of communities of practices is an opportunity to promote a new humanitarian paradigm in conflict resolution, one in which women are not treated as victims but as agents of change. For this reason, the international community should investigate alternative approaches to the liberal peace approach, such as bottom-up and community-driven hybrid models in which local women have more ownership over the conflict reconstruction process.

These new perspectives can offer the OSCE a platform to relaunch its credibility in Nagorno-Karabakh, in which its historical role as mediator, facilitator, and formulator of a peaceful resolution of the conflict lost ground to authoritarian actors such as Turkey and Russia who have not shown any intention of involving the two populations in the peace-building process. In such a scenario, the security dilemma is likely to continue in the next decades, dispelling any hopes of constructive dialogue and integration.

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# Chapter 12

## Gender Equality, Women's Rights and Neo-traditionalism: The Case of Kyrgyzstan



Asylai Akisheva

### 12.1 Introduction

One of the first public manifestations of the struggle for women's rights in modern day Kyrgyzstan dates back to 1995 when a delegation of gender activists first took part in the IV World Conference on Women. The conference resulted in the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a comprehensive policy framework that sets the global agenda for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women. Since then, Kyrgyzstan's government has gradually begun the process of joining the main international treaties in the field of women's rights. In this regard, the country has embarked on the path of harmonizing and developing national legislation *per* the standards of gender equality and non-discrimination by deploying gender approaches in its policies and legal frameworks. Apart from the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has been instrumental in improving and enacting Kyrgyz laws and other gender-sensitive policy and regulatory instruments. Being a security-oriented organization, the OSCE's main goals include promoting the principle of gender equality and integrating a gender perspective into the decision-making of its member states. Even despite certain obstacles encountered in the enforcement of the organization's gender policy, such problems as cooperation with government agencies or scepticism about its programmes, the OSCE/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Gender Programme has made a significant contribution to the formation of gender legislation and, in general, to the promotion of the principle of gender equality in Kyrgyz society.

Since its independence Kyrgyzstan has taken momentous steps in developing legislative measures to protect and support women's rights, yet the adoption of legislation alone is not sufficient for the effective implementation of gender policy. In many aspects, a patriarchal social system with high respect for the traditions and customs

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of ancestry dominates in Kyrgyzstan, directly affecting the position of women and their rights in the state. In addition, uptake of religious values is also accelerating pace in society, adversely affecting the attitude towards Kyrgyz women and girls. Despite joining the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1996, Kyrgyzstan ranks among the bottommost in the world in terms of gender equality and violence against women. Female workers are overrepresented in poorly paid sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, and education, and earn significantly less than their male counterparts (Amanova & Shatmanaliev, 2020; Muratbaeva, 2016; UN Women, 2021). Likewise, women play far less active roles in political life despite the introduction of thirty per cent gender quota across all levels of the government. With regard to gender-based violence, the issue occupies one of the leading positions in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz women are often victims of various forms of abuse, from the more widespread, such as domestic violence (Childress, 2018; Childress et al., 2017) and trafficking in women (The US Department of State, 2021; Zhakypbekova, 2018), to the more traditional, such as early marriage (Margolis, 2016), bride kidnapping (ala-kachuu) (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007) or “kelinism” (new brides’ forced into subservience to their mothers-in-law in their husbands’ households) (Akisheva, 2021b; Kudaibergenova, 2018; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2020).

On 11 April 2021, Kyrgyzstan held a referendum adopting a new Constitution. At the heart of the document was the transition from a parliamentary form of government to a presidential one. The Constitution also contains a focus on “traditional values” which could lead to significant discrimination and exclusion of women from public life. The ODIHR has made several attempts to dissuade the new government of Kyrgyzstan from adopting constitutional provisions that violate international human rights and the rule of law foundations. Before and during the observation of the Presidential Elections and Constitutional Referendums of 2021, the ODIHR was concerned about the situation in the country and had already warned the Kyrgyz government against adopting certain amendments, conducting analysis reports with valuable recommendations. However, these efforts did not prevent the government from embarking on a course of precarious constitutional reform. From the very Preamble, the new Constitution itself obliquely announces that the state is taking a course towards a “neo-traditionalist” approach (Schmitz, 2021), a policy that risks exalting traditions, customs, and morality above the Law. Such conventional reforms have the potential not to improve but, on the contrary, adversely affect the position of women in the country. Leaving aside the numerous procedural violations presented by the new constitutional law—ranging from the illegitimate announcement and adoption of the referendum, violations of the Constitutional Council’s work, the elimination of the system of checks and balances, and the usurpation of power into the head of state’s hands—some provisions also pose a risk to the rights of women (Akisheva, 2021a).

The new constitutional framework of Kyrgyzstan has so far sparked limited discussion in academia (Schmitz, 2021). Existing legal analysis, opinions, and reports of NGOs (Grazhdanskaja platforma, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021; OF “Pravovaja Klinika Adilet,” 2021) and international organizations (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021a;

OSCE/ODIHR & Venice Commission, 2021) have mostly concentrated on the general discourse and examination of the articles. However, the issue of human rights along the country's new constitutional path requires a debate from a different point of view, through the prism of women and girls, since the country's new constitutional policy will directly affect them. This chapter focuses on a legal analysis of the new constitutional legal framework of Kyrgyzstan from a gender perspective, highlighting the threats of the "neo-traditionalist" approach to women's rights. Accordingly, this study argues that the new constitutional legal framework threatens to become a tool that can primarily suppress the position of women in Kyrgyz society. The research examines how the new "neo-traditionalist" constitutional transition of Kyrgyzstan risks negatively affecting the rights of women and girls in the state. The first part gives the reader a general introduction to the current situation regarding women's rights in Kyrgyzstan and its regulation in the legal context. The second part focuses on the role of the OSCE in supporting and developing gender-sensitive legal foundations in Kyrgyzstan. More specifically, the discourse covers how OSCE/ODIHR gender projects have supported moves towards developing gender-sensitive legislation and the spread of the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination in Kyrgyz society, as well as what problems it faced in this process. Finally, the last part analyses the "neo-traditionalist" orientations in the new constitutional framework of Kyrgyzstan and their possible impact on the position and rights of Kyrgyz women and girls, in addition to the attempts of the OSCE/ODIHR to prevent the new Kyrgyz government from adopting constitutional provisions in violation of standards of human rights.

## 12.2 Protecting Women's Rights

The Kyrgyz Republic began the process of joining the leading international legal treaties in the field of women's rights and the elaboration of national legislation in terms of gender policy from the first days of its sovereignty in 1991. The country has ratified a diverse set of international human rights treaties protecting women and girls from discrimination and violence, including the UN CEDAW (1979), and its Optional Protocol (1999), the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966b), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966a), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000b), and the Protocol on Trafficking in Persons (2000a). After the accession of Kyrgyzstan to CEDAW, the leading international instrument for eliminating discrimination against women, in 1996, domestic legislation and national programmes began to be brought in line with international convention. A number of legal documents and plans were adopted, such as the National Program "Ayalzat" 1996–2000, and Laws On the Reproductive Rights of Citizens (2000), Social and Legal Protection from Domestic Violence (2003), State Guarantees for Ensuring Gender Equality (2003), and State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women (2008), as well as National Action Plans for

Achieving Gender Equality 2002–2006, 2007–2010, and 2018–2020 (The Government of Kyrgyz Republic, 2021). Moreover, the country periodically submits a report on the measures taken to achieve gender equality. While some of the legal acts fell short of expectations, others remain in place.

Accordingly, Kyrgyzstan has taken significant steps in developing legislative measures to protect and support women's rights since gaining independence. The adoption of legislation alone, however, is evidently not enough for the effective implementation of gender policy. Even though specialized legislative acts have been adopted and harmonized in accordance with international standards of women's rights, the national statistics and National Periodic Reports for CEDAW show that the problems of gender inequality and violence against women remained unchanged after ratification (Kyrgyzstan, 2019). Consecutively, cases of some types of gender-based violence have increased, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (National Statistical Committee of the KR, 2021). While, this does not mean that there were fewer number of cases before, the critical point is that the society began to pay greater attention to issues of violence against women and girls, and more cases are being reported in Kyrgyzstan.

### 12.3 Gender (In)Equality

In line with Article 24(3) of the 2021 Constitution, the Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women from 2008 establishes equal rights and freedoms for men and women and equal opportunities for enjoyment of these rights. Despite that, the participation of women in the economic and political system of Kyrgyzstan has deteriorated over the past 15 years. The rank of Kyrgyzstan has fallen by ten positions, indicating that the status of women in decision-making has declined in the local and national dimensions (World Economic Forum, 2021). Indeed, women are practically excluded from the policymaking process and play far fewer active roles in political and social life in the light of the traditional or religious attitudes in Kyrgyz society, even despite the introduction of a thirty per cent gender quota across all levels of the government. Only three seats out of nineteen are occupied by women in the executive branch of Kyrgyzstan: one Minister of Justice, one Chairman of the State Committee on Ecology and Climate, and a Vice Prime Minister (Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021). In the Jogorku Kenesh (Kyrgyz Parliament), out of 120 members, twenty female deputies reserved seats in the last elected Parliament, which is only seventeen per cent of the prescribed gender quota (Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021).

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that according to the UN Gender Inequality Index, Kyrgyzstan ranks 122nd globally (UN Data, 2020), and the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report indicates that, in 2021, Kyrgyzstan took 108th place out of 156 (World Economic Forum, 2021). The report highlights critical areas of inequality between men and women. In most areas, Kyrgyz women are better represented in the least paid sectors: healthcare, social services, finance, and

household services (Muratbaeva, 2016). Of course, it is difficult to say unequivocally that gender inequality is plainly manifested in Kyrgyz society. However, at the same time, its indirect aspects are evident in the segregation of labour, when women are more likely to work in low-paid jobs (Muratbaeva, 2016; UN Women, 2021), or involved in unpaid domestic work, limiting the employment opportunities for rural women in farming or other businesses (Amanova & Shatmanaliev, 2020).

## 12.4 Violence against Women

As stated in the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) data, one in three women, in Kyrgyzstan (32.8%) experience sexual violence, abduction, or other types of abuse (OECD, 2021). These are stimulated by traditionalism and sociocultural practices in the Central Asian region and often also supported by a religious mindset. Violence against women is widespread in the country and takes different forms, whether internationally widespread, such as domestic violence, trafficking in women and girls, the sale of newborn children, or more traditionally inspired, such as bride kidnapping, early and forced marriages, and "kelinism" (2021a). In connection with the indicated problems of gender-based violence in Kyrgyzstan, specific laws have been developed and supplemented to regulate violence against women and related problems.

The Law on the Protection and Defence against Domestic Violence (2017) is the primary legal document regulating the issue of domestic violence in the country, and replaced the old 2003 Law on domestic violence which was criticized by many. First, the law establishes measures to protect victims of domestic violence, covering not only physical but also psychological and economic abuse. Second, the Law requires that police issue protection orders and register a domestic violence complaint not only from the victim but from anyone. Third, the legal text offers instruction on the necessary legal, medical, and psychological assistance, social support, and counselling services to be provided the victims of domestic abuse. In connection with the issue of domestic abuse, since 2008 the CEDAW Committee has strongly recommended that Kyrgyzstan address the traditional cultural attitudes and causes underlying the practice of bride kidnapping. In response, the Kyrgyz Government has developed and adopted provisions in the framework of the Criminal Code to toughen the punishment for the abduction of girls. A new Criminal Code, adopted in October 2021, provides for liability in the form of imprisonment from five to seven years (Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021, Art. 172). Since 2016, significant steps have been undertaken to protect girls from early marriages following the implementation of CEDAW. Amendments were made to the Family Code and Criminal Code of Kyrgyzstan prohibiting religious rites with minors under 18. According to the provisions, parents, clergy, and other persons who have performed a religious marriage ceremony for minors will be imprisoned for three to five years (Criminal Code of Kyrgyz Republic, 2021, Art. 175). It is noteworthy that the criminal responsibility for holding religious ceremonies for minors is applied to representatives of all religions.

Finally, trafficking in women is regulated by Kyrgyz national criminal legislation in addition to international law. Article 166 of the Criminal Code of Kyrgyzstan establishes liability for the misuse for the purposes of prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation or slavery in the form of imprisonment for a period from three to six years, with aggravating circumstances from eight to eleven years.

Although international human rights and technical domestic legal and policy regulations have been adopted in Kyrgyzstan, the question of violence against women remains open. In many respects, patriarchal Kyrgyz society assigns a secondary role to females and does not allow women to control their own lives. Thus, problems such as early and forced marriages, bride kidnapping, domestic violence, “kelinism,” trafficking in women, and other forms of gender-discriminatory events still emerge across the state. Regionally, the fundamental legal issue is that no regional legal instrument to regulate the issue is under consideration in Kyrgyzstan or in Central Asia overall. Indeed, the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (2014), one of the primary legal tools providing a comprehensive framework for tackling violence against women, is openly awaiting ratification by all countries. Yet, Kyrgyzstan is not party to the Istanbul Convention. There is a small chance that the country, and the region, will join the Istanbul Convention as, following the recent tendency of fraternal Turkey, patriarchal Kyrgyzstan may interpret it as a threat to the family traditions.

While certain measures have been taken to ensure gender equality, Kyrgyz society remains on somewhat patriarchal and traditional foundations. These trends have a significant impact on the status of women and girls, who are viewed primarily as mothers, wives, and housewives, and as belonging to their male parts. Yet, Kyrgyzstan has a long way to achieve gender equality and full respect for women’s rights. The OSCE assistance played an influential role in the formation and improvement of national legislation on gender and women’s rights in Kyrgyzstan. The next section shows to what extent this has affected the women’s rights situation in the country.

## **12.5 Kyrgyzstan towards Gender Equality: The Role of the OSCE**

The OSCE relations with Central Asian countries began in 1995 with the opening of the Central Asia Liaison Office (CALO) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The primary purpose of the office was to promote principles of good governance in the region with an emphasis on rule of law and human rights, and to implement the ODIHR projects on migration, gender issues, and election assistance and monitoring. Two years later, the ODIHR established formal relations with the Kyrgyz Republic by memorandum of understanding with the Kyrgyz government (Galbreath, 2009). In the 2000s, the CALO, renamed as the OSCE Centre, opened representation in Bishkek (Freire, 2005).

Today, the activity of the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek is based on security problems, such as borders, terrorism, corruption, and human trafficking. At the same time, an essential aspect of the organization's work is assistance in the conduct and monitoring of elections in the country, judicial reform, and, most importantly for this study, promotion of gender equality (OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek, 2021). The 1999 Charter for European Security (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2004b), the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2004a), and related decisions are the main legal frameworks of the OSCE to enshrine the principles of gender equality. Moreover, with the principal goal of integrating the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination into the policies of its member states, the organization conducts its activities in line with the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) Landmark resolution on Women, Peace and Security (2000). In order to harmonize the National Strategies of the Kyrgyz Republic to achieve gender equality (The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2012) and other gender-related legislation *per* the Resolution, the OSCE assists the country in promoting women's empowerment and gender aspects in decision-making, which includes not only raising awareness among women and girls but also among men and boys (OSCE, 2021b).

From the very beginning, the OSCE/ODIHR Gender Programme<sup>1</sup> began to aid the states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, approaching each of differently. The OSCE and Kyrgyzstan engaged in earlier and closer cooperation on gender policy compared to other Central Asian countries, as the country had a relatively free civil society. Consequently, the Programme was aimed at working mainly with the civil society of Kyrgyzstan. In contrast, for example, in states such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, the main driving force behind the organization's programme was domestic violence and gender studies, while in Georgia, the emphasis was on developing a new coalition of female NGOs to address gender-related issues jointly (OSCE/ODIHR, 2009).

Since 2005, the OSCE has provided a systematic range of events related to gender equality and women's rights in Kyrgyzstan. The organization has carried out various training sessions and educational events among Women Initiative Groups (OSCE, 2021b) and female professionals from the law enforcement sector (OSCE, 2018a), as well as for religious sector staff in fostering gender parity ideas (OSCE, 2017). A similar approach can be noticed in Tajikistan. In the same year, the OSCE began to assist Tajik Women's Resource Centres in protecting victims of domestic violence by offering legal and psychological advice and through education and skill development (OSCE Office in Tajikistan, n.d.).

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<sup>1</sup> The OSCE/ODIHR Gender Programme has operated in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan since 2000 with the aim of promoting gender equality, women's leadership, and participation in decision-making, using gender expertise for informed decisions and efforts to combat domestic violence. At the same time, the strategies of work in each country are determined based upon local conditions. Prior to the launch of the programme, the OSCE/ODIHR had never participated in the implementation of gender equality programmes (see OSCE/ODIHR. [2009]. *Evaluation of ODIHR gender programme work in Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia*. Jefferson Institute. [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/99684/ODIHR\\_gender\\_programme\\_final.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/99684/ODIHR_gender_programme_final.pdf)).



The OSCE is dedicated to fighting violence against women in line with the 2018 Ministerial Council Decision of its 57 member States on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2018). Therefore, another leading effort of the organization in Kyrgyzstan was to follow the direction of eliminating all forms of abuse against women and girls in the country. In this regard, the Programme Office has undertaken various actions aimed at addressing gender-based violence, such as domestic violence, bride kidnapping, polygamy, and early marriage (OSCE, 2006b, 2010, 2018b). For instance, one of the activities was to run seminars and training for Women's Initiative Groups in cooperation with the Mobile Police Reception (OSCE, 2006a). Concerning anti-discrimination policy, the OSCE office supported civil society organizations in Kyrgyzstan in preparing an Alternative Report for UN CEDAW in 2019 (OSCE, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization also held events in support of government agencies on the importance of the role of women during emergencies (OSCE, 2020b).

## 12.6 Gender-Responsive Legislative Reform

The OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek broadly supports the advancement of gender issues in the legislative sphere of Kyrgyzstan (OSCE, 2005b). Since 2000, the ODIHR Gender Programme has done significant work to endorse the network of female leaders in Kyrgyzstan. The Office conducted activities in partnership with the Kyrgyz Agency for Social Technologies (AST) in an effort to increase the role of women in policymaking, develop the idea of gender expertise, and promote the use of the media in promoting gender equality. In a nutshell, Kyrgyz women's leadership, and the Parliament, with the assistance of the ODIHR, has made significant progress in advancing gender-sensitive legislation. In more detail, by lobbying for the creation of a "special presidential representative on gender issues," the ODIHR and the AST helped increase women's representation in decision-making following the 2005 elections, which had regrettably resulted in the absence of women in the Parliament (OSCE/ODIHR, 2009). The ODIHR helped incorporate into the Kyrgyz Constitutional framework provisions on equality between men and women that were not mentioned in the initial 1993 Constitution, as well as to adopt National Action Plans for Achieving Gender Equality. The AST, the ODIHR, and the Women's Network also helped draft the first 2003 Law on domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan. Since 2006, a thirty per cent gender quota has been enacted by law in central and local government offices. In addition, Women's Initiative Groups blocked attempts to decriminalize polygamy or bride kidnapping provisions (OSCE/ODIHR, 2009).

A big step towards gender equality in Kyrgyzstan was the adoption of the Law on State Guarantees for Ensuring Gender Equality, which was replaced by an improved version in 2008. The OSCE/ODIHR contributed to the assessment and analysis of the 2008 Law "on state guarantees of equal rights and opportunities for men and women," giving a legal opinion on its draft. The OSCE/ODIHR has made recommendations for the clarification of certain terms, expanding the list of definitions such as "direct



or indirect discrimination,” “gender mainstreaming,” the inclusion of a definition of “sexual harassment,” and so forth. Thus, the analysis of legal documents by the OSCE helped immensely in the development of the legal text and improvement of its interpretation and application in the future (OSCE/ODIHR, 2006). Following the experience of Kyrgyzstan, a bill on gender equality was adopted in Kazakhstan in 2009. This also took place with the support and assistance of the OSCE/ODIHR (OSCE, 2005a). However, the help was limited to one meeting on discussion of the draft law.

Some of the adopted laws in Kyrgyzstan, however, have not justify themselves from a practical point of view. For example, the above-mentioned 2003 domestic violence legal act proved problematic in terms of enforcement and fell short of expectations. The early national plans on gender equality did not have an implementation mechanism and therefore were not executed fully due to the lack of a budget (OSCE/ODIHR, 2009). Later, the new enhanced Law on the Protection and Defence against Domestic Violence has been in force since 2017. This new Law was developed with significant assistance from the ODIHR, which provided a legal opinion and analysis of its draft. The opinion was valuable in adopting the new Law in terms of incorporating a more effective mechanism for combatting violence in the country. Even though they were not all considered by the Kyrgyz Government and Parliament, the Office shared number of recommendations. One of the key proposals was a clear delineation of cases with and without criminal responsibility and a call for the criminalization of acts of domestic violence. With the adoption of new codes in 2021, provisions on domestic violence were included in the Criminal Code as a separate article with a maximum penalty of up to five years in prison (Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021, Art. 177). In turn, the Code of Administrative Offenses of 2021 also contains a similar provision on domestic violence, but with a lesser penalty of three to seven days of arrest or by community service of forty hours (Code of the Kyrgyz Republic on Offenses, 2021, Art. 70). This duality of norms can cause conflict of laws or even diminish the protection of victims in severe cases of domestic violence. The legal opinion also called for the refusal of conciliation in the Courts of Aksakals in cases with a criminal aspect (OSCE/ODIHR, 2014), but the Law “On the Courts of Aksakals” (2002) still does not provide for such provisions.

As in Kyrgyzstan, positive experience was observed in Uzbekistan, where the OSCE helped the country to pass the Law “on the Protection of Women from Oppression and Violence” (2019) in order to combat the growth of gender-based violence (OSCE, 2020a). Such a favourable lineage in the development of gender legislation cannot be traced in neighbouring Turkmenistan. Compared to its Central Asian brother states, the Turkmen state has had rather limited cooperation with the OSCE in promoting gender equality, with most of the OSCE’s work in the country restricted to a theoretical basis through seminars and training. Given that Turkmenistan has not yet adopted a specialized law on domestic violence, the only practical success in this regard was the opening of the first crisis centre in Ashgabat (OSCE, 2012) and the activation of a hotline for victims of domestic abuse by the NGO “Keik Okara” with the support of the OSCE (2009).

Even though Kyrgyzstan is not a member of the Council of Europe, the OSCE/ODIHR have often called on Kyrgyzstan to accede to the Istanbul Convention and its explanatory report. The organisation stressed that the latter can serve as valuable and detailed documents on preventing and combating violence against women in the country (OSCE/ODIHR, 2014). This also applies to the entire Central Asian region.

## 12.7 Challenges to the OSCE Gender Policy

Notwithstanding measures undertaken in Kyrgyzstan, the work of the OSCE and other international organizations has been rather critically assessed by the countries of Central Asia. In many aspects, the Central Asian states have accused the OSCE of being somewhat slow in reacting to events and conflicts in the region, as it was with the revolutions (Dunay, 2017) and border clashes in Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, the OSCE's slow response in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia as a whole is associated with many factors. The obstacles were created by the political instability of some (Kyrgyzstan) or the power of other countries in the region. In many respects, the reluctance of governments to cooperate has created significant obstacles to the implementation of OSCE projects, including to gender-related programmes. The soft power nature of the organization also delineates the boundaries for the implementation of its policies in Central Asia (Freire, 2005). All in all, as was mentioned by Warkotsch, the OSCE has always faced particular challenges in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian states given that its ability to influence the domestic policy of non-member states is low (Warkotsch, 2007).

Speaking directly about the issues of women's rights and the difficulties of the OSCE in providing assistance in this regard, the largest and most crucial element in the implementation of the OSCE programmes to promote gender equality in Kyrgyzstan is cooperation with local NGOs and government agencies. With the attraction of international support, the number of women's NGOs in the country has begun to grow (for instance, the "Women Can Do Everything in Kyrgyzstan" network was effectively organized by the OSCE) (Simpson, 2006). This is presumed to be a positive trend as women's organizations have finally begun to promote ideas of gender equality and non-discrimination in Kyrgyz society and have lobbied for women's interests in legislation. However, women's NGOs are suspected, as Simpson indicated, of being "ghettoized" and dependent on international donors in order to obtain funding in a highly competitive race. Furthermore, NGOs have been criticized for not taking into account the concerns of the local population, but rather following the abstract ideas and goals of international organizations, including of the OSCE (Simpson, 2006). On the flip side of the coin, there have also been certain problems for women's organizations themselves and female leaders have faced difficulties of their own in cooperating with international organizations on the one hand, and with government agencies on the other. They have had to try to implement activities that, in many parts, did not correspond to local realities to meet the requirements of

international donors (Megoran et al., 2014). Whereas in working with governmental offices, NGOs must convince the authorities that their project is essential, as was the case in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. When working with the OSCE, it was difficult for women's NGOs to convince the state administration that they are not "foreign agents of the OSCE" (Ismailbekova & Megoran, 2020).

In general, it can be said that the OSCE and ODIHR women's projects in Kyrgyzstan have had a positive impact on Kyrgyz society. They have created a basis for the dissemination of the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination in the country and among the population, as well as for the improvement and adoption of legislation and other acts with gender-sensitive aspects. In other words, the OSCE/ODHIR Gender Programme has made a significant contribution to the formation of gender policy in Kyrgyzstan despite certain obstacles that have arisen in the course of the implementation of its policy.

## 12.8 Adopting a New Constitution

As noted earlier, the OSCE and ODIHR, from the very beginning, have strongly supported the Kyrgyz government and Kyrgyz civil society in promoting the principles of the rule of law and respect for human rights. Thus, the ODIHR plays a significant role in monitoring reforms, referendums, and elections in Kyrgyzstan as a neutral party from the international community. The ODIHR has previously observed through its election observer teams 12 elections and referendums in the country (OSCE, 2021a), and most recently, the 2020 parliamentary elections and the 2021 presidential elections and referendum. In the aftermath of the October 2020 events, the ODIHR monitored the early presidential elections and the referendum of 10 January 2021, and then conducted a legal analysis of the draft of the new constitution as well as monitoring of the Constitutional Referendum on 11 April 2021.

Before and during the presidential election observations in April 2021, the ODIHR was concerned about the situation in the country and had already advised the interim government of Sadyr Japarov, who won the presidential elections, with recommendations to protect the country from illegal amendments. The Bishkek-based OSCE Programme Office called for the performance of further elections to be brought in line with international requirements and standards for democratic elections, including *per* the OSCE's own commitments. The central condemnation of the Kyrgyz government by the ODIHR was in regards to the holding of elections and a referendum on the same day, "as any legislative activity, must comply with the rule of law requirements, including the timeframes" (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021a). This was not taken into account. It should be noted that Kyrgyzstan and the other Central Asian countries have been criticized more than once by the ODIHR election monitoring. Many elections, previously held in Central Asian countries, were assessed by ODIHR as lacking in genuineness and showing a deficiency of transparency in the electoral process. Most previous ODIHR recommendations on these matters have been ignored by the states

(OSCE/ODIHR, 2010, 2019, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). As might be expected, another report by the ODIHR did not prevent the administration of Kyrgyzstan from holding a constitutional referendum on changing the form of government on the same day as electing a new president. In this instance, 81.30% of the voters supported the transition to the presidential form of government (Central Election Commission of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021).

The ODIHR has undertaken a thorough review of the draft 2021 Constitution written by the newly elected administration of the state for compliance with the principles of the rule of law and human rights. Together with the Venice Commission, the Office has made numerous recommendations for enhancing the text of the draft Constitution and bringing it in line with international human rights and the rule of law standards (OSCE/ODIHR & Venice Commission, 2021). At the same time, the legal analysis touched upon considerable provisions related to gender equality and women's rights. However, the Kyrgyz government has practically ignored these critical recommendations and proposals, as a result, on 11 April 2021, Kyrgyzstan adopted the new Constitution in the referendum. Some provisions of the recently adopted Constitution of 2021 can be interpreted and used in violation of not only the principles of democratization in general but, in particular, in the infringement on the rights of women.

## **12.9 “Neo-traditionalist” Constitutional Framework and Women’s Rights**

The constitutional framework and policy of the new Kyrgyz government, as Andrea Schmitz has indicated, is “imbued with neo-traditionalism” (Schmitz, 2021). In political science, the term has the following interpretation: “Neotraditionalism, in politics, the deliberate revival and revamping of old cultures, practices, and institutions for use in new political contexts and strategies” (Galvan, 2015). Indeed, referring to this definition, it can be perceived that the new Constitution of Kyrgyzstan entails certain aspects of a “neo-traditionalist” approach. The document, from the very preamble, includes provisions which spotlight the traditions and customs of Kyrgyz “ancestors” and the expansion of the powers of such historical institutions as the Courts of Aksakals and the People’s Kurultay. These aspects can be used to aid abuses in the context of human rights infringements. In particular, they may allow for the violation of women’s rights, since it is well-known that women and girls in Kyrgyzstan have not always been in an advantageous position in the context of certain traditional Kyrgyz customs. Practices such as “ala-kachuu” (bride kidnapping), early/forced marriage, and “kelinism” still exist in society and often infringe on the rights of Kyrgyz girls and women. Most importantly, at their maximum extreme, these customary practices are forms of violence against girls and women. In view of the “neo-traditionalist” orientation of the 2021 Constitution, the above conventional forms of gender-based

violence against women and young girls can be subjectively interpreted as reverence and adherence to the traditions and customs of the predecessors of the Kyrgyz people.

Furthermore, certain limitations can be read between the lines with regards to freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association, where the legislators try to establish a ban on holding events and disseminating information that negates “moral and ethical values, and public consciousness of the people of the Kyrgyz Republic” (Constitution of Kyrgyz Republic, 2021, Art. 10(4)). Parenthetically, Kyrgyz civil society organizations<sup>2</sup> were the first in the Central Asian region to hold Solidarity Marches (Kloop, 2016) and have been doing so in support of women's rights since 2016—although there have been rather unpleasant experiences in conducting such events (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In many respects, these efforts were broadly criticized or even forcefully interrupted (Mediazona Central Asia, 2020). These responses were fuelled by the prevailing homophobic sentiment in the Kyrgyz patriarchal society (PinkNews, 2019) which perceived the marches as support for LGBTQ+ movements. More creative expressions in support of women (KaktusMedia, 2019) in Kyrgyz society have also met with outrage from certain nationalist groups (*The Calvert Journal*, 2019) and, therefore, have been censored by the Ministry of Culture.

These equivocal constitutional provisions are likely to impact not only the rights of women, but possibly also queer rights and general freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. Moreover, as mentioned by the ODIHR/Venice Commission opinion, the concepts of “moral and ethical values” and the “public consciousness of people” are vague, undisclosed, and not legally defined at the international level and, in turn, may also be subject to arbitrary interpretation and enforcement (OSCE/ODIHR & Venice Commission, 2021). The subsequent confirmation and worrisome alarm bell was the adoption in August 2021 of the Law “On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information” (2021) which can also affect the right to freely express opinions online. The Law is supposed to guarantee the right of citizens to the protection of honour and dignity, but experts believe that the legal instrument is contrary to international human rights standards and will lead to state control over content on the Internet (Nastojashhee Vremja, 2021).

Another aspect of the “neo-traditionalist” policy is the revival and regeneration of old customary institutions. The text of the Kyrgyz Constitution indirectly sheds light on how policymakers have attempted to increase the role of such orthodox institutions as the Courts of Aksakals (Courts of Elders) and People's Kurultay in the new constitutional framework. While recognizing the traditional value and importance of both institutions in the cultural heritage of Kyrgyzstan, there is a risk that the increased power of the two establishments could affect women's rights to a fair trial,

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<sup>2</sup> The first Solidarity March in independent Central Asia in defence of women's rights took place on March 7, 2016, in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) organized by the Bishkek Feminist Initiatives movement. The march was attended by about eighty people, they were representatives of the organization of disabled girls “Nazik Kyz”, feminists from the Almaty (Kazakhstan) movement “KazFem” who came to support Kyrgyz activists, and ordinary citizens who are not indifferent to women's rights (see Kloop. [2016]. *Feministki Bishkeka: “Nam ne nuzhny cvety, nam nuzhny prava.”* <https://kloop.kg/blog/2016/03/07/feministki-bishkeka-nam-ne-nuzhny-tsvety-nam-nuzhny-prava/>. Accessed September 01, 2021).

especially in cases of domestic violence, and could undermine the overall legislative protection of Kyrgyz women and girls.

The previous Constitution of Kyrgyzstan already recognized the possibility for citizens to create Courts of Aksakals (2010, Art. 59) and hold People's Kurultay (2010, Art. 52). According to the Law, the Courts of Aksakals are extrajudicial public bodies competent to act on civil cases and as a post-sentence authority for minor criminal offenses. The important note is that these institutions, in addition to legal norms, are guided by their own conscience, personal convictions, and the morality and ethics historically formed from Kyrgyz customs and traditions (Law of Kyrgyz Republic "On the Courts of Aksakals," 2002). The Kurultay was previously a representative form of participation of local community members in the solving of critical issues of state and public importance, but was recommendatory in nature, having only soft power (Constitution of Kyrgyz Republic, 2010, Art. 52).

The 2021 Constitution broadens the activities of both institutions, expanding the role of Aksakal Courts in the judiciary (2021, Art. 115) and raising the level of Kurultay from the local to the national level. The parallel functioning of the first with courts of general jurisdiction can be up for debate. The UNHRC has already acknowledged the Courts of Aksakals as not fully following fair trial guarantees (UN Human Rights Committee, 2014). In other words, the decisions of the Courts of Aksakals often negatively impact women in violation of the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of gender. The ODIHR also noted in its report that, for instance, in cases of family violence, decisions of the Courts of Aksakals in most cases end with the reconciliation of the parties, which is not always to the benefit of women (OSCE/ODIHR & Venice Commission, 2021). Likewise, these courts do not have the authority to issue protection orders, provide support to victims of domestic abuse, or order the arrest of an aggressor. With respect to the changed powers of the People's Kurultay, it can now propose the dismissal of members of the executive branch (Constitution of Kyrgyz Republic, 2021, Art. 70(1)(4)) and act as a member of the Council for Justice Affairs to select judges (2021, Art. 96(7)). Nonetheless, what is the most critical and alarming is that the new Constitution enshrines the right of the People's Kurultay to initiate legislation (2021, Art. 85). According to some experts, in addition to becoming a "puppet parliament," such a quasi-constitutional body as the People's Kurultay may become the "marionette theatre" of the President in his "neo-traditionalist" play (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, 2021). Thus, there is a chance that the Kurultay, with its legislative initiative power, could become a tool in the hands of a head of state or other far-right groups to suppress women by lobbying for and passing anti-feminist laws or advocating for the elimination of gender-sensitive legislation.

Noticeably, the new constitutional framework of Kyrgyzstan lacks grounding in the principles of democratization, human rights, and the rule of law, rather it places a bold emphasis on ancestral traditions and moral values. The examined provisions carry a neo-conservative rationale, which, even without explicit indication, is fraught with much more solemn concerns. The new government risks turning this "neo-traditionalist" approach to constitutional reform into a threat to human rights, particularly women's rights. Women's fundamental human rights, such as freedom

of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and fair trial rights, risk being further restricted, and this may even extend to other rights in the future. Likewise, traditional and customary considerations may justify all types of orthodox forms of violence against women and girls.

## 12.10 Conclusion

The OSCE has played an auxiliary role in promoting the principle of gender equality and developing gender legislation and national gender plans in many of its member states. As in Central Asia, the organization has had a positive impact on enhancing the role of women in public and political life, and the fight against domestic violence and trafficking in women in the Balkans and the South Caucasus. For example, in Albania, the OSCE has helped analyse and implement a National Strategy on Gender and Against Domestic Violence 2007–2010 (OSCE, 2008b) and Laws “On Gender Equality in Society and Law” 2008 (OSCE, 2008a) and “On Measures against Violence in Family Relations” 2006 (The Parliament of Republic of Albania, 2006), while in Kosovo it has promoted Laws “On Gender Equality” and “On Protection from Discrimination” in 2016 (OSCE, 2016). In 2015, Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the support of the organization, developed a Manual to guide representatives of local authorities in implementing the Law on Gender Equality and the Gender Action Plan adopted for the period from 2013 to 2017 (OSCE/FBiH Gender Centre, 2015). Likewise, the Assembly of North Macedonia, with the assistance of the OSCE Mission to Skopje and the ODIHR, approved its first Gender Action Plan for 2020–2021 (OSCE, 2021c) and is currently drafting a Gender Equality Law (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021b).

In Kyrgyzstan, over the 30 years of development of gender legal regulation, the struggle for women's rights has had its ups and downs, and there remains still a long way to go. The OSCE has left a significant mark here. The Programme Office in Bishkek has provided Kyrgyzstan with great assistance in developing policies and legislation in the field of gender equality, although the government of the state often chooses to ignore certain proposals from the organization. One such example was the OSCE/ODIHR's recommendations on the draft of the 2021 “neo-conventional” Constitution which clearly called for adherence to a constitutional framework in support of human rights and the rule of law and were not addressed by the new government of Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, the country is a “hostage” to a “neo-traditionalist” constitutional configuration that risks coming into conflict with international standards for women's rights and gender equality. The introduction of the amendments into the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On elections of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic and Deputies of the Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic” in July 2021 was one of the first warning signs after the adoption of the new Constitution which may indicate further restriction and violation of women's rights. According to the amendments, the number of deputies of the Jogorku Kenesh has been reduced from 120 to 90, with 54 to be elected in a single electoral constituency per the proportional



system (according to party lists) and the remaining 36 deputies in a single-mandate constituency per the majoritarian system (Art. 59(1)). The thirty per cent mandatory gender quota is retained only in party lists and not in the number of single-mandate seats, which significantly reduces the number of women in Parliament (Art. 64(4)).

Should the “neo-traditionalist” tendency continue to develop and take deeper roots in the legal or political construction of Kyrgyzstan, it would represent a rollback to a patriarchal past, where women will be at risk of being further oppressed, subjected to greater violence, and will not be able to either enjoy or protect their rights.

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# Chapter 13

## Ending Gender-Based Violence in Kyrgyzstan: Reflections on the Spotlight Initiative



Aliia Maralbaeva and Chiara Pierobon

### 13.1 Introduction

In 2017, a new global, multi-year initiative called the *Spotlight Initiative* (SI) was launched by the European Union (EU) in cooperation with the United Nations (UN), with the aim of eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls<sup>1</sup> (VAWG) worldwide (European Commission, 2020). The Initiative is supported by a multi-stakeholder trust fund, with the EU contributing more than half a billion US dollars (European Commission, 2017). Overall, the Initiative has six mutually reinforcing objectives and strives to (1) promote laws and policies to prevent violence and discrimination and address impunity, (2) strengthen national government and regional institutions in preventing and responding to VAWG, (3) promote gender-equitable social norms, attitudes and behaviours, (4) make high-quality essential

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, *violence against women* is used to indicate “all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 3). Under this framework, violence against women represents a violation of human rights as well as a form of discrimination against women. *Gender-based violence* (GBV) against women is referred to the use violence “directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately” (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 3). Finally, *domestic violence* indicates “all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim” (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 3).

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services available for female survivors of violence, (5) collect high-quality, disaggregated and globally comparable data on different forms of VAWG and (6) empower autonomous women's rights groups, social movements and civil society organizations (UN Women, 2020a). In its theory of change, the SI clearly identifies the underlying causes and drivers of VAWG. Whereas patriarchal systems and inequitable gender norms, attitudes and behaviour are presented as root causes for discrimination against women and girls, historical and structural power imbalances between the genders, together with limitations on freedoms, choices and opportunities, represent the underlying causes of VAWG (UN Women, 2020b). Under this framework, impunity and the lack of punishment for perpetrators are depicted as main drivers of violence (*ibid.*).

Since 2019, Spotlight has seen implementation in the Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan, where more than 6.5 million US dollars have been allocated to recipient UN Organizations such as UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UNODC for the carrying out of activities across the initiative's six outcome areas. In Kyrgyzstan, the SI is especially aimed at providing a comprehensive approach to developing institutional capacities across sectors, utilizing existing policy frameworks, systems and coordination mechanisms while deepening government ownership and buy-in on VAWG (Spotlight Initiative, 2019). Remarkably, although Kyrgyzstan is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Kyrgyz women are still confronted with significant hurdles in accessing justice when it comes to gender-based violence (Putz, 2020) due to gender stereotypes and biases in the court system' (American Bar Association Centre for Human Rights, 2020, p. 1).

Due to the novelty of the programme, the SI has not received much academic attention thus far. The only exception is represented by Barges-Pedreny and De Almagro's (2020) study investigating the Initiative's contribution to broader framings of sustaining peace and resilience in Liberia. Overall, their findings are very critical towards the mode of intervention used by the EU and the UN as they indicate that it allows these organizations to "increasingly deny their responsibilities while, at the same time, they consider themselves indispensable and continue to supervise free from fault" (Barges-Pedreny & De Almagro, 2020, p. 329). This leads to two negative implications. Firstly, local and national women and women's organizations lack autonomy and agency and "are seen as mere implementers of a programme that cannot be resisted" (Barges-Pedreny & De Almagro, 2020, p. 329). Secondly, by emphasizing the focus on national ownership, local actors and their culture are framed as being both the solution and the cause of gender-based violence (Barges-Pedreny & De Almagro, 2020, p. 343). This chapter uses a slightly different angle and examines how the SI has sought to improve victims' access to justice by stimulating national and local ownership of an array of state and non-state actors engaged in addressing domestic violence from a legal and institutional perspective. The paper starts by setting the context of this study, it does this by familiarizing the reader with the phenomenon of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan and with the major legal and institutional barriers hindering access to justice on behalf of women victims of

domestic violence. We then introduce the main research question and the respective methods and present the main research findings. In the final section of the article, we provide key recommendations on how to improve the national legislation concerning domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan as well as the implementation of the Spotlight Initiative in the country and beyond.

## 13.2 Domestic Violence in Kyrgyzstan

Although abundant evidence suggests that domestic violence is commonplace in Kyrgyzstan, only a few studies on the characteristics of domestic violence and the risk factors associated with it are available to date (Childress, 2018, p. 776). It follows that very little is known about the experiences, attitudes and beliefs of abused women, or about the most promising approaches and services to assist victims of domestic violence in the country (see, for instance, Childress et al., 2018, p. 164). Overall, the traditional nomadic Kyrgyz values under which women played an important role in family and society, Soviet policies on women's rights and participation in public life and the post-independence resurgence of traditional family norms have affected gender relations in the country (Childress, 2018, p. 777). However, the socioeconomic crisis following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has, in particular, intensified family conflict and reduced the exit options available to victims of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan (Childress et al., 2018, p. 176). Economic instability, unemployment and the related inability of men to fulfil their role as the family 'breadwinner' has created stress that has led to an increase in domestic violence in combination with alcohol abuse.

At the same time, a re-emerging conservatism regarding traditional and stereotypical gender norms has been observed in the past ten years in Central Asia (Spotlight Initiative, 2019, p. 8) as the social construction of marriage has allowed for a certain acceptance of domestic violence on behalf of society. It is in this framework that society tends to interpret domestic violence as the result of women's inability to fulfil their duty as caretakers and peacemakers in their families, discouraging victims from seeking for help (Childress, 2018, p. 783). Indeed, many women who attempt to leave abusive relationships are encouraged to return to their family and reconcile, even when they have suffered serious injuries. Women who complain about violence in the home or leave abusive partners are perceived to be destroying their families, leaving their children as 'orphans' subject to immoral upbringing (Human Rights Watch, 2015). In addition, divorce is socially stigmatized and not a viable option for women who are afraid of causing shame to their entire family and, thus, of damaging its reputation (Childress, 2018, p. 785).

Based on the data made available by the National Statistic Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, between 2011 and 2019, an increase of over 400% of reported cases of domestic violence was registered in the country (see Table 13.1). Whereas 6,628 was the number of episodes reported by women in 2019, 1,190 cases were reported by men. Most victims of domestic violence were aged between 31 and



**Table 13.1** Number of reported cases of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan (2011–2020)

Year	Reported by women	Reported by men
2011	1.714	95
2012	2.341	74
2013	2.269	70
2014	2.521	98
2015	3.229	104
2016	6.795	210
2017	6.966	357
2018	6.522	616
2019	6.628	1.190
2020	8.060	517

*Source* Eshaliyeva (2020) and National Statistic Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2021)

40 years, followed by the age group 21–30. In the case of the perpetrators, the age group 31–40 years was the most represented, followed by the groups 21–30 and 41–50 (Eshaliyeva, 2020). In the first three months of 2020, 2,319 complaints of domestic violence were registered by law enforcement agencies. The situation was aggravated by the lockdown and curfew regime introduced between 15 March 2020 and 1 June 2020, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a matter of fact, 700 calls from victims of domestic violence reached the Association of Crisis Centres within the first month of lockdown (Akisheva, 2020, p. 3).

In their study, conducted at a shelter in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, Childress et al. (2018, pp. 170, 172) describe three types of consequences commonly affecting victims of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan: impacts to physical health; fear, uncertainty and psychological distress; and the loss of identity and feelings of powerlessness, and existential distress. Besides suffering from ‘a wide range of injuries including concussions, broken bones, swelling in their joints and body, impaired vision and hearing, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases,’ continual exposure to battering diminished women’s self-esteem and led to ‘learned helplessness’ that is very often is accompanied by suicidal feelings (Childress et al., 2018, pp. 172–173). In addition, the impact of the abuses also manifested itself in form of long-lasting negative mental and physical health effects on their children. Nonetheless, despite the gravity of the consequences, recent studies (e.g. Childress, 2018; Childress & Hanusa, 2018) have pointed out that only a small proportion of victims of domestic violence seek help due to several legal and institutional barriers. Police officers’ hostility to survivors and their general mistrust prevent many women from reporting the crimes due to their fear of being humiliated. As observed by Eshaliyeva, in this regard, women ‘are often “forced” to be ashamed of everything: ashamed of being raped, ashamed of making it public, ashamed of putting a rapist in prison’ (Eshaliyeva, 2021, p. 5). Other obstacles include pressure from authorities to reconcile with the

abusers and the practice of closing cases following reconciliation between victims and perpetrators.

### 13.3 Existing Legal and Institutional Framework for Addressing Domestic Violence

Based on the legal analysis of national legislation and an analysis of 280 court judgements on domestic violence (DV) in both Kyrgyz and Russian languages published in Kyrgyzstan's Court Decision Database between 1 January 2019, and 30 April 2021, the following legal and institutional barriers hinder access to justice on behalf of female victims of DV (Supreme Court of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021).

*Legal barriers.* According to the 2021 Constitution, in Kyrgyzstan men and women have equal rights and opportunities for the realization of these. Since 2017, Kyrgyz national legislation on protection from DV has been amended. These amendments include the 2021 Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, the new Penal Code (2021d), the new Code on Offences (2021a), the Law on Protection and Defence against Domestic Violence (2017), the Law on Courts of Elders (*aksakals*) (2002), the Resolution of the Kyrgyz Government on the Procedure for Implementation of Safeguard and Protection against Domestic Violence (2019d), the Standard Correction Program on Changing Violent Behaviour for Perpetrators of Domestic Violence (2019e), the Order Providing Assistance for Victims of Domestic Violence (2019a) and the Order on Interaction of State Bodies that Safeguard and Protect from Domestic Violence (2019c).<sup>2</sup> In 2019, the adoption of a new Code of Misdemeanours, which became invalid in December 2021, was a positive measure taken by the government to combat domestic violence, as far as it included 'a provision criminalizing domestic violence, which had routinely been addressed as an administrative rather than criminal offense' (Human Rights Watch, 2019). According to Article 75 of the Code on Misdemeanours, domestic violence, as a misdemeanour, entailed as punishment a fine of the II category,<sup>3</sup> correctional labour of the II category<sup>4</sup> or public works of the II category.<sup>5</sup> Thus, domestic violence fell under the category of cases for semi-public prosecution, which meant that pre-trial proceedings began only when the victim of DV or her legal representative applied to police and may be terminated due to reconciliation with the perpetrator (Code on Misdemeanours, 2019b). Based on analysis of case law on DV, our study revealed a lack of accounting for aggravating circumstances in the Code of Misdemeanours for domestic violence committed with

<sup>2</sup> The documents are named according to the hierarchy of normative legal acts established by the Law on Normative Legal Acts of the Kyrgyz Republic (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Fine of the II category: 15,000–25,000 soms (€150–250) for minors and 30,000–60,000 soms (€300–600) for other natural persons.

<sup>4</sup> Correctional labour of the II category: 2–4 months for minors and 4–6 months for other natural persons.

<sup>5</sup> Public works of the II category: 30–40 h for minors and 40–60 h for other natural persons.

threats of murder to the victim, her children and/or relatives, as well as severe bodily harm to those mentioned above.

In December 2021, a new Penal Code, a new Code on Offences and a new Criminal Procedural Code came into legal force. Adoption of these codes was a partially positive measure for combating DV because the Penal Code and the Code on Offences both include articles on “Family Violence.” At the same time, aggravating circumstances and strict criteria which could help distinguishing between DV as a crime and as an offence are still missing. The main differences between them depends on the types of harm. If DV causes less serious harm to victim health, it is recognized as a crime punished by correctional labour (two months to a year), community service (forty to one hundred hours) or deprivation of liberty for a term of up to five years (Penal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021d, Article 177). In contrast, if DV includes physical, psychological or economic violence, or the threat of physical violence, it is recognized as an offence punishable by public works (forty hours) or arrest (of three to seven days) (Code on Offences of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021a, Article 70). One of the main positive changes in the new codes is the elimination of fines as a form of punishment. In addition, the Code on Offences has been complemented by Article 72 on “Evasion of a Person who has Committed Domestic Violence from Undergoing a Correctional Program” that is now punishable by a warning or public works (forty hours) (Code on Offences of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021a).

The 2017 Law against Domestic Violence mandates that police automatically issue a three-day temporary protection order after confirming domestic abuse. A victim may request an extension of up to thirty days from police. Although service providers and activists say the police are issuing more protection orders under the new law, they still do not issue them in every case (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Such a temporary protection order forbids any physical contact or interaction with the person being subjected to violence and extends protection to family members. The aggressor, however, retains the right to live with their family in their home and can only be evicted or have their parental rights removed by the courts (Eshaliyeva, 2020). In 2014, the OSCE ODIHR presented its Opinion on the Draft Law on the Kyrgyz Republic Safeguard and Protection from Domestic Violence where it stressed that “in order to guarantee the security of victims on the spot, it would be advisable to broaden the scope of the restrictions to include ordering the offender to temporarily vacate the family home/residence, regardless of who is the owner of the premises” (OSCE ODIHR, 2014). This recommendation has been taken into account in the new draft Law on Amendments to Several Legislative Acts of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Field of Protection and Protection against Domestic Violence prepared in the framework of the inventory of national legislation in 2021.

*Law enforcement.* Childress and Hanusa describe several mechanisms that have prevented the legal system from effectively addressing DV, including mutual protection and solidarity among law enforcement officials, police failure to enforce temporary restraining orders, an emphasis on reconciliation, corruption and negligence among police, fear of retribution, *pro forma* attitudes among the police, police attitudes toward retractions among women and officers believing that some injuries were not serious enough to merit any action (Childress & Hanusa, 2018, pp. 152–153). At

the same time, victims of DV are asked to repeat their testimony several times; they are interrogated by the police, then by an investigator and then must testify in court. The procedure is not only very humiliating but can also contribute to re-traumatizing the survivors as they are often interrogated as though they were the criminals (Eshaliyeva, 2021). As pointed out by Eshaliyeva (2021), this procedure negatively affects victims' trust in the investigation. Moreover, violations of numerous international standards on the right to a fair trial have been reported, including: (i) the right to call and examine witnesses; (ii) the right to be presumed innocent; (iii) the right to an impartial tribunal; and (iv) the right to an appeal (American Bar Association Centre for Human Rights, 2020, p. 4).

Our analysis revealed that only in 50 cases out of 178 did victims reach the stage of court hearings and a chance at fair justice, and our interviews pointed out incorrect qualifications and identification in the DV cases, as well as ignorance of obligations by police officers and other authorities when taking care of these cases. As described by one of our Interview Partners (IP)

“DV can be recorded as a misdemeanour if it was committed only once. If the violence continues, the article ‘Cruel treatment’ of the Penal Code should be applied. When victims turn to law enforcement agencies and say that they have been subjected to violence for many years, the investigator, upon learning that the perpetrator is a family member, qualifies the case as a misdemeanour. [...] Such cases are often terminated during the investigation”. (Interview conducted in Bishkek on 21.06.2021)

Based on data made available by the Kyrgyz Ministry of the Interior, between January 1, 2019 and 30 April 2021, only fourteen per cent of the reported cases reached the court, the rest were dropped. Our analysis of case law on DV indicated that 178 women out of 229 preferred to dismiss their case upon reconciliation, even if they had already received the results of forensic examination necessary to pursue legal action against their perpetrators. This occurred despite systematic verbal and physical abuse, which included being threatened with knife or axe, being choked, electrocuted and kicked out of their houses, and being exposed to threats of murder against themselves, their children and/or their relatives. If a couple reconciles, Kyrgyzstan's laws permit authorities to drop domestic abuse cases (Margolis, 2020). As far as the Criminal Procedural Code (2019) allowed for the reconciliation of victim and perpetrator, a perpetrator enjoyed impunity.

Kyrgyz courts have mostly imposed fines for perpetrators of DV. Based on our analysis, in 33 legal cases out of 50, a fine from 30,000 to 60,000 soms (€300–600) was imposed on perpetrators, including unemployed perpetrators. Remarkably, as highlighted by Margolis (2020) ‘heavy fines, which usually are paid from the family budget, put a financial squeeze on victims and their children. This creates additional pressure on victims to return to their abusers.’ In 15 cases, perpetrators were punished by public works (40–60 h), and only in two cases were they sentenced to correctional labour for four and five months, respectively. Surely, the high amount of the fines might negatively affect women's decision to pursue legal action against perpetrators of DV.

*Infrastructural barriers.* According to the research conducted by the Kyrgyz Association of Women Judges, female victims of DV also face problems regarding physical access to justice. Indeed, police buildings do not have separate rooms for interviewing victims, and the infrastructure available does not allow women to submit their claim confidentially.

*Low level of legal consciousness among victims of DV.* Our findings also pointed out that victims of DV are simply not aware of their own rights. As highlighted by one of the IPs,

“They simply don’t know how and whom to contact first of all; how to act in the case of DV. Even when contacting law enforcement agencies, they do not fully know their rights during investigation of cases and criminal trial”. (Interview conducted in Bishkek on 21.06.2021)

### **13.4 Spotlight Initiative and Local and National Ownership: Main Findings**

This section investigates how the Spotlight Initiative has sought to improve the access to justice on behalf of female victims of domestic violence by reducing existing legal and institutional barriers. Particular attention was given to emerging forms of national and local ownership characterizing state and non-state actors that were involved in the Initiative. The findings are based on semi-structured interviews that were carried out with representatives of the UN organizations involved in the programme design and implementation, as well as with legal experts, lawyers and civil society activists engaged in the field of VAWG.

The first way through which the Spotlight Initiative has tried to enhance women’s access to justice is through the introduction of a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). The procedure was developed by a team of experts considering the best international practices as well human rights and international standards that were adapted to the Kyrgyz context and legislation. As highlighted by one of the IPs, in this regard,

“The SOP is a comprehensive approach to GBV; this involves referral mechanisms among police, health, and social workers, law enforcement and crisis centres. It means that all these institutions are aware of a coordinated response. If a victim goes to the police, the police know that she has the right to issue a claim and they refer her to a doctor, psychological support, or crisis centres. Or, if a crisis centre gets a call from a woman, it should refer her to health, police, or legal aid. This is the kind of circle of services that helps women to get protection, to get legal support, health support, and psychological and social support”. (Online interview conducted on 16.02.2021)

Advocacy campaigns are the second way through which the Spotlight Initiative has sought to improve women’s access to justice. On 12 November 2021, the Committee on Law Enforcement, Combating Crime and Corruption of the Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Council on Women’s Rights and Prevention of Gender-Based Violence under the Toraga of the Jogorku Kenesh, with the support of the Spotlight Initiative, discussed proposed amendments to the Law of the

Kyrgyz Republic ‘On Safeguarding and Protection from Domestic Violence.’ Representatives of the Cabinet of Ministers and of the Presidential Administration, international organizations and CSOs, as well as crisis centres, attended the discussion. The proposed amendments concern increasing the period for issuing a temporary protection order from three to thirty days, expanding its conditions, and the potential of delivering a protection order electronically. They also suggest greater engagement of probation and execution bodies as subjects of the implementation of the law in cases of DV, and the exclusion of courts of elders (UNDP Kyrgyzstan, 2021). These amendments have been included in the draft Law on Amendments to Several Legislative Acts of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Field of Protection and Protection against Domestic Violence which passed public debates in December 2021.

Another successful example of advocacy is offered by the Centre for Study of Democratic Processes, a public foundation and national partner of the Spotlight Initiative which provided methodological assistance for developing the Regulations of the new Department for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Coordination of Activities of Mobile Police Stations under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Telephone interview conducted in Bishkek on 13.01.2022).

In addition, in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Spotlight Initiative has further supported the project ‘Bus of Solidarity’ (BoS) through which lawyers and representatives of the Inspectorate for Juvenile Affairs jointly inform citizens about their rights and provide free legal consultations in the field of domestic violence among other things. Until now, the Bus of Solidarity has reached 117 villages and 72 towns in Osh and Naryn oblasts in the Kyrgyz Republic and offered 2,272 legal consultations in these pilot regions. The thirty attorneys and social workers involved in the BoS initiative were trained in the provision of gender-sensitive services to GBV survivors through the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) methodology. As highlighted by the implementing organization in this regard, thanks to the use of gender-sensitive interview techniques, when the BoS travelled to remote regions, its staff was able to identify ten cases of domestic violence even when the women were asking for help for other reasons, such as restoring personal properties that were taken away by their husbands (Interview conducted in Bishkek on 09.09.2021).

In cooperation with the Training Centre for Lawyers, the Spotlight Initiative has also implemented a Pro-Bono project providing qualified legal aid to victims of domestic violence. Around fifty pro-bono lawyers (mostly women) are now advising crisis centres for free and, between April and June 2021, forty cases were supported under this framework. The Pro-Bono project contributes to addressing a relevant shortcoming of the Law on Free Legal Aid that currently does not apply to victims of domestic violence. In addition, in order to ensure professionalism and confidentiality during the interview process, the UNODC has planned to build a pilot police room in Bishkek which will be equipped with a gesell mirror, audio and video recording devices, and other necessary equipment.

Overall, our study has confirmed Barges-Pedreny and De Almagro’s observation that the SI is donor-driven but has also shed light on spaces for autonomy and agency of national and local actors. The donor-driven nature becomes apparent if we consider

that Spotlight is a global initiative implemented in thirty-six countries worldwide, and is ‘top-down in terms of setting theory of change, indicators and so on’ (Online Interview conducted on 30.06.2021). However, the fieldwork pinpointed that the content of the theory of change was adapted to the national context and developed in consultation with the Interim Working Group formed by UN and EU representatives, CSOs, and national partners including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Culture, the National Statistic Committee, and the General Prosecutor’s Office. In addition, the Interim Civil Society National Reference Group was created to ensure that “the perspectives of people were incorporated” in the programme. The Group is (as of September 2021) composed of twelve members of civil society, mainly from Bishkek and Osh, and serves as a consultative body formulating recommendations and comments concerning the planning and reporting of the programme’s activities as well as research studies conducted under the framework of Spotlight.

At the same time, the interviews highlighted an initial ‘lack of common understanding of some concepts laid down in the documents [...] and in understanding indicators and theory of change because these are global indicators’ (Online Interview conducted on 30.06.2021). This challenge, which derives from the volatility of the UN staff in charge of the programme in Kyrgyzstan, has also created opportunities for processes of reappropriation in terms of ‘idea-recipient’s adjustment to the shape and content (or both) of foreign ideas to make them more congruent with the recipient’s prior beliefs and practices’ (Acharya, 2004, p. 245). This is well exemplified by the discussions taking place as part of the exercise ‘pathways of change’ through which implementing UN organizations ‘tried to unpack concepts and activities [...] to go through all these aspects to be on the same page regarding what we are doing and why we are doing it. While having this discussion, it gave us some space to create a common understanding’ (Online Interview conducted on 30.06.2021).

Local ownership has also been fostered through the capacity-building activities provided to the Committees on the Prevention of Domestic Violence in ten target communities. These Committees were created in 2017 and comprise representatives of local government (*Ayil Okmotu*), social workers, medical workers, representatives from the Local Crime Prevention Centers and, in some cases, religious leaders and women’s NGOs. The members went through a gender-sensitive training programme through which they were familiarized with the GALS methodology and with the local referral mechanism. The task of these Committees is to improve victims’ access to services by preventing, informing and referring, and by providing information and contact for social services, medical services, crisis centres, pro-bono lawyers and so forth. As explained by the interviewed organization:

“If you are a member of the Committee and you receive a claim, you should not tell her just go to the police. They have an algorithm of action, what questions they should ask, who they should refer to, firstly medical services and then social services. Then they call the social worker, and the social worker goes to the victim. (...) If she does not want to go to the police, this is her right. She can receive free legal aid. They Committees are linked to pro-bono layers, she can be referred to lawyers and then they can proceed, with police, with forensics, etc”. (Online interview conducted on 07.06.2021)

Another example of how local ownership has been stimulated under the framework of the Initiative is offered by local Women's Committees that have been created and/or strengthened in the ten target communities. These Committees comprise active women who conduct informal work in the field of gender-based violence, providing the victims with first aid, sharing information on how to write a claim, separating the victims from their husbands and fundraising for women who have left their houses. As part of Spotlight, the engagement of the Committees has been formalized through their official registration as legal entities and has been professionalized through capacity-building activities on project proposal writing and project management, communication strategy, computer literacy, etc. As highlighted by one of the implementing organizations in this regard, 'once they are registered and know how to fund-raise, Women's Committees will continue protect women rights, supporting victims, serving as bridge between crisis centres and police. Female victims of GBV are more trusting of these committees rather than the police and committee for the prevention of domestic violence' (Online Interview conducted on 07.06.2021).

As already anticipated from the previous quotation, although different forms of ownership became evident during our fieldwork, some doubts on the sustainability of the changes introduced by the programme at the national level were cast. For instance, one interviewed organization pointed out how the Essential Services Package—a new provision introduced by Spotlight—'is an extra function [...] and the staff which was trained in the region will never have an increase in salary or incentives to perform it' (Online Interview conducted on 22.06.2021). Even though national officials are interested and willing to engage in the capacity-building activities offered under the framework of the Initiative, the lack of financial and human resources might negatively affect the sustainability of the services introduced.

## 13.5 Conclusions

This chapter has provided an overview of the phenomenon of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan and examined how the Spotlight Initiative has sought to improve victims' access to justice by stimulating national and local ownership of an array of state and non-state actors engaged in this field. The comprehensive nature of the Spotlight Initiative makes it very difficult to assess its impact, especially considering that the programme is relatively new, is aimed at introducing long-term systemic changes, and that the COVID-19 pandemic has not only slowed down its implementation but also caused a sudden increase in cases of domestic violence. However, despite their descriptive nature, the examples reported in the chapter reveal that the implementation of the Initiative has been complemented by processes of globalization through which national and local actors have contributed to interpreting, translating and adapting this global programme to the Kyrgyz context.

Based on our findings, women's organizations and activists involved in the Spotlight Initiative in Kyrgyzstan are not 'mere implementers of a program that cannot be resisted' (Bargues-Pedreny & De Almagro, 2020, p. 329), but are also shapers



of the programme. Indeed, as pointed out by the interviewed organizations, the shift in focus on domestic violence triggered by a surge of cases during COVID-19-related lockdown measures is also the result of the many calls and requests for help received from local women's organizations that did not know how to help victims when the shelters were temporarily closed down. Similarly, the empirical material collected on the ground did not confirm Barges-Pedreny and De Almagro's observation that SI's focus on national ownership contributes to framing local actors as both the problem and the solution (Barges-Pedreny & De Almagro, 2020, p. 343). At least with regard to the legal dimension, our findings pinpoint that, on the ground, the localization of international standards and procedures has taken place through the involvement of autonomous and/or already existing structures and through the empowerment of a wide range of state and non-state actors. These stakeholders include civic activists, lawyers, social workers, women's committees, local self-government bodies and students, among others, who are addressed neither as the problem nor as the solution, but rather as potential change agents.

At the same time, the legal advocacy campaigns conducted at the national level can be considered to be partially successful since they contributed to the formulation of the new draft Law on Amendments to Several Legislative Acts of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Field of Protection and Protection against Domestic Violence and to the Regulations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' new Department for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Coordination of Activities of Mobile Police Stations. In December 2021, a new Penal Code, a new Code on Offences and a new Criminal Procedural Code came into force. The codes introduced positive change in combating DV by imposing harsher punishments for perpetrators, and, notably excluding the issuance of a fine as a punishment option. However, *the vague* and elusive definition of DV as a juridical concept and the preference given to reconciliation practices still represent significant barriers to accessing justice on behalf of female victims of domestic violence.

Overall, the following recommendations came to light through the study. The first set of suggestions resulted from the analysis of the national legislation and the 280 court judgements on DV. Access to justice on behalf of victims of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan could be improved by increasing the level of legal consciousness of potential victims of DV and their perpetrators. Therefore, the Spotlight Initiative could focus not only on GALS trainings for pro-bono lawyers and law enforcement officers, but also on introducing special courses in schools and universities across the country to provide socio-legal education to younger generations. Moreover, advocacy campaigns at the national level could also contemplate (i) the introduction of aggravating circumstances for DV and of strict criteria distinguishing between DV as a crime and as offence; (ii) the prohibition on reconciliation between a victim of DV and perpetrator in cases where aggravating circumstances are identified.

The second set of recommendations emerged from the interviews collected with national implementing partners and concern the importance of strengthening cooperation with local actors and existing institutions, including self-government structures. For instance, local ownership could be increased through great involvement of local

civil society organizations working on women's rights and the prevention of gender-based violence in more peripheral areas of the country. Until September 2021, only three local CSOs were granted financial support for the conduct of GBV-related projects in Jalal-Abad, Naryn and Osh under the framework of SI. Surely the grant programme could be further expanded by covering other regions of the country and by complementing legal assistance with measures focused on increasing economic independence for women. In this way, the Initiative could be further tailored to the local context, benefitting from local expertise and experience and building synergies with already functioning structures. In addition, following Childress et al. (2018), wider consultations and discussions with female victims of DV could contribute to adjusting the programme to the realities on the ground, by considering the most promising approaches and services for the assistance of victims of domestic violence in the country as experienced by the abused women themselves.

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# Chapter 14

## From Social Media to Social Change: Online Platforms' Impact on Kazakhstan's Feminist and Civil Activisms



Anaita Azizi

### 14.1 Introduction

After proclaiming independence in 1991, Kazakhstan, like other former Soviet states, faced the challenge of establishing its own independent governance framework. Kazakhstan's abundance of natural resources resulted in a rapid economic boost and a smooth transition to a privatised economy (Olcott, 2011). In fact, Kazakhstan's economic development significantly contributed to a public sense of social satisfaction, resulting in the absence of uprisings and in overall political stability (Rico, 2010). Therefore, civil activist movements were largely inactive. Research on activism in Kazakhstan conducted before the 2010s often characterises the population, especially the youth, as apolitical and passive (Beisembayeva, 2016; Laruelle, 2019).

The 2019 power transition has served as a catalyst for Kazakhstan's civil activist movement. The transition took place when Nursultan Nazarbayev, the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, resigned after nearly thirty years in power. The glimpses of hope for political change were shattered the next day (Ashim, 2019), after President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev proposed the renaming of Kazakhstan's capital Astana to Nur-Sultan, in honour of the First President. Moreover, while Nazarbayev resigned, the title of the First President, granted to him by the amendments to Kazakhstan's Constitution passed in 2010, allowed him to maintain power by becoming the Head of Kazakhstan's Security Council (The Constitutional Law on the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010). The unlikelihood of political change coming from the top became even more evident and resulted in increased political involvement among the youth, the formation of several activist movements, and online activism projects focused on civil education and holding the government to standards of transparency and accountability.

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While civil activism resurged in a new form in 2019, various forms of activism such as feminist and climate activism have been present since the early 2000s. According to the activists interviewed for the present study, the activist movements had a fair degree of freedom as the government considered the movements apolitical and, therefore, non-threatening to the regime.<sup>1</sup> The first grassroots activist movement was feminist and was founded in 2015. Along with civil activist movements, the feminist movement experienced a revival in 2019. As the events occurred recently, there is a significant gap in the literature on activism in Kazakhstan and how it is influenced by cyber-reality (Kurambayev, 2020). This chapter aims to examine whether a connection exists between the feminist activist movement established in 2015 and the civil activist movement established in 2019.

To address this question, the following research methods were employed:

First, an inductive study was carried out through sixteen interviews with feminist and civil activists ages eighteen to fifty. Among participants, thirteen were identified as women and three were identified as men. The interviews took place between January 2021 and March 2021. The interviews were semi-structured with over-arching themes of feminist activism, civil activism, and social media platforms' employment. The participants were identified based on their social media presence and whether they specified that they were activists, openly wrote their opinions, and posted pictures from protests and other activist demonstrations.

Second, a deductive study was carried out through a qualitative survey to test the hypothesis formed in the initial inductive analysis. The survey was conducted online in the Russian language in Kazakhstan. The survey explored the entry points into activism, the role of social media, and the interconnection between feminist and civil activism. Overall, sixty-five responses were collected. The survey featured twenty-four questions which were presented in four sections: respondents' demographics, use of the internet, involvement in Kazakhstan's activism, and stance on feminism.

Based on analysis of the survey results, the study compares feminist and civil activism in Kazakhstan as well as their intersections and interconnections.

## 14.2 Civic Engagement and Activism in Kazakhstan

With the increased societal tensions caused by the economic crises of 2008 and 2014, political dissatisfaction, and the rising popularity of social media platforms, the state's poor handling of economic crises and overall poor management became more visible.

Based on the interviews with study participants, until 2019, feminist activism was the most visible activist movement in Kazakhstan. Both feminist and civil activism have engaged in offline activities but established larger networks thanks to their online

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<sup>1</sup> Participants number 3811, 2827, and 1322.

presence. It is worth noting that the feminist movement is not considered political by the state authorities, which is why organising protests for women's rights is relatively easier (Cooper & Traugott, 2003).

The feminist *grassroots* activist movement is relatively new. Radical feminist group *KazFem* is Kazakhstan's first grassroots activist group founded in 2015. *KazFem* focuses on educational enlightenment on women rights and dismantlement of the systems of oppression. Activists explain that *KazFem* was the most active in the first two years after its foundation, but that many activists later experienced burn-out.<sup>2</sup> Today, Kazakhstan's feminist activist landscape comprises older activist groups such as *KazFem*, *Feminita*, and *FemAgora* and newer activist projects and individual activists. Examples are multiple, such as *Feminizm Prizm*, *Fem Tendik*, *Femin Erkin*, *Artyq Emes*, and *Tolyq Qogam*.

This study employs Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) theoretical framework of personalised action formation and the logic of connective action. The logic of connective action between Social Media and Social Action is defined as the "recognition of digital media as organising agents" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Unlike collective action, where participation requires significant group affiliation and involves hierarchical organisation, connective action is based on individuals' personal involvement with a low-greed organisation. The interpersonal connections amplified by the digital platforms result in an effect similar to collective action yet without a rigid formal organisation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In collective action, expressing personal views and contributing to a common good strengthens the movement.

Bennett and Segerberg's framework remains topical for Kazakhstan's activist context, particularly for feminist and activist movements. During the interviews, several respondents pointed out that *Oyan, Qazaqstan!* (*OQ*, from Kazakh: Wake up Kazakhstan!), a civil activist movement formed after 2019, started as group of friends but amplified and grew outside of Almaty thanks to social media. While the movement is decentralised, the activists' personal ties form its backbone. Bennett and Segerberg's framework also holds true for Kazakhstan's feminist activist movement. During the interviews, it was highlighted that Kazakhstan's radical feminist group *KazFem* was likewise formed by several friends and later grew and spread outside of Almaty through social media. While the affiliation of civil activists with *OQ* is common, feminist activists in Kazakhstan often do not affiliate themselves with any particular group or organisation. Despite minimal affiliation, the solidarity and support among feminist activists and their allies is strong. Hence, in this chapter I argue that in Kazakhstan, local feminist cyber-activism increases the likelihood of women's involvement in civil activism. The survey's framework, which was used to test this hypothesis, is based on Heger and Hoffman's study which aimed to explore whether feminism impacts women's political efficacy by increasing the likelihood of women's political participation online (Heger & Hoffman, 2021). Heger and Hoffman (2021) based their research question on the assumption that feminism empowers women by reasserting the importance of their political participation. While Heger and Hoffman's study could not demonstrate significant results, the authors concluded

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<sup>2</sup> Participants number 2827 and 4213.



that feminism is an essential variable for examining women's political participation online (Heger & Hoffman, 2021).

Based on Heger and Hoffman's framework, this study also employs a survey, which was taken by sixty-five participants, of whom 84.6% identify as women, 10.8% as men, and 4.6% prefer to self-identify.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the respondents (50.8%) were aged between eighteen and twenty-four. Most respondents had graduated with a bachelor's degree (47.7%) or a high school diploma (29.2%).

The majority (89.2%) responded that they have unrestricted access to the internet, 9.2% reported partially restricted access, and one respondent said that the Internet was unavailable during public demonstrations. While the respondents use various devices to access the internet, 100% access it through their phones alongside other devices. Interestingly, more respondents use social media for educational purposes (93.8%) than entertainment (87.7%). Moreover, 87.7% use social media to access news. Instagram is the most popular platform (93.8%) used to read news, followed by Telegram (78.5%) and YouTube (61.5%). The majority of participants (88.15%) express their political opinion online. Among them, 80% do it via Instagram.

Since online activism in Kazakhstan is mainly employed by youth (Kilybayeva & Nurshanov, 2020; Kosnazarov, 2019; Laruelle, 2019), the thirty-two responses of women and self-identifying persons aged between eighteen and twenty-four who identify as activists were analysed. Of these, 81.2% became activists after 2019. Interestingly all women and self-identifying participants identify as feminists. Among them, 60% do not consider themselves to be a part of any activist groups, while 21.9% are part of more than one activist group. Among the younger group of women (aged between eighteen and twenty-four), 90.625% are somewhat or highly politically involved. For 42.9%, feminism was the first entry point into activism, while 21.4% became involved in feminist and civil activism around the same time.

Based on the survey responses, the following results were highlighted:

The overwhelming majority of participants (96.8%) follow feminist blogs and social media accounts. Among them, 97% found these accounts empowering and helpful in learning about women's rights. Interestingly, out of the sixty-five responses, only seven mentioned feminist blogs which were not from Kazakhstan. These blogs are in Russian. Among the respondents, three mentioned @feminism\_visually, which posts about feminism in the form of digital art, and the other four mentioned sex-positive bloggers. Both kinds of content are limited in Kazakhstan's cyberspace. The remaining 89% mentioned Kazakhstan's bloggers and cyber-initiatives.

The majority of the respondents aged between eighteen and twenty-four engaged in activism after 2019 when the new civil activism surged, and feminist activism was revived. The majority of feminist initiatives were also established after 2019. Prior to that, locally produced content was scarce. The respondents confirmed that they follow feminist accounts to learn more about feminism, empowerment, and women's rights. The overwhelming majority mentioned a Kazakhstan-based

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<sup>3</sup> These are respondents who do not identify as either women or men.



initiative when asked about their favourite blog. This development is outstanding considering that, while local content generation has increased dramatically, there are plenty of feminist blogs in Russian from Russia to choose from. Almost a half of the female participants who identify as activists became feminist activists before they identified as civil activists.

While no hard conclusion can be drawn from these findings due to the small sample size, the age group imbalance, and the absence of the non-Russian-speaking population's perspective (the survey was only available in Russian), the results show exciting tendencies:

1. Women are more likely to become feminists and feminist activists when they come across *local* feminist blogs representing their reality.
2. For the majority, feminism was an entry point generally into activism.
3. The majority do not have a group affiliation which shows that activism's character today has changed in comparison with the early 2000s. One does not necessarily need a personal connection to become involved, something which is facilitated by the accessibility provided by social media.

### 14.3 Social Media in Kazakhstan

Even though social media platforms have become instrumental for the development of numerous activist initiatives across all five Central Asian states, the impact of online activism varies. Cases of online activism, especially feminist activism, are present in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; however, they are too few to draw substantial analyses. Turkmenistan remains a closed state, where any form of political activism is dangerous; hence, conducting research there is nearly impossible. Since civil activism in Kyrgyzstan developed along a more traditional offline trajectory, the development of cyber-activism was complementary and, therefore, slow—many online activist initiatives often serve as the representation for offline activism. In Kazakhstan, many activist initiatives were founded online and then moved offline; therefore, the use of social media platforms for grassroots activism and societal mobilisation is most prominent in that state.

After Nazarbayev's resignation in 2019, he set the precedent for Central Asian and other autocracies in the post-Soviet region. His resignation was followed by several peaceful demonstrations, the leaders of which were detained and publicly trailed (Putz, 2019). The trials, which involved multiple legal violations, were actively covered by independent media and fresh Instagram news media accounts such as *Rukh* (from the Kazakh for Spirit) and *ZaNamiUzheVyeHali* (from the Russian for "They Are Already Coming for Us"). The demonstrations and actions were referred to as *#qazaqkoktemi* (From the Kazakh for Kazakh Spring) and marked an unprecedented rise in citizen activism, which in turn prompted the creation of multiple new media initiatives to raise awareness about civil activism. Since the Kazakh government harshly suppresses peaceful protests, violating its citizens' civil and political rights,

most notably the right to peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of speech, the newly emerged activist movements had to “migrate” into cyberspace.

The so-called Kazakh Spring created a critical juncture for the further development of civil society’s further development. The new initiatives created after the Kazakh Spring are (1) based on new media platforms, such as Instagram and Telegram, and (2) led mainly by women who identify as feminists. Therefore, Kazakhstan presents a substantial case for analysing how feminist cyber-activism in Central Asia has impacted the region’s advocacy for civil and political rights.

In relation to Kazakhstan’s feminist activist movement, two survey responses particularly stood out, as these participants have been a part of the feminist activist movement since either the 1990s or early 2000s. Both respondents emphasised that there is a generational divide between the feminist activists. These findings allow for the identification of three critical periods in the formation of Kazakhstan’s feminist movement: (1) the 1990s, after Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991; (2) the 2010s, when the grassroots groups started forming; and (3) post-2019 with the resurgence of political activism.

The 1990s movements were not explicitly called feminist, more often referred to as “women’s movements.” The state did not perceive women’s rights as a political topic, which made such movements a more accessible entry point for international organisations and NGOs.<sup>4</sup> The women’s movement was niche activism, funded mainly by Western organisations and aimed at solving the most pressing issues such as women’s poor economic states. The second stage of feminist movement development in Kazakhstan started in 2015, through a resurgence of the first feminist grassroots initiatives from within the state.

The third stage of activism formation happened in 2019. Nazarbayev’s resignations and the events which followed prompted a rise in discontent among the youth. Many feminist activists reconnected and joined the newly established civil activist groups.<sup>5</sup> While most feminist activist respondents had left the civil activist groups within the next six months, the feminist movement strengthened due to newly established connections. Thanks to social media’s connective effect, post-2019 feminist activism became a horizontally growing low-greed movement with a high degree of cooperation and mutual support among the activists and activist groups, and a clear set of goals that the study participants confidently outlined. Among the most pressing demands are those for adequate legislature against domestic violence, criminalisation of harmful traditional practices, and equal opportunities for women in all spheres.

Social media platforms played a significant role in overcoming feminism’s stigmatisation. Instagram, Telegram, and, recently, TikTok have helped to make feminism trendy and popular, and have made information on the topic accessible. When asked about the strategies and tools that feminist activists employ to achieve their goals, all feminist activist respondents mentioned social media. According to the responses of the study participants, feminist activists use social media to:

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<sup>4</sup> Participant number 1322.

<sup>5</sup> Participant number 3811.

1. to raise awareness about the global feminist movement,
2. raise awareness and bring attention to the threats to women in Kazakhstan,
3. to seek support when activists are unlawfully detained, and
4. to crowdfund for state charges and, recently, for demonstrations.

The feminist activists emphasised that today's most important goal is to destigmatise feminism and raise awareness about women's lack of protection, which is feasible to do via social media platforms. Just in the recent year, several online projects were launched. The projects focus on amplifying feminist and activist voices (*Feminizm Prizm*), destigmatising menstrual health (*umaicup*), and building feminist communities (*Femin Erkin*). The most striking case is *Batyr Jamal*, Kazakhstan's registered online independent media specialising in women's rights and empowerment. The media platform was launched on 8 March 2021, and has thus far gained over 17,800 followers on Instagram, its central content platform. *Batyr Jamal* publishes various educational content and news items in Russian and Kazakh, popularising feminist ideas and values among the wider population.

While the study participants highlighted the critical role that social media plays in feminist discourse, they also noted<sup>6</sup> that cyber-activism alone is not enough:

We are truly visible when we are on the streets. We can make however many petitions, but the true change only comes with the live protests.

Both the interview and the survey conducted for the present study highlighted the importance of social media's impact on activist movement development. In the case of civil activism, social media provided various tools for activism entry, cooperation not only within one city but also across Kazakhstan, and the development of coherent demands for political reform. In the case of feminist activism, social media allowed for inclusive community building and mobilisation, as well as feminism's de-stigmatisation and reclamation as a local movement.

The connective effect of social media has contributed to the relatively rapid growth of both civil and feminist activist movements which were initially begun as initiatives by small groups of people but grew progressively across Kazakhstan into movements with substantial numbers of supporters.

Similarly to the feminist activist landscape, Kazakhstan's civil activist landscape is quite diverse; however, there is less cooperation among civil activist communities as each community has its own agenda. The communities founded in 2019 are low greed and mainly involve young people; therefore, these communities represent grassroots activism (Kalkamanova, 2020). Kalkamanova argues that these activist communities appeared as an outcome of the protests organised by *Demokraticheskiy Vybor Kazakhstana* (*DVK*, from the Russian for "Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan") prior to the 2019 events. In Kazakhstan, *DVK* has been given the status of a terrorist organisation and its leader resides outside of the county. There is no evidence to conclude that the *DVK*'s activities substantially impacted the activist community's development post-2019. Moreover, none of the study participants noted *DVK*'s impact after March 2019, when Kazakhstan's activist movement resurged and civil activists founded

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<sup>6</sup> Participant number 2827.

several initiatives such as *Qaharman* (from the Kazakh for Hero), *Oyan, Qazaqstan!* (From the Kazakh for “Wake Up Kazakhstan!”), and *Respublika* (From the Kazakh for Republic).

*OQ* was formed in response to the unlawful detention of activists at the 2019 Almaty Marathon. *Qahraman* emphasises that they are not a political organisation, and their main goals are to raise awareness about Kazakhstan’s politics (Qaharman, 2019). *Respublika* does not seem to be active as its social media accounts are deactivated, and none of the study participants mentioned the movement. Moreover, when the participants were asked which events had shaped the civil activist community, the most common answers were the Zhanaozen Massacre (2011), Land Reform Protests (2016), and the Fire in Astana (2019). Participants mentioned these events in connection with increased societal pressure and growing dissatisfaction with the government. The next group of events that was mentioned repeatedly included Denis Ten’s Death (2018), Nazarbayev’s Resignation (2019), the renaming of Astana (2019), and the Presidential Elections (2019). The study participants emphasised that Nazarbayev’s resignation brought about hopes that there could be substantial political change, but Astana’s re-naming signalled the opposite.<sup>7</sup>

Two years after Nazarbayev’s resignation, the civil society remains active, especially the *OQ* Community. In fact, the *OQ* is the only activist movement that spreads further than Almaty and has several groups in other cities. The *OQ* is active in cyberspace, mainly via its Instagram account; several *OQ* activists have their own Instagram blogs dedicated to civil activism. Among the mentioned activist communities, the *OQ* is horizontal and has the lowest entry barrier, as anyone sharing the community’s values can join via participation in online and offline campaigns. The movement is friendly and supportive towards the feminist community, and some *OQ* activists are outspoken LGBTQI+ allies.

The participants also mentioned that misconceptions about feminism are present within the community and that members regularly hold educational workshops to destigmatise feminism. Several feminist study participants reported that they used to be *OQ* members but left the movement within six months of joining.

There was no complete mutual understanding. Some people acted like you can ‘take off’ feminism for your convenience. I was not okay with it.

Several statements like the one above highlighted that feminist and LGBTQI+ activisms are perceived as separate from one another: the first is tolerated and the second is often ignored. However, this tendency has been slowly changing and could prompt the *OQ* to become the first intersectional civil activist movement in Kazakhstan.

Despite Kazakhstan’s restrictive protest law, the civil activist community has managed to “migrate” to offline space. In the summer of 2019, the *OQ* introduced the *seruen* (From the Kazakh for a walk). In practice, a *seruen* is not much different

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<sup>7</sup> Participant number 4785.

from a protest: activists gather, give speeches, network, and discuss political themes. One of participants<sup>8</sup> recalls:

Officially, it is not a protest – it is a walk. We gather with friends, hang out, and play music. But practically, I'd say it's the same as a protest. We gathered where we chose to, we chanted 'Nazarbayev, leave!' and we expressed our political position.

Based on the existing literature and the interviews conducted, it is safe to conclude that Kazakhstan's civil society has developed more within the past two years than over the entire independence period. Post-2019 civil activism is mostly driven by the youth (Kosnazarov, 2019). While a substantial part of the activism takes place in cyberspace, the activists have made substantial visible efforts to transfer the community mobilisation effects acquired via social media's connective action to the streets and across the country.

## 14.4 Online Activism

Offline and online feminist and civil activism are young in Kazakhstan. Despite having different development timelines, the movements share a set of similarities. First, both activist movements originated from a clique of friends or acquaintances and later developed into a broader activist community thanks to the connecting power of social media. Second, both movements use social media to develop and strengthen citizens' political participation through online educational and news projects on Instagram, Telegram, YouTube, and TikTok. In both cases, cyber-activism complements traditional grassroots activism and is used to enlighten and involve more people. Third, both activist groups realise that the core of the movement is based in urban Almaty; therefore, they make an effort to expand the movement to Kazakhstan's lower-income cities.

There are also significant differences in the developments of both movements. First, the movements have various degrees of diversity. Feminist activism is represented by several organisations, NGOs, women's centres, media initiatives, and individual activists. These actors represent different views on feminism: from radical to liberal to intersectional. Civil activism's landscape is less diverse. Despite the initial surge of activist communities, only the *OQ* has remained consistently active. While there are various civil activist media projects, their authors are often affiliated with the *OQ*.

Second, a generational divide is present in both movements, but the interactions within the movements are different. While the generational divide is more defined in the feminist community, activists and initiatives interact, collaborate, and support each other more often. In the discussions about civil activism, the focus often skewed towards youth (Kilybayeva & Nurshanov, 2020). Moreover, there are very few collaborations among the few civil activist communities.

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<sup>8</sup> Participant number 2246.

Third, the movements' agendas are dissimilar in terms of the clarity of their objectives. From 2015 to 2021, the feminist movement has developed a clear agenda consisting of tangible demands, such as re-evaluating laws aimed to protect women. Despite the feminist movement's diverse landscape, the study participants recalled the feminist agenda items in almost the same order. The civil activist agenda remains vaguely formulated. While the *OQ* has a published manifesto outlining their demands, the study participants could not recall these in detail. At present, the civil activist movement is focused on community building, promising a more sustainable and stable movement in the future.

Lastly, state perception of the movements is different. According to study participants, the state does not consider the feminist movement to be political. Therefore, the regime does not consider it to be a threat. While such perception is invalidating, feminist activists were able to use it to their benefit, since they could exercise their rights to freedom of assembly and expression more freely though still in a restricted manner. Since civil activists demand parliamentary republic and state transparency, directly criticising the regime, the civil activist movement faces targeted restrictions and suppression.

To test the hypothesis that cyberfeminist activism in Kazakhstan increased women's participation in civil activism, the study employed an anonymous online survey conducted in Kazakhstan in the Russian language. It is important to consider that the feminist discourse in cyberspace in the Russian language has predominantly come from Russian feminists and that its agenda has been chiefly centred around Russian women's issues. Therefore, the voices of Kazakhstan's feminists were traditionally under-represented in cyberspace.

The lack of a Kazakh perspective in feminist discourse initially resulted in shallow activist involvement. With the rise of local feminist blogs on Instagram and TikTok, Kazakhstan's feminist community has grown exponentially. This development can be traced even in recent years when comparing Women's Marches from 2017 to 2021. According to the study and survey participants, the 2021 march garnered historically high participation numbers, included various feminist actors, and is considered the most significant victory of Kazakhstan's feminist movement.

It is worth noting that several study participants highlighted that they became feminists first, and then became involved with civil activism. Study participants reflected:

Imagine a pyramid: feminist activism is the base because it is the most essential. We become feminists first and then, level by level, get involved with civil, climate, LGBTQI+ activisms and so on. How can you advocate for a parliamentary republic without advocating for women's place in that parliament?<sup>9</sup>

Men are less involved in activism because they are privileged, so they don't question the system which caters to them. And women fight because this system is unjust.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Participant number 4027.

<sup>10</sup> Participant number 3320.

## 14.5 Conclusion

The present study provided an in-depth analysis of feminist and civil activist movements' development in Kazakhstan. The study employed inductive analysis using Bennett and Segerberg's theoretical framework of connective action (2012) and deductive analysis using Heger and Hoffman's survey model (2021). Based on the results, the study identified a tangible link between Kazakhstan's feminist and civil activist communities. While there are substantial differences as to how both movements have formed and developed, they share a number of significant similarities, including the use of social media for awareness raising, community building, and online and offline mobilisation. Based on the initial survey results, there is a strong suggestion that (1) online feminist content prompts more women to become feminist activists and (2) the feminist content generated locally in Kazakhstan and centred around the local agenda prompts more women to become feminist activists, and consequently to join other activist communities.

While the research design was developed for Kazakhstan as a case study, this framework could potentially be used to analyse how social media impacts feminist and civil activism in other Central Asian states and potentially in other post-Soviet autocracies. While the activist movements might not yet be as prominent in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan due to the features of their political systems, social media has the potential to accelerate the formation and growth of activist movements online, and these could later transfer offline.

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# Chapter 15

## The Role of Teahouses in Central Asia: A Case Study of the Ferghana Valley



Ryan Schweitzer

### 15.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that civil society in Central Asia does not fully fit into the conventional definitions of civil society—while the region does have a robust network of civil society actors and groups, they are less visible than typically seen in other regions and are less likely to manifest in large formally state-recognized organizations or through the “traditional” societal participation in the ways identified by indices such as BTI when completing analysis (BTI Codebook, 2020). This chapter uncovers the traditional nuances in the social structures that most studies and NGO reports acknowledge but seem to exclude from analysis when studying civil society in Central Asia (Roy, 2004). In fact, it is the connection between the traditional social spaces, like teahouses, which are found everywhere in the urban and rural spaces in the Ferghana Valley, that have been a platform for civil society groups to develop and transform. Through personal interviews and observations conducted in 2021, this research seeks to further explore the link between traditional social spaces and their effects on civil society development in Central Asia. The traditional spaces in this region, at the crossroad of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, are inherently where civil society best manages to grow and establish itself while under threat from hostile environments and political surveillance.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asian states, such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, experienced periods of rapid political and social transformation. As these changes occurred, Western democratic nations, such as the US and the European Union (EU), often under the auspice of the OSCE and ODIHR, sought to introduce democratic ideas to influence and create social change, especially in the realm of human rights. While the West envisioned democracy taking hold in the region, the reality of Central Asian societal reforms have

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considerably dampened this enthusiasm. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are considered “hard-line autocracies” and Kyrgyzstan a “defective democracy,” one quickly slipping in democratic ratings (BTI, 2022). A typical indicator included in democracy indices, such as the Bertelsman Transformation Index (BTI), is civil society development. While the BTI and other indices, like the Varieties of Democracy (v-dem), use multiple indicators to operationalize their findings, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the absence of structural constraints within social participation are considered the true indicators of a functioning democracy. A thriving civil society is a reflection of these indicators; as a result, civil society is used as a litmus test for studying democracy.

Independent civil society institutions and actors, such as non-government organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups, are largely absent from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, especially when compared to other post-soviet countries such as Georgia (BTI, 2022). Governments in the region fear that public displays of civil society could challenge the status quo. These countries’ leaderships have, therefore, severely hindered the formation of civil society organizations and have instead supported the creation of ostensibly independent associations which are in reality under government control. These government-led civil society institutions do charity work and advocate on the behalf of certain “accepted” social movements, whereas topics that go against the traditional views of government can rarely manifest in the public view (Ziegler, 2015).

Previous studies and current conversations focus on what a vibrant civil society in the region should consist of, without considering the latent ways civil society forms and exists in Central Asia (Krizan, 1997). One way to understand the way civil society develops and maintains its functional ability—even while under threat by the government—is to consider less conventional modes of categorization and operability.

Teahouses can appear in rural and urban areas, along rivers, in bazaars, near the street, or among houses in a neighbourhood. They are more than just simple cafes or restaurants. As diverse as their locations are, their appearances differ even more—from indoor and outdoor seating to large open spaces or separate private rooms—no matter their aesthetic, teahouses offer a unique opportunity to understand the conditions under which civil society forms and integrates itself within the local, national, and international communities. Teahouses, as traditional spaces (and in some cases, re-invented “traditional” spaces) of regular, often daily, community gathering, among either men and/or women only or in mixed groups for family gatherings, provide not only a method to disseminate localized information, but offer the opportunity to discuss international ideas that are not typically covered in other spheres of society. As such, teahouses allow for the spreading of new ideas and the fostering of a community of interconnectedness, which ultimately lays the foundation for civil society development. Without a truly free civil society, the process of democratic transition becomes more difficult and, in Central Asia, teahouse gatherings allow for the creation of civil society away from the state, or at the very least, with limited interference from outside influence. Needless to say, state surveillance

is always present in authoritarian states, even among teahouse gatherings. Hence, these group gatherings require a certain level of confidentiality and trust.

Recognizing that Central Asia is a unique region with multiple cultures and societal traditions, customs, and values, in this chapter I focus on the development of civil society in teahouses across the Fergana Valley in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and the social conditions that allow this social space to operate even when under threat from the government.

## 15.2 Teahouses in Ferghana Valley in Central Asia

The three Central Asian countries that border the Ferghana Valley are Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Since their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, they have developed different political and social regimes. Whereas the Kyrgyzstan government has allowed more space for civil society, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have sought to limit the paths civil society could take. Yet, civil society in each country has been similarly relegated to the margins of society since 2015 due to the various changes in government leadership and realignment with countries such as Russia and China. According to the BTI data, Kyrgyzstan had a robust civil society and optimal conditions for its formation until recently, when the government began to monitor the sector more, especially with regard to foreign donations (Kyrgyzstan Country Report, 2020). Tajikistan has actively oppressed civil society, banned some organizations, and made civil society weak (Tajikistan Country Report, 2020). Likewise, Uzbekistan has had a tumultuous past with civil society, banning most organizations through legal means and making registration increasingly difficult (Uzbekistan Country Report, 2020). Therefore, these case studies consider the timeline of 2010 to 2021 and the transformation of the various government policies towards civil society which have led to its current state on the sidelines of society and pushed it into social spaces such as teahouses in order to function under tolerable conditions. I conducted primarily non-participant observations and interviews with civil society actors, teahouse owners, and security representatives in 2021, with the intention of filling the research and knowledge gaps in current literature on teahouses (Ernazarov, 2020; Ismailbekova, 2018; Urinboyev, 2014).

In my interviews, I aimed to find out how and whether teahouses, as a community-based social space in Central Asian society, provide the conditions for civil society to develop, and whether, despite the government and community surveillance which exist, these places still offer safety, accessibility, and key roles in local life that other locations fail to offer.

### 15.3 Civil Society and Teahouses in the Ferghana Valley

John Clark argues that civil society has three options, to “oppose the state, complement it, or reform it—but they cannot ignore it” (Clark, 1991). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the difficult nation-building process in the region, the states have experienced periods of various levels of democratization, coercion, and harsh repression. Due to the political order in the region, these three options are the conditions civil society actors in Central Asia must navigate. Additionally, a common view of civil society is that it is “an intermediate realm situated between state and household, populated by organized groups or associations which are separate from the state, enjoy some autonomy in relations with the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests” (Manor et al., 1999). Following these two ideas, the definition of civil society that is used for this research is a group of individuals, outside the state, that use collective action to make a change in the community. In order to operate successfully in Central Asia and avoid repressive state controls, this civil society must stay on the peripheries of the general society.

Teahouses have long been an important aspect of Central Asian society, dating back to the ancient Silk Road and caravanserai (Ernazarov, 2020). During the Silk Road period, teahouses provided the opportunity for individuals to solve community issues and come to agreements on such things as arranged marriages and business transactions (Central Asian Architectural History, 2019). As such, teahouses represented the community centre for the town and, continuing to this day, teahouses can be found in both large cities and regional villages, providing many benefits to Central Asian life beyond their role as mere places to eat and drink. Since their creation, they have been utilized for community support and political and social purposes (Ernazarov, 2020). Teahouses thus coincide with the development of all aspects of community (Ernazarov, 2020).

Teahouses, as informal spaces, allow for communication and the transmission of information—whether official (i.e. government, business) or unofficial (e.g. gossip, traditional fables, etc.) (Roberts, 2016). As such, when individuals meet in teahouses, they can solve issues through unofficial channels—outside the government purview, at a local level—or via official channels, as government officials use the space to discuss ideas and other “advisory work” (Ernazarov, 2020). Historically, especially in the cases of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, teahouses have been informal religious spaces where mosques outside the control of the state can be disguised (Atkin, 1989). This is important because it demonstrates the potential subversive nature of teahouses against government and institutional forces, indicating that teahouses have the potential to be used as a source of independent civil society development in Central Asia.

The layout of most teahouses allows for guests to have relative privacy—even as some Central Asian countries function through a close network of surveillance and espionage. The teahouses throughout the Ferghana Valley all have similar layouts, with ample space between tables and the option for private rooms which allow for a fairly high level of confidentiality. These private rooms are either completely enclosed or have shades that can be pulled around the table so that other guests cannot see the

identity of those sitting around the table. In addition, teahouses with outdoor table options have individual canopies or yurt-like structures that provided nearly complete privacy from other outdoor guests. Teahouses are unique in providing these types of private experiences because most restaurants or cafes observed in this region do not have private rooms and, when they do, have only one or two rooms available at a time. During observation in Uzbekistan, several government-registered and unregistered civil society organizations utilized these private spaces for meetings. One member of the Red Crescent Society, an active civil society organization in Central Asia, mentioned that teahouses offer the best meeting space not only because of comfort but because it is a private sphere and allows for the community to see the Red Crescent Society in action (Interviewee A, 2021). Additionally, according to this same source, teahouses allow for the Red Crescent Society to identify further sources of information or funding as they are able maintain an active presence in society (Interviewee A, 2021). The fact that the Red Crescent Society uses teahouses as a way to seek privacy but also as a way to show the community that they are active may seem counterintuitive, but in fact, shows the dual nature of teahouses as a public space which can offer privacy in ways that other public spaces, such as libraries or parks, cannot due to the fact that security services would immediately take notice. The nature of teahouses throughout the Ferghana Valley allows for individuals to maintain a level of privacy and autonomy, whilst still granting the members who partake in teahouse culture to see other guests within the teahouse—this permits civil society actors, such as the Red Crescent Society, to show their continued presence within society, while also allowing for privacy not afforded in other spaces.

This privacy also creates the conditions for civil society to develop. One of the best examples of this is through the emerging formation of Islamic civil society. While Kyrgyzstan overall is more tolerant towards religious organizations and beliefs compared to the other Central Asian states (Engvall, 2020), authorities in the country still view religion cautiously (Kolodzinskaia, 2020). This is especially true when it comes to Islamic groups that are difficult to classify, like Tablighi Jamaat. This Islamic organization or network is apolitical and, in Kyrgyzstan, does not have a clear goal beyond spreading and teaching Islam in the country, helping the Islamic community through charitable works, and connecting Kyrgyzstan's Muslims to the wider global community of Islamic followers (Mirsaitov, 2013). Since this organization relies on building connections with the local community to help further develop and support itself, it can be viewed as a civil society organization.

The works of Tablighi Jamaat are controversial throughout Central Asia because some view its teachings as extremist (Mirsaitov, 2013); however, in Kyrgyzstan, where religious legislation is more lenient than in other Central Asian states, the political authorities tolerate the organization, watching it carefully to monitor its activities (Mirsaitov, 2013). Thus, when this organization gathers with many individuals, they do so in relative anonymity, without any obvious signs of Tablighi Jamaat membership. The members of Tablighi Jamaat that I found gathering in a *chaikhana* (the local word for a teahouse) in Osh told me that teahouses are the best location to meet in order to limit any outside interaction from authorities, not only because anyone can visit a teahouse, but also because it is safe to meet in teahouses

as they can simply stop talking if someone enters their private dining room. In addition, they are able to easily explain away their meeting—a simple meal with friends. This was also evident in Tajikistan where one interviewee mentioned, “I would never host meetings at my home because it could endanger myself and others. If police arrive and see my Quran, then they could create links that are not there” (Interviewee B, 2021). This interviewee is a member of a local NGO involved with giving free legal advice in Khujand. However, with the political and security dynamics in the country, hosting meetings with other members of his legal aid service could become dangerous. As such, he only hosts meetings in his office or at teahouses. In his own words, teahouses “offer a more common place where police cannot associate one immediately with a religious agenda” (Interviewee B, 2021).

Under widespread surveillance of personal activity, teahouses throughout the Ferghana Valley allow individuals, especially those who are religious and fear being associated with banned groups, to meet. Civil society is already a sector that the government monitors heavily, and if the government has an opportunity to connect it with banned religious groups or any minor infraction, it will take that opportunity to shut down the group (“Tajikistan Rights Group Forced to Close,” 2012). Therefore, teahouses allow for a safer refuge than private homes because teahouses do not have religious materials lying about, such as the Quran, for police to incorrectly associate with the people meeting there, as they can in private homes. Teahouses provide the opportunity for civil society to gather without individuals worrying about their homes being raided under the suspicion of religious extremism. While people still gather in teahouses as they would in private homes, civil society groups garner less suspicion from the security services because these social spaces are public. Additionally, individuals meeting together in teahouses worry less that their neighbours will call security services over activity incorrectly deemed to be suspicious, as all individuals, especially men, are welcome to meet in these spaces. Therefore, teahouses in the Ferghana Valley in this context provide not only protection from unwanted attention but can serve as an easy explanation for a meeting—whereas a meeting in a public place, like a park, or a private home would require a much greater effort to explain.

Despite this, as mentioned earlier, teahouses in Tajikistan, and perhaps all throughout Central Asia, do not fully escape the purview of the state; in fact, they sometimes become tools of the state to gain further evidence or blackmail against opposition figures or members of society who are deemed to go against social norms. For instance, in 2020 two gay men visiting a part-teahouse, part-hookah bar found themselves in the middle of an online scandal when videos of them emerged kissing thanks to secretly hidden cameras in their private room (“In Tajikistan, Two Men,” 2020). The teahouse owner used these private videos to blackmail and kick the two men out from the establishment (“In Tajikistan, Two Men,” 2020). While this incident occurred in Dushanbe and not in the Ferghana Valley, it demonstrates the risk that individuals in Tajikistan face even in teahouses. This risk was also established during the research observations where security cameras could be seen in teahouses, though the owners claimed that audio could not be heard and these were for security purposes only (meant to protect against burglaries) (Interviewee C, 2021). For this

reason, while teahouses are seemingly safe spaces, there are times this safety can and should be put into question. Even if the surveillance is not conducted by the Tajik government agencies, the threat posed by private individuals, especially in terms of blackmail, is still high.

While it is normal to have security cameras inside and outside of businesses, it is unusual to find them in private rooms, especially if guests do not know they there present. This has serious implications for civil society development in Tajikistan because, even if the state is not using these cameras, as the above example demonstrates, private owners of the teahouses can use these videotapes as leverage for extortion, blackmail, and other nefarious goals. The implications are even more dire if the state is directing the placement of these cameras in teahouses, particularly in ones frequented by civil society actors deemed religious or oppositional in nature. It would thus be wise for civil society actors to take further steps to protect their safety, even in teahouses. While it is important to consider these scenarios, during the research there was no evidence or interview testimony given to support the notion that the state is using security equipment in teahouses. Even with the risk of security cameras being in private rooms, teahouses still offer an important social space for civil society to meet, especially as all aspects of society in Tajikistan have become ever more securitized.

## 15.4 Government Interaction with Teahouses

Throughout the Ferghana Valley it was also evident that, even as governments try to prevent civil society from forming or becoming too independent, these same security services and other government officials meet regularly to discuss their business in teahouses. These meetings occur on and off the official record (Interviewee D, 2021). During observations, uniformed security services and police officials were seen eating and discussing topics, including issues concerning work, in the teahouse. One police official in Margilon—a city in Uzbekistan’s Ferghana Valley—stated that “Teahouses are the usual place to meet and eat because they are quick, but also because there are private rooms out of range from others who want to listen to our conversations” (Interviewee D, 2021). These private rooms allow government officials, including the same security services who monitor civil society, the privacy they require to discuss topics that the public should not or cannot know about. The fact that even officials use teahouses to conduct business, including possibly the sharing of secret information, demonstrates the reliability of most teahouses as safe places from encroaching ears. Because several different groups meet in private rooms, or even in the general dining areas, there are simply too many people to target and monitor. Thus, it is highly unlikely that individuals or small groups of random civil society actors will be actively monitored. The same interviewee above summarized the situation in his comments that “teahouses offer the ability for one to merge with the crowd, and it is not uncommon to see high-ranking officials amongst the crowd of the general locals enjoying talks about recent weddings” (Interviewee D, 2021).



It is widely acknowledged that teahouses are a common social space for all, including those in government and security positions who normally oppose and monitor the social spheres of society. This situation seems to indicate the relative safety of teahouses for all members of society. The fact that even low-level government employees are unafraid to attend meetings and speak freely in teahouses reinforces the notion of teahouses as a safe space for all members of society, including civil society actors.

In fact, one can conclude that civil society is further developed in parts of the Fergana Valley due to the interaction between teahouses and government officials, albeit sometimes in indirect ways. Since the ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in 2010 in Osh, many Uzbek teahouse owners pay police officers to both protect their businesses and to essentially buy off the ethnic-Kyrgyz police officers who might otherwise take a predatory approach towards Uzbek businesses, thereby essentially creating a patronage system for survival (Interviewee E, 2021). As one Uzbek teahouse owner stated, “Paying police is a small price to pay to keep my business running” (Interviewee F, 2021). The tensions resulting from the ethnic violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in 2010 can still be felt today—even the teahouse owner interviewed fears that such an event might occur again. These 2010 events helped to spur a rebalance of patronage networks to ensure safety in areas the state had failed to provide for safety before. Most important for this research is the way this corruption between local police and teahouse owners impacts the development of civil society.

While Uzbek teahouse owners pay police to protect, and ultimately not to interfere in, their businesses, this has the unintended impact of creating an environment outside police interference and monitoring of civil society within the teahouse as well. By not having police always inside the teahouse, civil society can freely develop and discuss ideas. Local police indifference towards teahouses, due to the payments received from the Uzbek teahouse owners, creates an environment of freedom for civil society to meet in these locations. Conversely, the giving of local police bribes to stay away from the operation of Uzbek teahouses in southern Kyrgyzstan, gives, at least in theory, these same police officers more time to interfere and monitor other social spaces such as universities, parks, and online platforms. Therefore, in these spaces civil society cannot operate under such private conditions. This process creates a cyclical effect that results in civil society actors meeting more in teahouses than in other social spaces. While this situation occurs in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, specifically due to the unique social conditions in the city, it is likely that, in other parts of the Fergana Valley, teahouse owners also pay local police bribes, although for other reasons, and that the impact on civil society development in teahouses would be the same.

## 15.5 Charity or Corruption

Central Asia is developing and has an endemic corruption problem (Roy, 2004). As a result, not all the allotted government funds reach their intended destinations,



particularly when it comes to the furthest regions and villages from city centres. In other countries, this would lead to major issues, especially in terms of social welfare. However, many in the region have unified around common community networks which serve to fill in the gaps of government indiscretion, such as the *mahalla* networks (local social institutions typically embedded within a small community or neighbourhood in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) (Urinboyev, 2014).

As central tenants of the community, teahouses allow space for the *mahalla* leaders to gather and discuss their plans, including charity for the community. It should be noted that many of these leaders are on the payroll of the government (Urinboyev, 2014). While not a formally recognized and registered organizations of civil society, these informal gatherings of leaders represent the ways civil society manifests in the region. Furthermore, it demonstrates the unique role teahouses play in society as a place for gatherings around social improvement. As one *mahalla* leader in Ferghana, Uzbekistan, suggested, “Teahouses represent the very essence of Uzbek society—filled with hospitality, friendly faces, and the tendency to help” (Interviewee G, 2021). In this sense, teahouses provide not only a place for local council members to meet but also a social mechanism to further their intended goals.

In addition to providing a space for community leaders to meet, teahouse owners also recognize the need to help community leaders fulfil their charitable initiatives. Not only do teahouses help to occasionally feed the poor or homeless, they sometimes also donate money or other resources to these *mahalla* leaders to help with the community’s needs. One teahouse owner in Khujand, Tajikistan, so described his participation in a recently created civil society group in his neighbourhood, “during the pandemic I witnessed the devastation that the dire economic condition was having on my friends and neighbours, so I started donating food from my business to the poor and volunteering to raising more money for my community” (Interviewee H, 2021). This teahouse owner, like many others, realized the important role the teahouse plays in the community, as well as how important the community is to keeping the teahouse financially stable—the two are interconnected. The community uses teahouses as a social space and, as a business, teahouses need the community in order to maintain a good working environment. Thus, while teahouses provide a safe and confidential space for the development of civil society, the owners of teahouses also help to further the causes of civil society in their respective communities. In return, civil society also reinforces the financial stability of the teahouse by giving it customers. For example, the aforementioned teahouse owner indicates that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, he allowed a local group of teenagers to use his teahouse as a base to collect and distribute masks, which also attracted more customers to his business (Interviewee H, 2021). To this end, teahouses not only help to develop civil society, they, through their very existence in the Ferghana Valley, can be seen as a unique civil society actor in their own regard.

## 15.6 Conclusion

Teahouses in the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia have enabled civil society actors to develop and further refine their organizations' goals and initiate change in their respective communities. This is an impressive feat, as the governments in the region actively try to create hardships for or prevent civil society from forming entirely. Governments in the region are highly suspicious of foreign involvement, including funding, and any individuals who seemingly represent the possibility of forming an opposition to the status quo. As such, civil society is the target for repression because of the foreign involvement and occasional oppositional ideas that these groups engender. While, according to the constitutions and government officials of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, civil society is able to freely form and operate, very few truly independent civil society organizations are able to receive official recognition; instead, most of the formally recognized civil society groups are state sponsored. This is not to discredit the diligent work that civil society groups engage in throughout the region; in fact, there is a vibrant civil society in Central Asia, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, but one must look in the casual peripheries of society to recognize it. Although civil society has had to develop and operate outside the scope of the government, it actually develops in one of the most social spaces imaginable—the teahouse.

In this chapter, I aimed to underline the role of the teahouse as a social space and examined the ways they help create the necessary conditions and environments for civil society to develop and create change in the Ferghana Valley of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Central Asian teahouses and the social culture that they have spurred have outlasted Russian, Soviet, and modern-day government repression. The study of teahouses offers the unique ability to understand not only government oppression and the ways they use security services, but how teahouses act as an intersection between the political sphere, a business enterprise, and a community space. The dynamic roles that teahouses play in Central Asian societies make them key assets to civil society development. However, as governments in the region begin to administer stricter regulations for civil society registration and international funding and to target key pathways for information sharing such as the internet, it would be surprising if the social situation surrounding teahouses does not become scrutinized as well. As the security situation in teahouses in Tajikistan has increasingly become more tense, it can only be a matter of time before other Central Asian governments begin to take notice of the unique role that teahouses play in society, especially for civil society.

Teahouses in Central Asia's Ferghana Valley significantly contribute to enhancing the ability of civil society to develop and advance their agendas. The prevailing ways these social spaces accomplish this is through a combination of safety, privacy, and charitable giving. The inherent components and structure of teahouses, which allow for comfortable and basic social gatherings, also allow for more dynamic instances of human interactions that are necessary for civil society—especially in consideration of the repressive environments that they must operate within. While other social

spaces, such as parks, restaurants, and private homes, offer some of the same things as teahouses, they do not contain the complete components that teahouses can and do provide. These public spaces have also previously been known to be surveilled by the state, which means that these other places are not as conducive to civil society development. The safety of teahouses is shown by the fact that even security and police services use these space for their private lives and work discussions. The fact that even these security and government officials are comfortable having private meetings in teahouses is a prime indicator that teahouses are a safe option for civil society development.

Furthermore, teahouses are distinct in their ability to promote civil society development due to their close ties to the local community. Teahouses in the region take on a charity-like role, enabling business-community improvement by giving to the community, allowing civil society organizations into their businesses, and occasionally giving money to these organizations to help improve the local environment. They play a unique role in civil society development by helping to fund various actors or groups who they view as a force to help improve the local environment. Thus, teahouses enhance the ongoing civil society building process in Central Asia, even in the light of increasingly hostile government actions towards these individuals and groups. The findings of this research are not specific only to the Ferghana Valley; instead, they can be more generally applied to the entireties of the countries that share the Ferghana Valley as teahouse culture is present in nearly all parts of these countries and provides the same level of protection and safety. It is imperative that these spaces are protected region-wide in order to provide for the further the development of civil society in Central Asia.

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**Part II**  
**Special Section—China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Curse or a Blessing for Democracy in Eurasia?**

# Chapter 16

## China's Belt and Road Initiative: Curse or Blessing for Democracy in Eurasia?



Anja Mihr and Brigitte Weiffen

### 16.1 Introduction

China's New Silk Road Initiative (the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) has been spinning its logistical and infrastructural web around the world since 2013. Massive infrastructural investments in railway tracks and roads, as well as in logistical centres and the agricultural and energy sectors, have been made in over 50 countries in Eurasia, spanning from China across Central Asia to Western Europe. We intentionally use the term "Eurasia" which, in line with Maçães (2018, p. 185), expresses a fundamental ambiguity: On the one hand, it might refer to a third continent carved out of the large landmass between Europe and Asia. On the other, it suggests the existence of a supercontinent encompassing Europe, Asia, and everything in between.

As the name change from the initial "One Belt, One Road" to "Belt and Road" suggests, what is being planned are in fact many belts, roads, corridors, and infrastructure projects. Though the initial focus of the BRI has been on China's immediate neighbourhood, Europe constitutes its final goal, as suggested by the reference to the Silk Road, the ancient trade network linking the Atlantic to the Pacific (Maçães, 2018, p. 135). The BRI is a central component of Chinese investment policies that have affected core public policy areas in over 100 countries in the world.

Almost a decade after the official launch of the BRI, this Special Section of this year's volume on Development and Transformation of the OSCE Region assesses the BRI's political implications. While the Initiative's focus is on infrastructure, trade, and finance—and is neutral with respect to the regime type of partner countries—it

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is plausible to assume that the BRI exerts an impact on those countries' political regimes, affecting autocracies and consolidated, weak, and failed democracies alike. BRI investments have triggered not only state responses, but also significant reactions from business, civil society, and other non-state actors. Beyond its impact on individual countries, the BRI is part of China's strategic quest to challenge Western influence, in particular the Western propagation of human rights and democracy as universal values that have shaped the liberal international order.

This and the subsequent ten chapters in this section discuss the effects that BRI investments have had, intentionally or not, on democratization or autocratization processes in recipient countries and societies, ranging from those in Europe to those in Central and South Asia. Focusing on the impact of the BRI on political dynamics, the chapters investigate to what extent political goals are embedded in the expansion of the BRI and how the governments of recipient countries respond to it. The authors look, for example, at how political regimes are affected by social movements, protests, entrepreneurship, and the rise of a new middle class in the countries where China's BRI is present and has led to significant infrastructure development.

The contributions to this special section are based on presentations at the international workshop "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Curse or Blessing for democracy in Eurasia?", organized by Research Committee 34 "Quality of Democracy" of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek from March 12–14, 2021 (see the detailed conference report by Yau, 2021).

This chapter sets the stage for the debates addressed in the special section. Starting out with a brief overview of the BRI and Chinese influence in Eurasia, it subsequently discusses core assumptions and preliminary findings regarding the BRI's impact on the political regime type of its partner countries. Furthermore, it gives an overview of the contributions to the special section, and outlines questions for future research.

## 16.2 The BRI and Chinese Influence in Eurasia

Upon his appointment as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, and as president in 2013, Xi Jinping invoked the Chinese dream of a "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" in relation to the political goals of "building a moderately prosperous society" by 2021, the year in which the CCP celebrated its centenary, and of turning China into a "modern country" by the time the People's Republic of China marks its own centennial in 2049 (Maçães, 2018, p. 125; Smith, 2021).

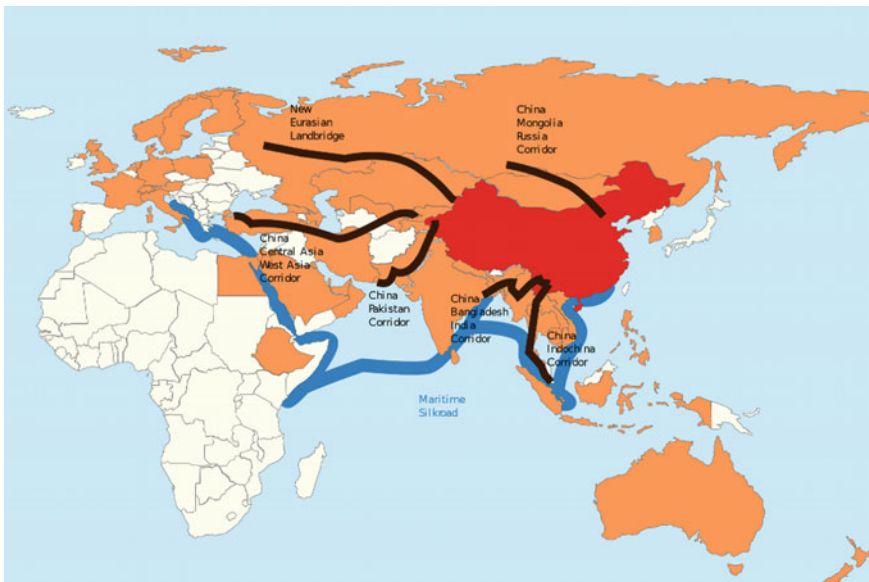
Announced in October 2013, the BRI is a massive project involving the funding and construction of a system of roads, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, fibre-optic and communication systems, ports, and airports—the model being the infrastructure efforts made by China as a key feature of its own rapid development strategy since the 1980s (Lairson, 2018). The BRI aims to consolidate and upgrade a dense network of bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTA) into a multilateral arrangement, anchored by China's gravitational pull and vast open market. The "belt" describes



the land connections such as railways and highways serving to export China's vast industrial outputs to Europe through Central Asia and Russia. In turn, the "road" refers to all maritime connections such as sea routes and ports and aims to connect China with Europe via the South China Sea (see Fig. 16.1). The Initiative was inaugurated in May 2017 during the Belt and Road Forum, which was attended by officials from 130 countries (Alon et al., 2018). According to the Green Belt and Road Initiative Center (2021), approximately 140 countries around the world have joined the initiative thus far.

China's influence in the Eurasian region can be interpreted through the lens of centre-periphery relations (Fong, 2021a; Reeves, 2018; Smith, 2021). Since the 18th Party Congress in 2012, China's relations with its smaller neighbours have taken on heightened importance in Beijing's overall diplomacy. China perceives these relations as important elements of the country's rise to "great power" status and the creation of a new, Sinocentric international order. The region is a crucial part of China's geopolitical strategy fitting with a more wide-ranging strategic goal of a "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" in the light of this new order (Reeves, 2018; Zhang, 2016).

In his 2017 work report to the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping identified China's peripheral relations as a necessary foundation for China's great power relations and a precondition for its broader global engagement (Reeves, 2018; Xi, 2017). In this mindset, China serves as the centre of East Asia and its surrounding jurisdictions from Hong Kong and Taiwan to the Indo-Pacific states serve as peripheries. The



**Fig. 16.1** Land and sea corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative (Source Lommes [<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:One-belt-one-road.svg>])

Chinese Party-state's centralized direct jurisdiction covers twenty-three provinces and the five autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, Ningxia, and Guangxi in mainland China. Outside the direct jurisdiction of the CCP, there are several concentric circles of peripheries, including Hong Kong (and Macau), Taiwan, and the states of the Indo-Pacific (Fong, 2021a).

Likewise, the BRI is designed according to a logic of concentric circles, in which China tends to prioritize states in its immediate vicinity over more remote ones. The Xi administration's definitive BRI policy statement, *Push Forward the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Economic Road's Common Vision and Operation*, issued in 2015, specifically indicates that the BRI's principal aim is to construct a 'five-path' approach to establish ties between China and its peripheral partner states' domestic political, trade, finance, and social institutions in order to achieve greater integration and mutual economic growth (see chapter 17 by Dana Rice).

The BRI focuses on Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. In the 2013–2021 period, Chinese investment, along the BRI, was concentrated in East Asia, encompassing Northeast and Southeast Asia (26,82%), and West Asia, including Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East (21,93%). Both macro-regions account for almost half (48,75%) of all Beijing's investments in the Initiative (Nedopil, 2022). China is expected to allocate US\$ 1.3 trillion for the BRI by 2027 and has already put around US\$ 200 billion into it (Chatzky & McBride, 2020).

In the context of the Initiative, Beijing regards Central Asia, above all Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, as a source of oil, natural gas, aluminium, cotton, and foodstuffs and, even more importantly, as the key land corridor connecting China to Europe via the Caucasus, Russia, and Ukraine. The region is expected to play an important role in China's strategy to reduce its reliance on sea transports which leave it vulnerable to piracy or a possible naval blockade in the event of a major crisis. In addition to physical infrastructure, China plans to build fifty special economic zones, one of the largest being Khorgos on the Kazakhstan-China border, the heartland of the BRI on the Eurasian continent. At the same time, South Asia is an important region for the BRI, where China's primary goal is to protect its national economic interests in the form of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), vital for imports and exports, and it aims to acquire territorial assets in the region in a policy of "active defence" (namely, against Indian and US forces), such as the Gwadar port in Pakistan.

One of the consequences of BRI is that China has been increasingly involved in the management of conflicts and wars in Eurasia, above all in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. More recently, in 2020 and in 2022, Chinese business and political envoys, led by the Chinese foreign ministry, were engaged in negotiations between the conflicting parties in the Ferghana Valley between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and in the Russian-Ukrainian war (see Chapter 26 by Mihr). These countries lie at geopolitically strategic crossroads for the success of the BRI, and hence regime stability is the Chinese government's priority on the Eurasian continent.

In Southeast Asia, the BRI's Maritime Silk Road plays a pivotal role in China's trade with Europe, as well as in energy and resource imports from the Middle East and Africa, since it crosses the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, which are

bitterly disputed between China and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. Despite these potential threats to the development of the BRI, China expects to maintain its clout in the region via the significant power disparity between it and its smaller neighbours (Emmerson, 2021).

China's economy is capitalist and unlike the former Soviet Union does not present a systemic alternative to capitalism, even though the CCP in its rhetoric still refers to itself as socialist. Since the late 1970s, China's economy has grown at an average rate of about 8 per cent per year, has dramatically developed in terms of infrastructure and average income and, as a consequence, has enabled the country to narrow the gap with the West. It is anticipated that by 2030 it will be the largest economy in the world (Chatzky & McBride, 2020).

### 16.3 Political Implications of the BRI

China's economic system is emphatically capitalist, and its state-led, authoritarian political system has arguably played a major role in integrating the Chinese economy into the global capitalist system. Many Western analysts believed that the country's economic transformation and increasing wealth would lead it towards greater democracy. Instead, it has become less free and more autocratic over the past decade and has never promoted democratic institution building or the rule of law inside or outside of its territory.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2021, China has a total score of 2.21 (on a 0 to 10 scale), down from 2.97 in 2006, and sits at rank 148 (out of 167), close to the bottom of the global rankings. The country has a score of 0.00 for *electoral process and pluralism*, the lowest possible on the scale (EIU, 2022). The CCP does not allow for free elections, universal suffrage, or a multiparty system, and does not grant the people civil liberties. There is no freedom of expression; no free print, broadcast, or social media, and there are restrictions on the internet. Free trade unions, an independent judiciary, and equality before the law do not exist either. The state does not practice religious tolerance and routinely uses torture (EIU, 2022).

For a long time, external observers assumed that China pursued a pragmatic and regime-neutral approach in the conduct of its foreign policy, seeking to maintain good relations with any country where China had diplomatic, security, or business interests, regardless of regime type. As of the early 2010s, China displayed no missionary impulse to promote authoritarianism—"for now, at least" (Nathan, 2015, p. 158). Yet, while Beijing showed no signs of promoting autocracy in a strict sense, the way it protected its own regime from challenges at home and abroad has had a negative impact on the fate of democracy. China has indirectly supported autocracies, in particular in its periphery, and encouraged autocratic regimes elsewhere by the power of its example, showcasing that democracy is not a prerequisite for economic development (Bader & Hackenesch, 2021; Fong, 2021b; Nathan, 2015; Wu, 2021).

While China's pragmatism and willingness to cooperate with any type of political regime as long as it benefits its economic interest might have been an adequate assessment in the 2000s and early 2010s, things have gradually changed since Xi Jinping came to power. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has started to make the claim that its political and cultural influence should grow in proportion to its economic rise and the expansion of its trade links to the rest of the world. Xi's more assertive foreign policy challenges the dominance of the West in the global order, and the BRI is an important component of this grand strategy (see chapter 25 by Mandelbaum and Weiffen). With the BRI, the Chinese government intends to transform the image of the country—from a willing participant to a “mover and shaker” of the global economy.

To escape a situation in which China has frequently found itself a “political island” in a liberal international order that it did not create, the country wants to offer the outside world, starting with its periphery in Southeast and Central Asia, its own vision of a universal culture and universal values that rival the universal values of human rights and democracy proclaimed by the West (Maçães, 2018, p. 136). Hence, China is actively seeking to formulate values that can appeal to every human being: some version of development and well-being that can be readily understood and assimilated by every nation on the planet in a way that democracy and human rights cannot (Maçães, 2018, p. 52).

A White Paper titled “Democracy that Works,” published by the CCP in December 2021, re-defined the notion of democracy in Chinese terms, highlighting that state-led prosperity for all under state control is the goal of its activities, including the BRI. In this paper, China characterizes itself as a “socialist country governed by a people's democratic dictatorship,” where “dictatorship” ensures “the people's status as masters of the country” and hence serves democracy (PRC, 2021). From a Chinese perspective, the Western-style electoral systems are based on party competition which produces inferior leaders, time-wasting deliberation, and a lot of gridlocks. The main claim of the Chinese system's advantages over its Western counterpart—that it facilitates fast and efficient decision-making as well as long-term planning to maximize economic returns, stability, and security—depends on the elimination of any mechanism of democratic accountability.

A look at the history of the ancient Silk Road suggests that its extensive network of routes and hubs not only accelerated the exchange of commercial and technological goods, but that it also facilitated the movement of people, cross-cultural dialogues, and the diffusion of ideas and customs (Bryant & Chou, 2016). While China may currently not embrace autocracy promotion as an explicit foreign policy goal, its broad-ranging economic, political, and cultural initiatives along its New Silk Road will likely influence how foreign governments and everyday people think and act. In fact, the spill-over from infrastructure and trade into politics, culture, and security are not a bug in the project, but its most fundamental feature.

Western analysts are therefore concerned that, as its power grows, China will seek to remake the world in its authoritarian image (e.g. EIU, 2022). In fact, the 2021 EIU Democracy Index reported a record decline in democracy, with less than half (45.7%) of the world's population now living in a democracy of some sort. Even fewer, less

than 7% of world's population, reside in a full and consolidated democracy, most of them in Western Europe. The number of "full democracies" fell to 21 in 2021 and the number of "flawed democracies" increased to 53. Of the remaining 93 countries included in the index, 59 are "authoritarian regimes," up from 57 in 2020, and 34 are classified as "hybrid regimes," down from 35 in 2020 (EIU, 2022). Substantially more than a third of the world's population live under authoritarian rule, with a large share living in China and along the New Silk Road in Eurasia.

Despite this, we still know little about the impact of the BRI on political regime transformation, and about whether and how—despite its economic achievements which have given millions of people a higher income, qualifications, and socioeconomic prospects—it may act as a curse or a blessing for democracy. It is these open questions and the signs of change that this book section aims to illuminate.

## 16.4 Outline of the Special Section

This special section explores the key question of whether and to what extent the BRI is a curse or blessing for building and maintaining democratic institutions. It aims to contribute to the burgeoning debate about the BRI's effect on democratic institutions based on the assumption that the BRI is affecting autocracies and strong, weak, and failed democracies alike.

In their chapters, contributors elaborate on the impact that the BRI has had on democratization or autocratization processes in the countries and societies that China has invested in. They reflect on the BRI's intentional and unintentional, direct and indirect impacts on core elements of democratic governance and democratic political culture, such as free and fair elections, political rights and civil liberties, an independent judiciary, the role of the military in politics, accountability and control of corruption, citizen participation, and civil society.

The section aims to incentivize a debate on this topic through a collection of ten chapters that present the state of research on the impact of the BRI on democracy/autocracy in Eurasia. Rather than in-depth research papers, we invited authors to write shorter pieces on their respective topics, where they identify key aspects related to democratic institutions, different (and often ambiguous and contested) meanings of democratization and the quality of democracy, and outline possible debates.

This book section is structured as follows: Chapters 17, 18 and 19 provide insights and building blocks for the debate. Dana Rice's contribution in Chapter 17 gives an overview of the BRI, examining the main investments, strategies, and controversies over the past decade. In Chapter 18, Heike Holbig explores official visions of democracy in Xi Jinping's China, showing how the idea of a "Chinese-style democracy" has developed over time and might gain traction in other non-democratic regimes in Eurasia. In turn, Edward Schatz's discussion of varieties of authoritarianism in Eurasia in Chapter 19 puts the BRI's role into perspective, arguing that the push for authoritarianism in the region may have less to do with China than with broader global trends.

Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23 study specific examples and cases. In Chapter 20, Artem Dankov looks at the BRI's contribution to sustainable urban development in Central Asia, cautioning that major cities are also focal points for ethnic and social conflict which can threaten regime stability in the region. Ilya Jones's contribution in Chapter 21 explores the ambiguous effects of the BRI on conflict dynamics in Kyrgyzstan, where Chinese investments have been met with public scepticism. In Chapter 22, Yurii Poita analyses the opportunities and risks of the BRI for Ukraine (before the Russian attack on the country in February 2022), pointing to a number of geopolitical and security challenges as well as the risk of an indirect impact of the BRI on democracy in Ukraine. The study by Gul-i-Hina Shahzad-van der Zwan in Chapter 23 investigates how and to what extent Chinese engagement under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has contributed to de-democratization in Pakistan vis-à-vis domestically driven changes.

Finally, Chapters 24, 25 and 26 consider the consequences of the BRI for democratic regimes on a more general level. Marketa Jerabek conducted a statistical analysis of the BRI's impact on human rights and democracy and reports the results in Chapter 24. In Chapter 25, Henoch Gabriel Mandelbaum and Brigitte Weiffen explore how different varieties of autocracy promotion, broadly understood, are part and parcel of China's grand strategy and reflect on the role of the BRI in this context. Anja Mihr's contribution in Chapter 26 reflects on the response by the European Union and Central Asian countries to the emerging influence of China on the countries across the Eurasian continent.

## 16.5 Conclusion: Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the various contributions, we can draw conclusions and derive some suggestions for further research. With the BRI being a flexible inter-governmental project in the field of economic investment and logistical connectivity, many governments in Eurasia regard participation in the BRI as more of a "marriage of convenience" and less of a trigger for political transformation. Nevertheless, depending on the level of investment and involvement, the way China deploys and governs its BRI is likely to affect how governments and citizens in partner countries think and act, and how they respond to China's aims to reshape the international political order. It seems that the BRI has become both a curse and a blessing for political regimes and civil society along the "New Silk Road." Future research should therefore try to disentangle the contradictory and ambiguous consequences of the BRI.

On the economic level, massive BRI investment has brought unprecedented development and infrastructural progress for the benefit of whole societies and has facilitated new instances of transnational cooperation, start-ups, and economic regulations. However, these investments have also increased dependence on China, led to the exploitation of natural resources, and have provided fertile ground for organized crime and local warlords to benefit from trafficking and illicit activities.

On the political level, as China prioritizes political stability in the countries it invests in, the BRI has, intentionally or not, frequently strengthened autocratic regimes, and encouraged would-be autocrats and authoritarian practices in its democratic partner countries in Europe and elsewhere. For example, Chinese influence has infringed on labour standards and levels of transparency. In contrast, in Eurasia in particular, the BRI has also contributed to the emergence of a new, interconnected civil society that feels encouraged to protest against their own, opaque, and corrupt governments when they are collaborating with the autocratic regime in Beijing. Across Eurasia, one can identify the rise of protest movements and local authorities who have voiced their concerns vis-à-vis political practices related to BRI investments. China's BRI has thus triggered resistance among civil society and governments, contributing to a sometimes modest, sometimes violent, regime transformation in the region, both in autocratic and in democratic terms.

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# Chapter 17

## An Overview of China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Development Since 2013



Dana Rice

### 17.1 Introduction: What is BRI?

In September 2013, during a speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke of the need to “forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region.” This, he told the audience of staff and students, should be accomplished through a new “economic belt along the Silk Road.” A month later, in Jakarta, he expanded on these ideas and proposed an international “maritime partnership in a joint effort to build the Maritime Silk Road of the twenty-first century” (Xi, 2013b). Together, the land-based economic belt and the Maritime Silk Road became known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>1</sup>

Eight years on from Xi's initial announcement of the multi-trillion-dollar initiative, approximately 140 nations have signed on as partners.<sup>2</sup> The BRI has become a buzzword in the media and among academics alike. Too often, however, discussion of the BRI lacks serious analysis, falling instead into the exoticising discourse of the Silk Road imaginary which China itself promotes.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally known as One Belt, One Road, or OBOR. In English-language media, OBOR was later rebranded as the Belt and Road Initiative, which Chinese authorities felt better highlighted the inclusivity of the project. In other languages, however, the name has not changed. Across the Russian-speaking world, for instance, the initiative continues to be referred to as *один пояс, один путь* (One Belt, One Road).

<sup>2</sup> The Council on Foreign Relations offers a relatively comprehensive list of these countries and the years they joined (see Sacks, 2021). However, as Sacks notes, even numbering BRI participants can become a surprisingly complex task given that varying levels of participation exist. There are also cases where states within a country have signed on to the BRI independently of the federal government (e.g. the Australian state of Victoria).

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According to Xi, the seed for the modern-day Belt and Road Initiative was planted in a distant, almost mythical past. Cultivated in his listeners' imaginations through florid language and pithy proverbs, Xi's discourse of a shared Eurasian history is one populated by heroic emissaries, legendary explorers, and fabled traders with their caravans and "camel bells echoing through the mountains" (Xi, 2013a). This was the world of such illustrious travellers as Zhang Qian—the Chinese envoy whose "journeys opened the door to friendly contacts ... [between] Asia and Europe"—and Zheng He—the renowned Ming Dynasty navigator who made seven voyages to the Western Seas (Xi, 2013a). It was a world of openness and inclusivity, where the ancient silk routes connected "the birthplaces of the Egyptian, Babylonian, Indian, and Chinese civilisations, as well as the lands of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam" (Xi, 2017). It was a world where mutual learning flourished alongside this trade, where Confucianism and papermaking travelled west beside porcelain and iron-work, and where astronomy and medicine came eastward together with spices and pomegranates.

But what does reviving the old Silk Road mean in practice? And what does China hope to achieve? This chapter aims to provide a brief but critical overview of the BRI's evolution in Eurasia (including Central Asia, Eastern/Central Europe, and the European Union). The chapter begins by examining BRI's coordination and funding mechanisms. The sections which follow explore the official aims of the BRI and the development of the various geographic corridors and thematic strands by looking at specific project examples. The chapter ends with a review of the key debates and criticisms surrounding the BRI, including concerns about China's loan practices and geopolitical objectives.

## 17.2 Coordination and Funding of the BRI

The "Belt and Road Leading Group" in China's Politburo is the highest coordinating body for the BRI. However, the many individual agencies and institutions involved in different aspects of the BRI can make it difficult to understand who is overseeing what. Furthermore, the Chinese government does not publicly provide a list of all the projects which constitute the BRI or a list of companies officially affiliated with the initiative. As such, many individual Chinese companies and businesses working overseas seem to identify as part of the BRI when it suits them. Even in non-BRI signatory states, many Chinese projects still emulate the characteristics of the BRI. This lack of clarity further compounds public misconceptions around the initiative. However, to better understand the BRI, three key points should be emphasised.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These points build on several articles written by Raffaello Pantucci, Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore and Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London. Pantucci lists three misconceptions which inhibit politicians and researchers' understanding of the BRI in Central Asia: (1) BRI is not a monolith (each strand is different and at different stages of development, etc.); (2) the BRI is not a giant aid project; and (3) the BRI has a long timeline (See, for instance, Pantucci, 2017).

Firstly, the BRI is not a giant aid project, nor has the Chinese government ever professed it to be. Secondly, the BRI is not one project or even a series of projects but a grand vision (or even a “grand strategy”) building towards 2049, the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Revolution. Third, and finally, numerous projects under the BRI began long before the BRI was announced, and some were already complete prior to the launch.

In conjunction with the BRI's launch, China led the establishment of two new multilateral development banks: the New Development Bank (aka the BRICS Bank, founded in 2014 by the BRICS countries with an authorised capital of \$100 billion USD)<sup>4</sup> and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (created in 2015 with 57 founding members and an initial capital of \$100 billion USD). With significant experience in major infrastructure projects within China and overseas, China's three policy banks<sup>5</sup> have also played an important role in financing Chinese companies involved in BRI projects, as well as the Silk Road Fund, a sovereign wealth fund established in 2014 (Standard Chartered, 2018).

China's state-owned enterprises often operate in consortiums with sovereign wealth funds in financing BRI projects. COSCO Shipping, China Merchants Port Holdings, and China Overseas Port Holding Company are major players in the acquisition and management of ports such as Gwadar, Hambantota, Djibouti, and Piraeus. Likewise, oil and gas field development and pipeline construction under the BRI is managed by the China National Petroleum Corporation, China National Offshore Oil Corporation, and other state-owned enterprises. With relatively little private investment in the BRI, decisions by sovereign wealth funds and state-owned enterprises are often seen as “intertwined with geopolitical objectives” (Sejko, 2017; see also Kenderdine and Han, 2018 for a more extensive treatment of this dynamic).

### 17.3 Official Aims of the BRI

While the BRI has received significant media attention since Xi's 2013 speech, it was not until two years later that the initiative's aims were officially laid out in writing. In a paper issued by China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in 2015, five cooperation priorities were presented, with the first being policy coordination. In short, policy coordination refers to the “soft connectivity” that makes concrete infrastructure projects under the BRI possible. Policy coordination means synergising China's BRI with the development plans of other countries—e.g. Russia's “Greater Eurasian Partnership,” Turkey's “Middle Corridor,” and Kazakhstan's “Bright Road” initiative—as well as integrating the BRI with various multilateral visions such as the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (see Belt & Road Forum, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> BRICS is a multilateral grouping representing Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

<sup>5</sup> “Policy banks” here refers to the three banks established by the State Council of China in 1994 to implement the government's economic policies: the Export–Import Bank of China (Exim), the Agricultural Development Bank of China (ADBC), and China Development Bank (CDB).

The second BRI cooperation goal is facility connectivity. This priority area promotes the creation of “an infrastructure network connecting all sub-regions in Asia, and between Asia, Europe, and Africa,” which should, at the same time, offer green and low-carbon solutions to connectivity (NDRC et al., 2015). For the BRI, this connectivity is both physical—roads, railroads, seaports, airports, oil and gas pipelines, transcontinental submarine optical cables—and, increasingly, digital.

In the process of improving connectivity, the BRI’s third stated aim is to facilitate unimpeded trade. In practice, this aim means pursuing free trade agreements; creating special economic zones; enhancing “customs cooperation such as information exchange, mutual recognition of regulations, and mutual assistance in law enforcement”; and reducing non-tariff barriers to trade (NDRC et al., 2015).

The pursuit of unimpeded trade is underpinned by the fourth aim: financial integration. The NDRC (2015) provided a long list of aspects required to achieve this fourth priority, including establishing new institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and BRICS New Development Bank, and internationalising the renminbi.<sup>6</sup>

The fifth and final aim of BRI is to strengthen people-to-people bonds. As Xi (2013a) noted in his Nazarbayev University speech, “amity between the people holds the key to good relations between states.” The Chinese government realises that attracting the general population to Chinese culture and values is integral to the success of BRI, and China is therefore devoting significant resources to the soft power aspects of the initiative.

## 17.4 BRI Corridors and Strands

Early rhetoric by the Chinese government envisioned BRI projects as existing within six overland corridors which merge with key ports along the Maritime Silk Road. These six corridors include (1) The New Eurasian Land Bridge, (2) China–Central Asia–West Asia, (3) China–Mongolia–Russia, (4) China–Pakistan, (5) China–Indochina Peninsula, and (6) Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar. Given that the focus of this edited volume is on the OSCE member states, this section will concentrate on the first two of these corridors.

The **New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor** is vital for the success of the BRI because the Chinese government aims to increase facility connectivity between the industrial centres in China and the main harbours and logistical centres in Europe, such as Greece, Poland, Germany, and the United Kingdom. At the heart of this route is the cross-continental railway that connects China to Western Europe via Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, and Poland. By modernising the existing rail infrastructure, this corridor offers a faster alternative to container ship transport and promises

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<sup>6</sup> The *renminbi* (RMB) is the official currency of China, the basic unit of which is known as the  *yuan*. In practical terms, internationalising the renminbi refers to China’s long-term goal of the RMB becoming a reserve currency, minimising Chinese currency risk (see Lai, 2015).

to invigorate the landlocked economies of Central Asia in addition to important European dry ports like Germany's Duisburg.

Another vital part of this corridor is the Western China—Western Europe Highway, or “Meridian Highway,” which likewise travels through Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus. When completed, the Meridian Highway would allow trucks to travel across the continent in just eleven days, compared to fifteen days by rail or thirty to fifty days by sea. Linked to the aim of policy coordination, the Meridian Highway has been promoted as one of the BRI's thirty-nine cooperation projects with the Eurasian Economic Union (see Clarke & Rice, 2020).<sup>7</sup> However, while construction of the Kazakhstan segment began back in 2009 (long before both the Eurasian Economic Union and BRI came into existence), the segment through Russia has been stalled for years, with a proposed routing only decided in 2019.

To streamline and optimise global trade (see Aim 3), this corridor also is supported by Chinese investments in key ports, special economic zones, and industrial parks. Situated at one of the main railway crossings between Kazakhstan and China, the Khorgos Special Economic Zone and dry port is an often promoted project—though personal fieldwork suggests that Khorgos is far from the “new Dubai” various media outlets have touted it to be (see Rice, 2020). On the European side, China state-owned COSCO Shipping—the world's largest shipping company—has controlling stakes in the ports of Piraeus, Valencia, Bilbao, and Zeebrugge, as well as minority stakes in Antwerp, Las Palmas, and Rotterdam.

The New Eurasian Land Bridge is closely connected to the **China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor**, which likewise aims to reduce Chinese reliance on maritime routes through the Malacca Strait. Unlike the more northerly New Eurasian Land Bridge, however, this corridor focuses on the southern route linking China to Europe via the Central Asian republics, Iran, the Caucasian republics, Turkey, and the Balkan states (i.e. bypassing Russia). Other strategically important projects in this hydrocarbon-rich region are the Kazakhstan–China oil pipeline and the Central Asia–China gas pipeline. In addition to energy, the Chinese government has again placed emphasis on road and railroad connectivity in this corridor. Many key national and regional projects, such as the Centre–West road in Kazakhstan (\$1.1 billion USD total cost) and the Angren–Pap electrified railway in Uzbekistan (\$1.9 billion USD total cost), have been branded as BRI projects at one stage or another and have received financing from Chinese policy banks and/or other BRI-related funding mechanisms.<sup>8</sup> In November 2019, China Railways Express took its maiden voyage from Xi'an, China (advertised by the Chinese government as the symbolic starting point of the historical Silk Road), to Europe through Istanbul's Marmaray undersea tunnel, cutting travel time by eighteen days compared to cargo ship and demonstrating the potential of these overland transport routes (Hatipoglu & Gokmen, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> As of 2021, the Eurasian Economic Union comprises member states Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>8</sup> For a more comprehensive list of BRI road and railroad projects in the Central Asian republics, see Aminjonov et al. (2019).

However, whether these rail routes, which are sometimes referred to in BRI discourse as the **Iron Silk Road**, have lived up to their political and media hype is another matter. Kenderdine and Bucsky (2021), for instance, point out that the volume of rail freight traffic between China and Europe reported by the European Union falls far below that claimed by China. Nevertheless, the railway is strategically important in offering China an alternative to Malacca—the narrow strait between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra through which much of China’s trade transits. Addressing this potential chokepoint (sometimes referred to as the “Malacca Dilemma”) is even more crucial given that most of China’s energy imports currently pass through the strait.

In recent years, the focus of the BRI seems to be shifting away from specific geographically based corridors and more towards global thematic strands, including the “Human,” “Green,” “Health,” and “Digital” Silk Roads. As such, it is also useful to explore how these different strands have developed in practice and look at a few project examples in Eurasia.

As discussed in the section on BRI priorities, the Chinese government acknowledges that popular support is a key factor in the overall success of the initiative; the **Human Silk Road** therefore plays an important role in developing these people-to-people ties and cultivating positive perceptions of China. Sometimes referred to as the Cultural Silk Road, this strand of the BRI now incorporates the Confucius Institute programme—Chinese government-sponsored centres for Mandarin language and Chinese cultural studies which were first introduced in 2004. As of 2019, there were 548 Confucius Institutes and 1193 Confucius Classrooms operating worldwide. In addition, the Chinese government offers thousands of scholarships for foreign students to study in China, with many intended for those from BRI countries. The Chinese government also sponsors various festivals, forums, international performances, and other events under the BRI—such as the 2020 Silk Road Week—which are aimed at further strengthening cultural ties.

Building on the idea of “socialist ecological civilisation” which was incorporated into the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, the **Green Silk Road** is one more way China is attempting to cultivate positive public opinion. As governments increasingly struggle to ignore the loud segments of society calling for climate change to be addressed, China aims to transform its image from one of the world’s worst industrial polluters to that of an environmentally friendly change-maker. At the First Belt and Road Forum in 2017, Xi urged the BRI signatories to “pursue the new vision of green development and a way of life and work that is green, low-carbon, circular and sustainable” in line with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Chinese government encourages renewable BRI projects through several mechanisms, including the issuing of so-called “green bonds” and “green loans” by Chinese policy banks. In addition, the Green Silk Road Fund was launched in 2015; this venture is unique among BRI investment funds because it is predominantly led by Chinese private entrepreneurs rather than the state. Notable examples of green projects connected with the BRI include the German Meerwind offshore windfarm (in which the Chinese state-owned Three Gorges Group holds an 80% stake) and the Kaposvár 100 MW Photovoltaic Power Plant (Hungary’s largest

solar power station, constructed by the China National Machinery Import and Export Corporation).

The **Health Silk Road** strand of the BRI was first mentioned in 2017 when Xi signed a memorandum of understanding with the World Health Organisation, promising to make health a priority of the BRI. This rhetorical extension of the BRI received little attention prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, since the start of 2020, the Chinese government and Chinese companies, often under the auspices of the BRI, have donated (and sold) personal protective equipment and other key medical supplies—which later included China-manufactured vaccines—around the world. It remains to be seen whether these efforts have been enough to deflect from the negative global attention China has received surrounding the origins of the virus.

Like the Health Silk Road, the **Digital Silk Road** (DSR, also referred to as the Cyber Silk Road) has taken on renewed importance in the wake of COVID-19. Announced in 2015, the DSR has a vague mandate, much like the other BRI strands. The Council on Foreign Relations has described DSR-related investments as helping to meet a need in developing countries across the world for cheap, high-quality resources in “telecommunications networks, artificial intelligence capabilities, cloud computing, e-commerce and mobile payment systems, surveillance technology, smart cities, and other high-tech areas.” Some democracies, however, have raised concerns that China's DSR may lead BRI countries to adopt China's own “model of technology-enabled authoritarianism” (Council on Foreign Relations). In 2019, for instance, Chinese company Hikvision supplied Kazakhstan with the same facial recognition technology that China openly uses to track minorities in Xinjiang (Jardine, 2019).

## 17.5 Controversies Around the BRI

The development of the BRI has received mixed reactions from foreign governments, academics, and local people. Claims of so-called “debt-trap diplomacy” are commonly levelled against China by its critics. The term “debt-trap diplomacy” was first promoted by Indian geostrategist Brahma Chellaney in early 2017. Chellaney (2017) raised concerns about the lack of transparency around China's loan conditions, arguing that China is offering excessive credit with the intention of extracting economic or political concessions when the debtor country is not able to repay the debt. Parker and Chefitz (2018, p. 1) identified three primary strategic goals behind this technique. These include “filling out a ‘String of Pearls’<sup>9</sup> to solve its ‘Malacca Dilemma’ and project power across vital South Asian trading routes; undermining and fracturing the U.S.-led regional coalition contesting Beijing's South China Sea

<sup>9</sup> The so-called “string of pearls” hypothesis suggests that China is developing a line of commercial and military facilities from its eastern seaboard to the Horn of Africa, which China could use in controlling key maritime chokepoints as well as in cutting off India.



(SCS); and enabling the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to push through the 'Second Island Chain' into the blue-water Pacific."

The Hambantota port, which has become a major BRI project in Sri Lanka, is often cited as an example of these debt-trap diplomacy tactics. During the final years of the Sri Lankan civil war in the mid-2000s, China stepped in and offered funding to develop Hambantota (Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa's hometown) when no other country or international organisation would. However, rather than coming in as foreign direct investment, the project was "financed by Chinese loans and built by a Chinese company with Sri Lanka's government on the hook for the project's debt obligations" (Parker & Chefitz, 2018, p. 9). When the initial project failed to generate profits for the Sri Lankan government, new Chinese loans were signed to further develop Hambantota, reaching a total of more than \$8 billion by 2017. Unable to repay this debt, Sri Lanka granted China a 99-year lease on the port and tax concessions for Hambantota's further development.

Similar debt-for-infrastructure deals have taken place across the participatory states of the BRI.<sup>10</sup> With COVID-19 taking a toll on the world economy, BRI signatories like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which were already in significant debt to China prior to the pandemic, are struggling further with repayments (see van der Kley, 2020). Although a Boston University data set gained significant attention in 2020 for suggesting a steep decline in Chinese policy bank lending to BRI economies, Kenderdine and Yau (2020) refute this claim and argue that policy banks are continuing to lend large amounts, just in a different manner than before.

In addition to debt concerns, it has become increasingly evident that there are political conditions attached to cooperating with China, despite China's claim to be offering "no strings attached" loans. One condition is the recognition of the One China Policy. There also appears to be a tacit "no questions asked" rule over the mass internment of Muslim minorities (including ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz) in camps in China's Xinjiang region. China has claimed these are "re-education facilities" for radical Islamists, most of whom have now "graduated" (BBC, 2019); critics, like the outspoken Adrian Zenz, claim these are concentration camps where "genocide" is taking place (Zenz, 2021). When, in October 2021, a joint UN statement by 43 states criticised this mass detention and called for immediate investigation, many BRI countries either remained silent or signed a counterstatement praising China's treatment of minorities in Xinjiang (Aljazeera, 2021).<sup>11</sup>

In Europe, where around 18 EU countries have signed bilateral agreements with China under the BRI, some states are now raising concerns over cooperating with an autocracy. In 2021, Lithuania, which a few years previous had signed a memorandum of understanding on the BRI, left the 17 + 1 bloc between China and Eastern/Central Europe due to worsening relations (Lau, 2021). More recently, Lithuania's decision to allow for the establishment of Taiwan's first representative office in Europe prompted

<sup>10</sup> For a rebuttal to the "debt-trap diplomacy" argument, see Brautigam and Rithmire (2021).

<sup>11</sup> 2021 is the third consecutive year in which a UN statement and counterstatement on the Xinjiang issue have been released.



a diplomatic row which ended in China and Lithuania recalling their respective ambassadors (Reuters, 2021).

Fears about Chinese expansionism are widespread through the Eurasian region, especially in the Central Asian countries which border China. Despite strict protest laws in most of Central Asia, numerous demonstrations against Chinese investments have taken place in recent years. In Kazakhstan, the largest rallies occurred in 2016 in response to a Land Code change which would have allowed Chinese and other foreign companies to lease Kazakh agricultural land for up to 25 years at a time (the Kazakh government eventually backed down on this). The Xinjiang issue also plays a significant role in perceptions of China in the region, given that many Kazakhs and Kyrgyz have familial ties to Xinjiang, particularly to Ili and Kizilsu prefectures.

Ecological degradation by Chinese firms has been another rallying point for protesters. While grand visions of a Green Silk Road leading to “ecological civilisation” may be espoused in Xi’s speeches, the reality is that China has funded numerous BRI coal projects right alongside the renewable ones which it so widely promotes. The BRI is also closely connected with China’s policy of external industrial transfer and, in practice, this policy has meant moving some of the most polluting industries—such as cement production—to neighbouring regions like Central Asia (see van der Kley, 2016).

Even in Pakistan, China’s so-called “Iron Brother” and staunchest ally in the South/Central Asia region, popular backlash has been strong. In August 2021, demonstrations in the coastal city of Gwadar—a key node in the BRI—forced port operations to temporarily shut down. While largely peaceful, the August protests came in the wake of a suicide bombing targeting Chinese nationals in Pakistan and another attack targeting China’s ambassador to the country (Baloch, 2021). Xi Jinping and Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan may have committed to fighting any threats to their ironclad friendship (Dawn, 2021); however, as China has witnessed in Pakistan and other countries, the biggest challenge to the BRI may not be external threats but internal perceptions.

## 17.6 Conclusion: The Future of the BRI?

Chinese President Xi Jinping’s vision of reviving the ancient Silk Road has come a long way since 2013. On the eve of its 10th anniversary, the BRI has grown from its roots in a Kazakh university speech to a worldwide initiative encompassing 40% of global GDP and 63% of the world’s population. The branches of the BRI reach from Xi’an to Tripoli and Vladivostok to Lisbon. In the process of building the BRI, China has further established its image as a global superpower, the CCP has better secured its strategic backyard, and Chinese companies have gained dollars (or, rather, renminbi). To quote a Chinese proverb, “if you want to get rich, build roads.” Xi has certainly done just that.

However, Xi Jinping’s initiative of the century has also faced significant backlash from critics. “Debt-trap diplomacy,” political conditions, ecological degradation, and

other issues have sown doubts over China's intentions and soiled the BRI's reputation for some. The apparent attractiveness of the Chinese development model has allowed the Belt and Road to expand to this point; however, whether it will remain attractive will depend on the extent to which BRI projects can deliver economic benefits to the citizens of participating countries in the coming years.

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# Chapter 18

## Official Visions of Democracy in Xi Jinping's China



Heike Holbig

### 18.1 Introduction

The Chinese communist party regime (Chinese Communist Party, CCP) is widely reckoned as the antithesis of liberal democracy, with the latter defined by open, free, and fair elections. Democracy in China thus appears to most outside observers as an oxymoron, a contradiction in and of itself. Yet, within the country, the party-state has consistently been framed by its leaders and in the mass media as a democratic political system, employing multiple visions of democracy with and without adjectives. Against this backdrop, the objective of this chapter is to analyse the self-perceptions and worldviews of China as a major global power and an increasingly important actor in Eurasia; it is *not to normatively* evaluate Chinese democracy, or to euphemise official attempts of political self-legitimation. To put it differently, the focus is not on Democracy with a capital letter as political scientists usually apply it when they discuss democracy in Western countries, or when they deplore the backsliding of democracy across the globe. Rather, the focus is on using a context-sensitive approach to explore processes of experimentation, adaptation, localization, and reinterpretation of the notion of democracy with a lowercase d, that is, as a signifier open to multiple construals by all kinds of actors, and with all kinds of motivations. When Chinese discourses about “democracy” are quoted or paraphrased in the chapter, the intention is not to spread the word but to offer a better sense of the internal logics of justification as well as of the changing tonalities in party discourse. In the framework of the debate around the impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative on political regimes in Eurasia, this chapter starts from an empirical point of view, taking into account the scepticism that some readers might feel when reading about China’s democratic self-adulations.

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The chapter will proceed as follows. To set the scene, Western perceptions of China's political system articulated in recent years are outlined. Against this backdrop of outside images, we will delve into the official self-images of Chinese democracy as propagated by the CCP. While the period before Xi Jinping is sketched only roughly, a more detailed analysis is offered of the period since late 2012 when Xi Jinping succeeded Hu Jintao as China's paramount leader. Five examples of the use of democracy in party language are selected to illustrate the changes in the official visions of the notion of democracy under Xi Jinping. The conclusion offers some reflections about the importance of understanding Chinese visions of democracy and the potential implications these might have for the international realm.

## 18.2 Western Perceptions of China's Political System

Western political science is unequivocal about China's political system being a textbook example of an autocracy. This is true for democracy indices such as Polity IV, Freedom in the World, the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Index. These indices have consistently ranked post-Mao China as an "autocracy," "not free," an "authoritarian regime," or a "closed autocracy" respectively. In 2016, Francis Fukuyama—author of the 1989 essay "The End of History"—pondered that "China is a real test case. It is the only alternative to a liberal, capitalist democracy. The country is technically and economically advanced—but it pursues modernization without democracy" (Die Zeit, 2016, author's translation).

From the perspective of political practitioners in the West, China is not only an autocracy, but one that increasingly and proactively challenges liberal democracies. Back in 2007, a German member of parliament described China's combination of a "modern authoritarian" political system with a "capitalist" economic system as one of the biggest strategic challenges for Europe (Von Klaeden, 2007, author's translation). Twelve years later, in March 2019, the European Union labelled China "a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance" in its watershed "Strategic Outlook" on EU-China Relations (European Commission, 2019).

In the United States, shortly before the 2020 elections, Robert O'Brien, Trump's National Security Adviser, argued in a *Foreign Affairs* article, "For decades, conventional wisdom in the United States held that it was only a matter of time before China would become more liberal, first economically and then politically. We could not have been more wrong—a miscalculation that stands as the greatest failure of U.S. foreign policy since the 1930s [...]. Today, [...] the CCP's ideological agenda extends far beyond the country's borders and represents a threat to the idea of democracy itself" (O'Brien, 2020).

In the same magazine, as part of his own electoral campaign, Joseph Biden called China "a special challenge [...]. China is playing the long game by extending its global reach, [and] promoting its own political model." To meet that challenge, he called for a "united front of U.S. allies and partners," and he envisaged holding a

“Summit for Democracy,” “to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world” (Biden, 2020).

As we can see from these quotes—and the many others on offer—China is not merely seen as one non-democratic regime among others. Rather, it has increasingly been pitted against the liberal democracies of the West and as the Number One challenge to “the idea of democracy itself” (O’Brien, 2020).

### 18.3 Official Self-Images of China's Political System Before Xi Jinping

These signals of “othering China” have not gone unheard in Beijing, and the party-state leadership has not hesitated to take up the challenge. In fact, China's political system had been framed as a democracy for a while. This has made it easier for party propaganda under Xi Jinping to stylize China as the world's largest democracy—and as a more genuine and more effective form of democracy than the liberal democracies of the West.

The term “democracy” (*minzhu*) has not once been considered an alien concept since the founding of the CCP a century ago. As part of the vocabulary of Europe's “long nineteenth century,” the term democracy had been adapted into the Chinese language via Japanese around 1900. In the social-Darwinist worldview of the time, it denoted the quintessential modern, civilized, and sovereign nation-state, with all the prerequisites necessary for a body politic in the survival of the fittest (Amelung & Holbig, 2016). “Democracy” also had a positive connotation in Mao Zedong's historical treatises on “new democracy” in the 1940s as the signifier of his strategy to co-opt social elites who fought for national emancipation alongside the CCP. The “People's Republic of China,” founded in October 1949, was based on the Leninist principle of “democratic centralism.” According to this principle, leaders are formally elected, and key policies collectively discussed, but the political decisions reached by these voting processes are binding upon all members of the party, and as vanguard of the revolution, the party leadership has the final say. The country's first constitution of 1954, modelled on that of the Soviet Union, established the National People's Congress as the embodiment of popular sovereignty under the leadership of the CCP. The most recent constitution of 1982, which addressed the Maoist excesses of the Cultural Revolution, reconfirmed the principle of democratic centralism and the formal status of the National People's Congress as the highest organ of state power (Holbig & Schucher, 2016).

The ideas of Chinese democracy in the reform era were spelled out most authoritatively in a White Paper published in 2005. This document defines the main features of “socialist political democracy.” Most importantly that “1) China's democracy is a people's democracy under the leadership of the Communist Party of China [...],” and 2) “China's democracy is a democracy in which the overwhelming majority of the people act as masters of state affairs. [...].” (SCIO, 2005).

The notion of “people’s democracy” (*renmin minzhu*) appears as a pleonasm to Western ears. In socialist jargon, it denotes the alternative to Western democracies based on multiparty systems which are considered to be dominated by capitalist elites. The idea that the people act as “masters of the state” combines the party’s legitimating claim of people’s sovereignty with the principle of party leadership, which is regarded as a prerequisite to ensuring the people’s role as masters of the state.

As the 2005 White Paper elaborates further, China features multiple elements of a democracy, among them:

- a system of People’s Congresses which formally elect state leaders (though only from among preselected candidates);
- a system of Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conferences acting as symbols of the party’s United Front (which are constituted of co-opted social and economic elites);
- experiences with grassroots democracy in villages and urban resident committee elections (which are manipulated by the party);
- citizens’ economic and political rights and respect for human rights (which was codified in the constitution in 2004 but interpreted in parochial ways).
- so-called inner-party democracy (*dangnei minzhu*), which includes experiments with inner-party elections, where party organizations and members can nominate candidates, and where the ratio of excess candidates has been raised over time to make these inner-party elections more competitive (SCIO, 2005).

Overall, the White Paper of 2005 shows that the Chinese party-state strived to position itself as a full-fledged, high-grade, and successful democratic system long before Xi Jinping’s ascent as the country’s paramount leader. However, the claim that the Chinese party regime is a democracy has been articulated in much more assertive ways under Xi Jinping’s leadership. This is to be illustrated in the following section by five examples of visions of democracy offered by the party leadership since 2012.

## 18.4 Envisioning Democracy Under Xi Jinping

### 18.4.1 *The Merits of Meritocracy*

During the final years of the Hu-Wen era, domestic and international voices openly criticized the political stalemate and stagnation which they blamed on the weak collective leadership style cultivated by Hu Jintao. Many hoped for a bold new vision and authority at the top, and for a strongman leader to get things done. Indeed, this is what they got. In October 2012, just a few weeks before the 18th Party Congress that would baptize Xi as the new secretary-general of the party, Chinese television disseminated an animated video titled “How Leaders Are Made” which went viral among Chinese and foreign audiences (“How Leaders are Made,” 2012).



The five-minute clip compares how leaders rise to power in the US versus in China. The US process—featuring a smiling Barack Obama—is caricatured as a series of drawn-out and costly election campaigns, political string-pulling, and the overriding importance of the final act of voting. In contrast, the Chinese process is depicted as a selection of the president—featuring a smiling Xi Jinping—on the basis of merit and skill. Candidates are said to earn these skills over the course of long political careers, moving up the administrative ladder and facing various acid tests. The clip concludes,

Many roads lead to national leadership, and every country has one for itself. Whether by a single ballot that gets the whole nation out to vote or by meritocratic screening that requires years of hard work like the making of a kung fu master, as long as people are satisfied and the country develops and progresses as a result, it's working. (“How Leaders Are Made,” 2012)

Although the term “democracy” is not used in the clip, it invokes the central elements thereof, such as public interest and popular consent. In this Chinese version of democracy, merit replaces campaigning, candidates are screened instead of elected, and performance output tops procedural input and accountability.

### 18.4.2 *Democracy with Adjectives*

The second example demonstrates the subtle shift in emphasis in the official discourse on China's “democracy with adjectives” that can be observed between the lines in the Report of the 18th Party Congress Report in November 2012. The notion of inner-party democracy, which had been promoted by Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao, was now downplayed. Instead, the document stressed the importance of so-called “consultative democracy.” As I have discussed elsewhere, this concept was imported and adapted in party theory circles over the course of more than a decade. To make a long story short, “consultative democracy” (*xieshang minzhu*) is a localized version of Jürgen Habermas' notion of “deliberative democracy” (*xieshang minzhu*) which he introduced to students in Beijing back in 2001 (Holbig, 2016). His idea of open-ended public communication among free and equal citizens, who confer and make decisions based on the “unforced force” of rational argument, has gained much currency among Chinese academics since its introduction. In the course of its official Chinese adaptation, however, Habermas' original idea of a horizontally structured deliberation between citizens was re-interpreted as a vertical pattern of consultation organized top-down by the party centre, as illustrated by the following passage from the report of the 18th Party Congress.

Socialist consultative democracy is an important form of people's democracy in our country. ... Extensive consultations should be carried out on major issues relating to economic and social development as well as specific problems involving the people's immediate interests ... to solicit a wide range of opinions, pool wisdom of the people, increase consensus, and build up synergy. We should adhere to and improve the system of ... political consultation

under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. .... (CPC Central Committee, 2012, section 2)

Five years later, in his report to the CCP's 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi Jinping rephrased this idea even more succinctly, saying, "The essence of the people's democracy is that the people get to discuss their own affairs. Consultative democracy is an important way of effecting Party leadership and a model and strength unique to China's socialist democracy" (CPC Central Committee, 2017, Sect. 1). Thus, in the official Chinese notion of consultative democracy, the people, represented by selected members of important social and ethnic groups are consulted in a hierarchical fashion by the party-state to forge a consensus, thereby legitimizing party rule via a consultation process circumscribed by the CCP's organizational and ideological leadership monopoly. In other words, not only has Xi Jinping reduced the extent of inner-party competition and collective leadership which Hu Jintao had promoted. He also appears to be more inclined than his predecessor to keep "democratic consultation" within proper limits and to open this exercise only to segments of society that the party can control (Cabestan, 2019).

### 18.4.3 *Democracy Without Adjectives*

Democracy does not only come *with* adjectives in the Chinese official discourse, however. Soon after Xi Jinping's installation as party leader, the propaganda apparatus presented a set of twelve "Socialist Core Values" (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi*). According to the report of the 18th Party Congress, the Socialist Core Values "are the soul of the Chinese nation and serve as the guide for building socialism with Chinese characteristics" (CPC Central Committee, 2012).

Praised as "the common denominator for the values of socialism" (Seeking Truth, 2012, p. 12), the twelve core values are laid out on three different levels, that of the nation-state, society, and the individual, with four values ascribed to each level. At the nation-state level, "prosperity" and "democracy" come first, followed by "civility" and "harmony." These four values are seen as national objectives and as shaping the interpretations of all other values. At the level of society, the four core values are "freedom," "equality," "justice," and "rule of law"; and at the personal level, "patriotism," "dedication," "integrity," and "friendliness." Within this hierarchical set of values, it is important to note that "democracy" is not positioned at the level of society but of the nation-state, thereby signalling that it is a quality ascribed to the nation as a whole, not to procedures or structures within the state. In the authoritative text published for the official inauguration of the Socialist Core Values campaign in May 2013, the term was defined along the lines of the 2005 White Paper, but extended to include the vision of "a beautiful and happy life" for the people:

Democracy is a beautiful aspiration of human society. The democracy we strive for is a people's democracy, and its true core is the people acting as masters of the state. Democracy is the life of socialism, and the political guarantee for creating a beautiful and happy life for the people. (People's Daily, 2013; author's translation)

The Socialist Core Values campaign continues until today. In a recent study, Miao (2021) has analysed a collection of almost 400 propaganda posters that have been disseminated online and offline across the country since 2013, coming to a very interesting finding: While the twelve core values have been replicated as a complete set over time, only six of them have been given detailed illustration in the propaganda posters—namely “prosperity, civility, and harmony as national-level values, and patriotism, friendliness, and integrity as personal-level values” (Miao, 2021). “Democracy,” as well as “freedom,” “equality,” “justice,” and “rule of law” are often *absent* from the theme-specific posters. As the author argues, these missing values.

... have very specific ... definitions, all of which fall under the strict guideline of the party-state. As individuals are not expected to interpret or contribute towards these values, but instead are considered the beneficiaries in a society where these values will be allowed to prosper, values such as democracy and rule of law are not popularised in the poster collection. (Miao, 2021, p. 169).

Despite the relative toning-down of “democracy” compared to some other core values, its ubiquitous presence on rural walls, urban subway billboards and online might have a two-pronged effect. On the one hand, propaganda inculcates the notion of “democracy” without adjectives in people’s minds and everyday language. On the other hand, the very notion of democracy is tamed and immunized against potential challengers who might strive to interpret democracy in more specifically procedural ways than the official idea of a “beautiful aspiration of human society” (People’s Daily, 2013, author’s translation).

#### **18.4.4 China as the “World’s Largest Democracy”**

With an understanding of the domesticated version of democracy presented in China, it might not come as a surprise that Chinese official media have hailed the country as the “world’s largest democracy.” In August 2015, the party-controlled *Global Times* (*Huanqiu Shibao*) ran this headline: “Which Is Ultimately the Largest Democratic Nation?” (Han, 2015). The answer is obvious, but it is important to see how the argument is built.

The article starts with an attack against the West, above all the United States which, in the author’s view, had tried for a long time to exclude China from the global values discourse for being “undemocratic.” In contrast, India—which in the eyes of the West was the “world’s largest democracy”—is found to enjoy an unjustified high level of trust from the West due to the same normative bias. Against this backdrop, the article then argues that it is time for China to break free from the “discourse trap” and secure its prerogative of interpreting global values, including the essence of democracy. “Democracy” is described as a historically formed term that has developed differently in various epochs and regions and for which there are no fixed standards. The Arab Spring and its aftermath are mentioned to show that the Western democratic model

is not compatible with non-Western cultural contexts. The lesson to be learned is that, without stability and order, neither prosperity for the people nor civilizational progress will be achieved.

The article then claims that China represents a particularly “genuine” and “effective” form of democracy compared to others. In contrast to many façade democracies across the globe, the author argues, China ensures that different social strata are adequately represented in the political process. Unlike in “certain states,” the Chinese people do not merely have the choice between different “political dynasties” on election day. Instead, they are involved on a daily basis in a number of important decision-making processes through a range of consultative mechanisms. Overall, the article concludes, socialism with Chinese characteristics has been proven to represent the true interests of the people, and the country’s economic success proves the vitality of the democratic system; thus, China can be considered the “largest democratic nation.” The article ends with a moralistic tone; last but not least, it pleads, it is time for China to make this clear and no longer silently accept its—false—undemocratic image (Han, 2015).

What we find here is a new dimension in China’s official vision of democracy, if not a new habitus of the Chinese leadership. Whether these claims appear plausible or not, what matters here is that these claims, as such, challenge Western democracies. The intention is to end Western discourse hegemony, project China’s own discourse power, and contest Western interpretations of global values. The claims also imply that China outperforms its Western counterparts in various regards (Holbig & Schucher, 2016).

### ***18.4.5 Democracy in the “New Era”***

The role of democracy in the “New Era” inaugurated by Xi Jinping at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 entailed the definition of a new “principal contradiction” in China’s society. According to the Marxist strand of historical materialism, each period of social development is characterized by a specific principal contradiction, and its correct identification allows for its resolution by the vanguard party, and thereby the furthering of the socialist cause.

In line with this logic, the Mao era had been characterized by the contradiction between the “proletariat and the bourgeoisie,” which had to be solved via class struggle. In the early reform era under Deng Xiaoping, the principal contradiction was “between the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people versus backward social production” (Xinhua, 2017). According to Xi Jinping, this contradiction has been solved thanks to China’s unparalleled economic performance and the improvement of peoples’ livelihoods over the past four decades. Thus, in the New Era, the principal contradiction is no longer about quantity but quality. It is now a contradiction “between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life” (CPC Central Committee, 2017), and this is where democracy comes in. The “better life” which people demand, in Xi’s words,

includes “democracy, rule of law, fairness and justice, security, and a better environment” (CPC Central Committee, 2017). Indeed, “democracy” appears here as the first among various aspirational values that are propagated as expressions of a “better life”—and as a vision among other visions that the party promises to realize with a view to satisfying the people.

To put this vision in historical perspective, by the middle of the twenty-first century, Xi Jinping envisages the development of China into a “rich and strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful modernized socialist strong nation” (CPC Central Committee, 2017, literal translation of *fuqiang minzhu wenming hexie meili de shuhuizhuyi xiandaihua qiangguo*). In the official English translation provided by the Xinhua News Agency, the same phrase is rendered as a “great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful” (CPC Central Committee, 2017), thereby avoiding the repetition of “strong” vis-à-vis international audiences. In the Chinese original, the term “strong” (*qiang*) is indeed used twice—Xi Jinping’s innovative contribution to the CCP’s strategic target for 2049 when the People’s Republic of China will celebrate its centennial.

As we can learn from these slogans, democracy is part and parcel of the official party-state vision for China, not only in the present, but even more so in the future. At the same time, the claim for a democratic China is inscribed in the overarching claim for becoming a strong nation and a great power by the middle of the century. What we see here might be the re-emergence of a vocabulary that was characteristic of a Social Darwinist worldview of the late nineteenth century, of a struggle between nations, where being “democratic” appears to be advantageous for the survival of the fittest in the international realm (cf. Amelung & Holbig, 2016).

## 18.5 Conclusion: Implications for China’s International Interactions

To conclude, I offer some reflections about what the official Chinese visions of democracy might imply for China’s interactions with other world regions and countries, including via its Belt and Road Initiative, since 2013. Firstly and generally, this chapter illustrates the importance of taking into account the self-views and world-views of actors in different regions and their changing roles in international power constellations. This approach also allows for better assessment of Chinese expectations, ideological positions, strategic portfolios, and preferences vis-à-vis other countries and actors.

Secondly, China’s official visions of democracy can be seen as an almost ironic response to the widespread perceptions that China challenges not only Western liberal democracies but the idea of democracy itself. Whether these visions are plausible and credible or not appears less important than the contestation of what is perceived to be long-standing “discourse hegemony” of the West. China’s *alternative* discourse

on democracy might gain traction in times of newly emerging geopolitical alliances. Together with its economic clout, China's rejection of the perceived "discourse hegemony" could make a growing impression on actors in Eurasia and other world regions. Against the backdrop of the declining global appeal of Western-type liberal democracy with the rise of populist leaders in the US and Europe, we cannot rule out the possibility that Eurasian actors increasingly perceive China as an alternative international rule-maker and, possibly, also as a leader in the "democratization" of international relations.

Last but not least, much will depend upon the self-image of Western democracies. The varying effectiveness of public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in countries worldwide has shaken, if not severely damaged, the self-confidence of liberal democracies in their superior capacity to deliver public goods. It is hard to tell whether China's robust response to the pandemic at home and its vaccine diplomacy abroad will lend more credence to its official visions of democracy. However, the malaise of Western liberal democracies—which has worsened in the wake of the pandemic—tends to weaken the normative underpinnings of Democracy with a capital letter and thus buttresses China claims to contest the perceived discourse hegemony of the West and ability to project its own interpretations of global values such as democracy and other "beautiful aspirations of human society."

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# Chapter 19

## Varieties of Authoritarianism in Eurasia



Edward Schatz

### 19.1 Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive undertaking with enormous potential to transform Central Asia and beyond. Indeed, in the imagination of Western pundits, the die has already been cast: Chinese efforts will overwhelm local societies and recast them according to Beijing's model of development. The best defence one can hope for is a counterpunch, such as one proposed by the Biden White House in 2021 to step up the West's infrastructure spending in the developing world as an alternative to China's (Sanger & Landler, 2021). It follows from this logic that China's influence is so irresistible that the countries of Central Asia might be fairly renamed "Sinostan."<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I offer a twofold argument. First, China is a great power with enormous and growing influence, but Central Asian publics and policymakers have agency; they can accept, modify, or even resist impending transformations. Second, Central Asia is indeed in the throes of major political and economic transformations, but these transformations may be driven by broader, global trends as much as they are driven by China per se. To make this case, I take stock of authoritarianism across the region. As I hope to demonstrate, any thinking about authoritarianism should be attentive to the various trajectories of Central Asian regime transformations. These trajectories precede China's recent, visible push into the region—a fact that puts China's influence into perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title of a book (Pantucci & Peterson, 2022).

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## 19.2 Democracy on the Rocks

There is no doubt that democracy today is on the defensive. It is being battered by publics cynical about liberal values and disappointed that elections do not necessarily bring positive change as swiftly as promised (Malka et al., 2020). It is being challenged by regimes claiming to champion economic and social rights while showing little interest in political rights, and it is being thrashed by claims that democratic polities govern poorly, helped along by the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic, open societies did, indeed, initially fare worse than many closed regimes (Nelson, 2021).

In our troubled times, democracy may seem at best to be a luxury. At worst, it may appear a culturally alien imposition. The word itself has taken on highly pejorative meanings that could be with us for decades, if not longer. Across Eurasia, Russian-language terms like *demokrat*, *pravozashchitnik*, *pravovoe gosudarstvo* (“democrat,” “rights defender,” and “rule of law,” respectively) have come to acquire negative meanings quite the opposite of their original connotations.<sup>2</sup>

And it is not just in the post-Soviet space. In many ways, we seem to have experienced a normalization of authoritarian practices. Across the globe, normative tides have shifted, abetted by major powers. In 2013, Russia passed a law outlawing so-called “gay propaganda,” to crack down on LGBTQ people and those protecting LGBTQ rights (Kondakov, 2019). In 2018, Saudi Arabia had Jamal Khashoggi murdered and dismembered in its consulate in Turkey, reminding journalists of the transnational reach of authoritarian regimes (Hubbard, 2020). Also in 2018, China took Canadian citizens hostage as bargaining chips for the purpose of negotiation shortly after it had established internment camps where it incarcerated more than a million of its citizens; in both instances, human lives were considered less important than regime priorities. In 2021, the United States—once considered the globe’s paragon of democratic virtue—saw an incumbent president foment an insurrection against his country’s own democratic institutions. The same democratically elected president had made a policy of quite literally putting immigrant children into cages (Bhatnagar, 2019).

This sense of impunity clearly suggests a moral failing of the globe’s political elite, but it also owes something to the ungoverned spaces of today’s capitalism. As revelations from the Panama Papers (2016) and Pandora Papers (2021) make abundantly clear, and as scholars have addressed as well (Cooley et al., 2018; Sharafutdinova & Dawisha, 2017), kleptocrats find ample space in our global economy to squirrel away their ill-gotten spoils. In turn, these same kleptocrats hold up profit and wealth as signs of cardinal virtue, while painting generosity as weakness or folly.

None of this, as we shall see below, is lost on Central Asia. Kazakhstan’s long-serving president appeared to have arranged an illicit payment of 30 million USD to what media described as his “unofficial wife” (Putz, 2021). The processes by which state wealth is privatized and sent abroad has been happening across the region since the Soviet collapse (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017). In October 2020, Kyrgyzstan

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<sup>2</sup> On political discourse in Russia, see Urban (2010).

witnessed a peculiar series of rapid developments impossible to understand without considering the global democratic decline and rise of impunity. The incumbent president, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, was faced with massive street mobilization, as protesters decried the fraudulent conduct of recent parliamentary elections. No stranger to mass protests, Kyrgyzstan quickly descended into uncertainty as the president went into hiding. In the meantime, Sadyr Japarov, a populist opposition figure, was serving prison time for participating in the kidnapping of a regional governor. When the turmoil erupted, his supporters conducted a jailbreak, freeing Japarov. The same day, the country's Supreme Court voided his kidnapping charge. Within weeks, Jeenbekov had resigned, and Japarov had manoeuvred himself into the position of interim president. This astonishing move from prison to the presidency tells us much about our current moment: frustration with the rule of law lends radical populism a broad resonance.<sup>3</sup> Neither China nor the BRI is directly responsible for the authoritarian impunity of Central Asia's regimes, but at a minimum a great power's see-no-evil approach to the region does nothing to undermine it.

It is not just impunity that characterizes our era. Autocrats around the globe are making claims—some more credible than others—that they are able to provide good governance. From economic growth to public goods, to social welfare, and to sound public health, the notion is that democracy diminishes efficiency. Whether or not this is true is a separate question (Foa, 2018), but that does not stop autocrats from advancing the claim. Indeed, it would be hard to dismiss this as mere apologetics, when in areas like public health, digitization, and security, autocrats may not do poorly. After all, many of the more politically free countries around the globe have indeed struggled against a deadly virus. The rule of law, with all its deliberateness, also seems inadequate in addressing rapid changes abetted by digital technologies. Robust free speech protections likewise challenge a government's ability to conduct surveillance for potential security threats.

In sum, for the short term it is hard to summon much optimism about democratic prospects for Eurasia or in fact for the globe. We would be forgiven for assuming that what we face is nothing less than an authoritarian juggernaut that is impossible to stop. But what is this authoritarian moment and how permanent should we expect it to be? Let us address some commonly held assumptions.

### 19.2.1 *Eurasia's Variety*

The first assumption often made about our moment is that authoritarian governments share some common essence. In abstract sense, this might be true, but authoritarianism polities are really more like Tolstoy's unhappy families. Just as Lev Nikolae-vich posited that all unhappy families are unhappy in their own ways, each authoritarian polity is authoritarian on its own terms. This fact is not lost on scholars

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<sup>3</sup> See Smith (2019) for an important discussion of this dynamic in the South African case.

of authoritarianism, starting with Linz (1975) and moving far beyond his seminal contributions.<sup>4</sup> Much of this great variety is on display in the Eurasian cases.

Kazakhstan achieved independence rather by accident. After a brief period of what Lucan Way (2015) calls “pluralism by default,” its first president established firm control, buoyed by oil revenues and a generally demobilized society. Its authoritarianism today is based on claims of effective governance and an ability to manage its cultural and religious pluralism. It is also based increasingly on managing (and repressing) its opposition abroad, as Alex Cooley and John Heathershaw (2017) have expertly documented. Resource extraction, technocracy, and transnational oppression are the pillars of Kazakhstan’s authoritarianism. In early 2022, protests erupted across the nation. Initially a local outcry against a price hike for fuel in western Kazakhstan, protests soon engulfed cities across the country and, for a moment, authoritarian governance appeared wobbly. Nonetheless, after a reckoning among the political-economic elite and the introduction of Russian-led “peacekeeping” troops at the request of President Tokayev, the situation stabilized, and the basic governance formula was restored. At a minimum, the governments of neighbouring countries were relieved, viewing Kazakhstan’s authoritarianism as synonymous with stability.

Russia’s trajectory is different. Russia achieved independence when it rather dramatically seceded from the Soviet Union and embraced a wild-west pluralism that lasted for the better part of a decade, enriching a class of globe-trotting oligarchs bent on conspicuous consumption. In the meantime, statists—who were suddenly on the losing end of the changes—saw in Russia’s destiny something unique. They began to agitate and mobilize resources for a new, more patriotic Russia that could re-take its rightful place as a “great power” in a multipolar world not dominated by the United States.<sup>5</sup> Practically, its authoritarianism is based on what Keith Darden (2001) calls the “blackmail state” in which broad surveillance produces abundant opportunities for gathering *kompromat* (personal information that could be used to embarrass or compromise opponents), thereby controlling the political field. Resource extraction, geopolitical revisionism, patriotic revanchism, and anti-Westernism are the pillars of Russia’s authoritarianism.

For its part, Uzbekistan moved rather dramatically to distance itself from its Soviet past and, by extension, its relations with post-Soviet Russia. Broad social conservatism gave sustenance to Islam Karimov’s narrow, negative (and as it turns out, slightly paranoid) view of global connections. Uzbekistan under Karimov was not quite a hermit kingdom, but it was an inward-looking authoritarian system. In 2016, this changed dramatically, with the new president Shavkat Mirziyoyev embracing Uzbekistan’s ties with neighbours and partners, fostering connections and economic opportunity, and generating untold riches for select few with uncertain prospects for wealth trickling down. Uzbekistan’s authoritarianism is rooted in social conservatism, minor political opening and major economic liberalization amidst global

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<sup>4</sup> Among many others, consider Svoboda (2012), Wedeen (1999), Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009), and Levitsky and Way (2010).

<sup>5</sup> For one exploration of anti-Americanism in the Eurasian context, see Schatz (2021).

trends to the contrary, and the declaration that it is open for business not in a unipolar moment but amidst an increasingly multipolar world order (Schatz, 2018).

All of this is different from Tajikistan's autocracy. The country's small size, limited natural resources, and legacy of a brutal though short-lived civil war in the 1990s mean that Tajikistan's authoritarian rule has been tenuous and confounded by endemic state weakness. The regime of Emomali Rahmon gradually began to consolidate its power and generate new revenue streams, ultimately banning the only major opposition political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, in 2015. Since then, Dushanbe has been able to leverage its borders with China and Afghanistan to claim a crucial role in global security as it charts its distinctive way forward.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Turkmenistan deserves close attention. Closed, autarkic, deeply repressive, and strangely sultanistic, Turkmenistan unfortunately appears in the Western imagination largely when its absurd cult of personality makes headlines (Freedman, 2007). While Ashgabat has become interested in selling its natural gas more broadly than in the past, it nonetheless seeks to studiously avoid other international entanglements that might force it to make difficult decisions. Its authoritarianism is rooted in rentierism, a devastated civil society, and a still-isolationist ethos.

It would be convenient if we could array this variety along one dimension, but the reality of Eurasia is that it does not bend to our analytic convenience. Authoritarian trajectories vary widely and in many ways. And, if we widen our lens further to China or Myanmar or Venezuela, we realize that a simple coding of "authoritarian" seems woefully inadequate to encompass the wide range of authoritarian experiences on display around the globe today.

## 19.2.2 *An Authoritarian "Internationale"?*

The second assumption often made about our authoritarian moment—and one that is connected to the first—is that we are witnessing a deep convergence of principles and practices, such that there is effectively an authoritarian *block* of states. For example, in January 2022 when unrest in Kazakhstan prompted the introduction of Russian-led troops from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), all the regions' states seemed to be on the same page; they prioritized stability over human rights or popular grievances while accepting the Kazakhstani government's depiction of "foreign terrorists" as the instigators of violence.

I do not doubt that authoritarian rulers can appear to stand in solidarity with each other. Russia can generally count on Chinese support in the UN Security Council. China can generally count on Russia's. Yet, one wonders about the durability of this apparent convergence of principles and practices. Russia has embraced the Eurasian Economic Union, with its own political and economic logics. In the meantime, China—largely through the BRI—seeks to foster a different vision. To say that this

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<sup>6</sup> In 2021, after the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan, the only Central Asian state to refuse diplomatic relations with the Taliban was Tajikistan (Powers, 2021).

generates contradictions is to put the point mildly. To date, the states involved in both the EEU and the BRI have papered over these contradictions through broad declarations of purpose, especially through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

It is not impossible that these differences can be ironed out. But other possibilities loom. Let us rewind to the unbreakable friendship between Mao's China and Stalin's Soviet Union. The problem with the unbreakable friendship was that it was much more fragile than it seemed. To borrow Alexei Yurchak's (2006) phrase, "everything was forever until it was no more." After Stalin's death, relations between Moscow and Beijing soured rather rapidly (Radchenko, 2009). There are many reasons for these changes that should not detain us here; suffice it to say that Mao's relationship with Stalin was a highly personal one and each regime was a highly personalist one.

Fast-forward to the 2020s. In today's Russia, power has become increasingly personalized, centred around the personal qualities and, indeed, whims of one man over the past 20 years. Likewise, China's system—which for a few decades seemed bent on avoiding highly personalized leadership—has now slipped into a mould not unlike Russia's, with President Xi assuming increasing command of more and more of the political establishment. If Xi and Putin get along famously (as most reports seem to indicate; see Jiangtao, 2021), then one has to ask the difficult question: what comes when Putin or Xi goes to pasture? What implications will this have for their convergence of authoritarian principles and practices?

The answer is abundantly clear: we cannot know. This neither dooms Russia-China relations to a new split any more than it guarantees that their alliance will remain unbreakable. But it does underscore the point: behind the appearance of a monolithic "block"—what some scholars (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014) have called, wrongly I think, an Authoritarian Internationale—lie many moving parts and many possible futures.

### *19.2.3 Good Autocratic Governance?*

The third assumption about our moment is that authoritarian governments—at least the softer, more benign, perhaps more technocratic ones—might be onto something when they claim to offer good governance. Of course, lurking behind the authoritarian's clam about the potential for good governance is an equally potent temptation for bad governance. Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine in 2022 reminds us what happens when foreign policymaking relies on the caprices of the single despot and his coterie of yes-men. But, putting aside those who have clearly selected brutality over humanity, do the "enlightened" autocracies have advantages in providing effective governance?

There is zero doubt that such governments can often mobilize resources—human, financial, and political—much more quickly than their democratic counterparts in order to seize opportunities. These may be economic opportunities like those presented by building new transport corridors. They may be political opportunities allowing for the alteration of the geopolitical map like those present in Ukraine in

2014 when social turmoil opened the door for Russia's annexation of Crimea. They may be opportunities to provide public goods, like coordination around counterterrorism or financing of infrastructure projects, or perhaps even fighting global climate change.

But we should not let our thinking about democratic governance colour how we think about authoritarian governance. Today's democracies face myriad challenges—from developing sound immigration policies to fighting climate change to battling outbreaks of disease to contending with anti-democratic populist backlashes. These challenges are real, but it does not follow that some unspecified authoritarian alternative would fare better. To be clear, if one could design a specific authoritarianism, it might look like this: an enlightened, generous, well versed, and infinitely capable autocrat governs a society that shares his or her values and welcomes his or her leadership. If we could custom make such an autocracy, then our bright future might indeed be authoritarian.

But we do not have the luxury of choosing which variety of autocracy we live under. And even if we could, autocrats are famous for dying, leaving in their wake degraded, diminished, and depleted versions of themselves and their visions. Chavez seduced Venezuelans with the promise of something better and then left Venezuela with the less capable, less inspirational, less legitimate Maduro. Similarly, whatever hope one might have had for Berdymukhamedov after Turkmenbashi's passing in 2006 now looks hopelessly misplaced.

In the end, in spite of authoritarian rhetoric, regime type is orthogonal to governance. Both democracies and autocracies can provide effective governance, and both democracies and autocracies can provide ineffective, corrupt governance. If we ask which regime type better addresses social and economic problems over the short or medium term, we can expect a hung jury. On the other hand, if we ask which regime type allows for voice, participation, and protection of its most vulnerable people, we should expect a unanimous verdict in democracy's favour.

#### ***19.2.4 Pockets of Democracy, Pockets of Authoritarianism***

A fourth assumption about our authoritarian moment is about scale. We tend to believe that the scale that matters most is the national one. This sort of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002) is understandable; one wouldn't want to ignore the importance of regime type at the national level. We have not—as it turns out—witnessed the dissolution of nation-state frontiers with the rise of global connectivities of various sorts. The pundits who confidently declared that the “world is flat” (Friedman, 2005)—that is, that we now reside in a frictionless world of unlimited possibility untroubled by mere political frontiers—have gone strikingly silent.

Yet, the national is not the only scale that matters, and it may—depending on the question, depending on the situation—matter less than other scales. As Lisa Wedeen (2008) has documented about Yemen, which at the national scale is authoritarian,

democratic practices are part and parcel of everyday life scaled—and lived—locally. To say simply that Yemen represents an authoritarian context is to miss something crucial. Similarly, to say that Canada is democratic is perfectly accurate until one sits in on a typical faculty meeting at a Canadian university or, less trivially, experiences Canadian life as a person of indigenous descent. National authoritarianisms are shot through with democratic practices and institutions scaled at the non-national level. For their part, democracies are also shot through with authoritarian practices and institutions scaled at the non-national level.

Feminist scholars have known this for a long time. We should be in the business of disaggregating politics, at various scales, and identifying how such politics play out for various communities and various individuals involved (Crenshaw, 1990). Broad patterns do not cease to matter when we use such a lens, but their effects are always highly mediated. Turkmenistan does not cease to be an autocracy just because some citizens tell jokes in their kitchen at Berdymukhamedov's expense, but how Turkmenistan's autocracy functions is inseparable from what happens in these more intimate spaces, at these more local scales.

### 19.2.5 *Democracies in the Vernacular*

Finally, a fifth assumption about our moment returns us to Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy. Remember Tolstoy's full quote: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." (*Vse schastlivye sem'i pohozi drug na druga, kajdaia neschastlivaia sem'ia neschastliva po-svoemu.*) Under our analogy, democracies should be essentially similar.

Alas, the analogy fails us here. Beyond some basic, minimal features, each democracy truly exists only in the vernacular. I do not have in mind a literal vernacular, in which politics can only become intelligible through well-defined, scarcely changing, traditional cultural frameworks (Kymlicka, 2001). Vernaculars are not straight-jackets. But democratic governance does require a reckoning with the specific cultural complexities, the specific political history, and the specific horizons of possibility of any given context.

There is much, for example, in the Kyrgyz or Kazakh nomadic tradition that is consistent with key democratic principles. This is not to say that advocates for democracy would want to recreate nineteenth-century nomadic communities, but it is to say that democratic advocates would be wise to depict their initiatives as building upon and extending—rather than departing from—such traditions. We see this across the Middle East, with feminists finding sustenance and legitimacy in the Quran and Hadith; they seek not to deny the rightful place of holy texts in society but to build upon these texts as they chart a very human way forward (Abu-Lughod, 1998).

The corollary of course is also true. Those in Russian society who would posit the ostensible incompatibility of democratic values and practices with the broad sweep of Russian political history have probably not seriously reckoned with Russia's



checkered past. Consider the democratic promise of sayings like “God is far up high, the tsar is far away” (*Do boga vysoko, do tsaria daleko*). Invoked when one cannot expect help to come, it implies a need for self-reliance. Lightly governed for most of its political history, Russian society enjoyed myriad freedoms by default, even if not by principle. Life in the sprawling Russian empire was no more democratic than was life in Kyrgyz nomadic encampments, but the point remains: a recoverable, usable past is available for those interested in speaking democracy in the vernacular. Of course, in the context of Russia’s dramatic autocratic deepening in 2022, Russia’s democratic potential seemed to have evaporated. But, if human societies were simply prisoners of their recent—and in this case brutally autocratic—past, we would all be living under autocratic rule.

The argument for one regime type over another is not that one brings greater economic performance. Regime type may or may not grow the economy. It may or may not generate greater equity. It may or may not improve lives. It is also not that one regime type brings great political benefit, by endearing a state to a great power involved in some kind of geopolitical competition. Today’s darling may become tomorrow’s estranged “ex.” Rather, choosing democracy is simply and only about selecting political practices and institutions that are fairer and more humane. If fairness, humanity, generosity, and freedom play any role in a state’s recoverable, usable past, it too can speak democracy in the vernacular.

### 19.3 Is the BRI a Blessing or a Curse?

All of this returns us to the question that animates this book section. Is the BRI a curse or a blessing for democracy? The answer comes in two parts.

First, we are smart to take stock of the BRI’s influence. In the short term, the BRI can indeed provide a lifeline for authoritarian governments—especially those that are cash-strapped during difficult times produced by economic decline, public health crises, or natural disasters. This lifeline has the potential to shore up autocrats’ claims to legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> There is nothing quite like a palpable, visible infrastructure project shouted from the rooftops of authoritarian palaces to suggest that the regime is working for the people.

But the relationship is contingent; the BRI’s influence is a variable, not a constant. If regimes are seduced by concessional loans but unconcerned about the quality or practical utility of the infrastructure being built, they open themselves up to downstream accusations of corruption. If regimes are unconcerned about creating jobs and distributing any new wealth generated by involvement with the BRI, they expose themselves to a downstream populist backlash. If regimes find themselves doing the bidding of foreign governments in their treatment of minority populations, this builds pressure for counter-mobilization over the longer term and raises the costs of repression domestically in the short term.

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<sup>7</sup> On legitimation strategies in Central Asia, see Omelicheva (2016).



To be sure, the BRI is a well-funded development scheme promoted and underwritten by the world's largest and arguably most powerful authoritarian regime. It would seem natural to push in an authoritarian direction, but it may well be that—borrowing a phrase from Alexander Wendt (1992)—the BRI is what Central Asian states make of it. Change seems inevitable, but the direction and endpoint of that change are hard to predict. By rapidly shifting the configuration of forces in tremendously unpredictable ways, the BRI inevitably opens new horizons of what is politically possible. Its transformative potential is enormous, but if there is one thing we know from prior historical examples of similarly enormous transformations, it is this: the architects of change do not have the power to determine the final outcome.

Second, while we recognize the BRI's influence, we are smart to avoid exaggerating it. There are myriad processes afoot in the global political economy that—independent of China and its foreign policy in Central Asia—are poised to change the region. Isolating China's role in these changes will be no mean analytic task, but it is one that scholars should endeavour to undertake.

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# Chapter 20

## The Belt and Road Initiative and Sustainable Urban Development in Central Asia



Artem Dankov

### 20.1 Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an ambitious programme to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks along six corridors with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade, and stimulating economic growth. The BRI comprises a Silk Road Economic Belt—a trans-continental passage that links China with Central Asia, Russia, and Europe by land. The initiative defines five major priorities: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and connection of people.

While China and Russia play a prominent role in Central Asia, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, India, Pakistan, and Iran are intensifying their influence in the area thanks to political, historical, cultural, and linguistic ties. These roles are changing, however, as China becomes a highly significant economic and geopolitical player in the region. Since the BRI's launch in 2013, China's economic strategy has been characterised by infrastructure projects, and by hydrocarbon and mining resource extraction financed by state banks. However, the strategy is now more diversified, with an increasing focus on the agribusiness and industrial sectors and a growing proportion of private sector investment from China.

This chapter analyses the phenomenon of urbanisation in Central Asia and its political and social implications. It will be shown that major cities have emerged as important economic and political centres, but that they are also focal points for ethnic and social conflicts which threaten regime stability. The BRI, while supporting sustainable urban development, does little to attenuate the problematic political and social consequences of urbanisation.

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## 20.2 Urban Development in Central Asia

Urbanisation is an ongoing global trend. In 1950, 29.6% of the world's population lived in cities. In 1980, this figure was 39.3% and in 2000, 46.7%, while more recently, in 2020, it reached 56.2% (United Nations, 2018). This trend is also apparent in the post-Soviet space, chiefly in Central Asia where urban populations have increased dramatically since the end of the Cold War in 1991 and the creation of new states in the region. In 1959, city-dwellers accounted for 38.5% of the population, whereas in 2021 this figure had risen to 48.4%, with the population increasing from 9.1 to 36.2 million (United Nations, 2018). According to UN forecasts, by 2050 Central Asia is to become home to 100 million people, with over 55% residing in cities (Dankov, 2015).

The rapid growth of cities and urban populations in Central Asia brings both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, cities are drivers of economic growth and development, concentrating opportunities for businesses and people. On the other hand, urban infrastructure often fails to keep pace with demand, leading to a deterioration of living conditions and such problems as environmental degradation, a shortage or poor quality of public services, and the rise of disease and health risks. Urbanisation is becoming a major challenge for Central Asia, a region which is experiencing rapid economic and demographic growth. Today, the region's population exceeds 75 million, with 48.5% living in urban areas. Urbanisation processes in Central Asia are extremely unbalanced, with some areas having many urban dwellers and others still dominated by rural communities. The population is growing fastest in major cities, which attract a high number of Central Asians. According to official data, in 2021 the region's seven largest cities had 9.8 million residents, or 13% of the total population (see Table 20.1). Over the past 25 years, these cities' populations have increased 1.5–2 times, with Nur-Sultan (Astana) in Kazakhstan being the absolute leader as the number of its inhabitants has quadrupled. The two largest Central Asian cities are Tashkent in Uzbekistan and Almaty in Kazakhstan, ranking fourth and eighth respectively in the former USSR. Tashkent is more populated than Paris, and Almaty has more residents than Hamburg or Milan.

Central Asia's major cities such as Almaty, Nur-Sultan, Dushanbe, Tashkent, and Bishkek will continue to expand in the medium term. By 2030, major cities that today have populations of over ten million are expected to have populations officially totalling 12 million, i.e. over 15% of the regional population, and almost 25 million combined with settlements around these new large cities. In fact, in 10 years' time, every third Central Asian resident will live in large agglomerations around the million-plus cities.

The urbanisation and formation of megalopolises is a new phenomenon for Central Asia. According to the 1989 USSR census, by 1991 the share of urban residents in Central Asia was expected to fluctuate from 33% in Tajikistan to 57% in Kazakhstan, well below the USSR average of 66% (Census, 1990, p. 5). The region had only two million-plus cities, Tashkent, the largest city in the region, and Almaty, where the population only passed the one million mark in 1981. Most people living in

**Table 20.1** Population of the largest cities in Central Asia (1989–2030), million

City	1989	1999	2009	2021	2030 (forecast)
Tashkent (Uzbekistan)	2.07	2.14	2.21	2.69	3.10
Almaty (Kazakhstan)	1.07	1.13	1.36	1.98	2.45
Nur-Sultan (Kazakhstan)	0.28	0.32	0.61	1.18	1.60
Shymkent (Kazakhstan)	0.39	0.44	0.62	1.04	1.50
Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan)	0.62	0.76	0.84	1.07	1.20
Dushanbe (Tajikistan)	0.59	0.58 <sup>a</sup>	0.73 <sup>a</sup>	0.82 <sup>a</sup>	1.00
Ashgabat (Turkmenistan)	0.4	0.6 <sup>b</sup>	0.85	1.00	1.20
Total	5.42	5.97	7.22	9.78	12.05

<sup>a</sup>2000, 2010 and 2020 data respectively

<sup>b</sup>1995 data

*Sources* USSR-wide census of 1989, national censuses of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, and current statistics. Forecasts based on average growth rates of populations in Central Asian cities, 2009–2021

towns were largely of European origin by the late 1980s and resided in small and medium-sized towns.

### 20.3 The Economic and Political Significance of Big Cities

Managing a major city is a complicated and risky process, and the emergence of Central Asian megalopolises poses a tough challenge to regional stability, chiefly due to their excessive political and economic influence.

First, big cities are centres of economic activity; their share in national GDPs reaches 20–30%. This applies in particular to Bishkek, which generates more than 40% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, with the figure expected to rise in the 2020–2021 period. Second, specific features characteristic of the Central Asian political environments (rigidly centralised decision-making systems, etc.) mean that capitals have an excessive importance for their countries. In the post-Soviet era, no Central Asian country has seen regime change through conflict in the periphery. The partly Islamist revolt in Andijan, Uzbekistan, in May 2005 was crushed swiftly and ruthlessly, although the uprising was definitely the most powerful in the former USSR and the rebels enjoyed massive support among the local population. The December 2011 riot in the Mangystau Region, Kazakhstan's largest oil producing territory, and the January

2022 unrest in Almaty and other cities were quashed with similar alacrity. On the contrary, the imposition of control by different political groups over the capital has served as a major factor in the political victory and establishment of new regimes, whether during the civil war in Tajikistan or the Kyrgyz revolutions of 2005, 2010, and 2020.

The problem presented by these large cities is inherent in their important role in Central Asia's socio-economic and political life. Its leaders allocate sizeable resources to maintaining urban stability because complications invariably threaten the steady political and economic development of the entire state. As a result, regions outside the urban centres receive less attention, with their problems going unsolved for decades. This prompts more people to move to the big cities, further aggravating the issues posed by rapid urbanisation and ultimately forming a vicious circle.

## 20.4 The Political Challenges of Big Cities

By the end of the Soviet period, all cities in Central Asia with a population of over 350,000 were multi-ethnic, none were dominated by a titular ethnic group. During the three decades of independence, their ethnic composition has drastically changed. On the one hand, de-Europeanisation resulted from the massive outflow of non-Asians, while on the other hand, the titular ethnic groups gained ground through migration from the countryside to the cities. For example, over the 1989–2021 period, the share of Uzbeks in Tashkent rose from 44 to 67%, while that of Russians dropped from 34 to 16% (Census, 1990). Over the same period, the proportion of Kazakhs in Almaty grew from 24 to 60%, and that of Russians contracted from 57 to 25% (Census, 2011, p. 15). Some large cities became almost mono-ethnic, with Tajiks accounting for 91% of Dushanbe's population in 2021, a steep increase from only 39% of the total population in 1989. This process engenders several problems.

*The Fate of Ethnic Minorities:* For a long time, ethnic minorities, including non-Asians, Koreans, and others, played a key role in the Central Asian republics. Not only did they help shape the urban middle classes, but they also played key roles in industry, transport, municipal infrastructure, and the social sector. In the post-Soviet period, many have set up small and medium-size businesses and have thus come to form the backbone of the business community. Minorities boast high education levels and living standards, but an issue arises due to broader changes in ethnic balance within the population.

On the one hand, the continuing contraction of minority ethnic groups in large cities hampers their sustainable development, as these groups historically boasted skills that proved vital for the industrial, transportation, energy, and municipal sectors. Many were employed in the education system, replenishing the professional workforce, or owned their own businesses and created jobs.

On the other hand, these cities face a massive influx of rural migrants who mostly represent titular ethnicities. Many of them are poorly educated and lack the qualifications they would need to get a decent job and settle into city life. Hence, they tend

to gather in suburban slums, are underpaid, and have a low quality of life, resulting in the accumulation of social and interethnic tension fraught with the risk of social unrest. Under this scenario, well-off minorities may fall victim to the wrath of those rebelling under slogans of national, ethnic, and social justice.

*Relations between clans:* All Central Asian countries, except for Kazakhstan with its three expanding big cities, suffer from a lack of alternative centres of growth. Hence, they are seeing only one city develop, the capital, which attracts migrants from other parts of the country. In Central Asia, where politics is highly dependent on ethnic, religious, and clan solidarity, the number of people from a certain nationality or region largely determines the configuration of the political system.

As a result, a clan-based issue is emerging as a consequence of urbanisation. Central Asian countries are each largely ruled by a single dominant regional political clan, e.g. Turkmenistan is dominated by the Akhal *velayat*, and Tajikistan by the Khatlon Region. However, the capital-cities give a home to people from various territories, including those whose clans are not happy about the distribution of power. These individuals may well be tempted to try to exploit regional identity and mobilise political supporters for rallies and marches, or even unrest and military clashes, as was the case in Tajikistan where demonstrations in the capital, Dushanbe, escalated into civil war in 1992.

## 20.5 Social Problems of Suburbs

The ‘favelisation’ of the suburbs—that is, the creation and expansion of irregular or informal settlements—has recently become the predominant threat to the sustainable development of major cities. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the region lacked balanced urban development policies. The various administrations plunged headlong into the illegitimate sale or distribution of huge plots of land for private house building. As a result, in the 1980s, Central Asia became home to the spontaneous construction of settlements and country-house complexes, as well as the uncontrolled development of farming lands adjacent to large cities. This unplanned construction spree failed to provide for social infrastructure, and buildings often even remained unconnected to basic utilities. People hailing from rural areas who, for whatever reason, could not stay in the cities, inhabited these new residential communities. For the past two decades, most major cities have been surrounded by massive newly built housing developments, which continue to expand. An example is the notorious *Adobe Belt* of residential communities around Bishkek, where almost one-third of the city’s population lives.

*The Stigma of Life in the Favelas:* These suburban settlements are known for having a very poor quality of life, high levels of poverty, a skyrocketing crime rate, the absence of elementary utilities (potable water, electricity, and gas), and highly limited access to social services such as education and health care. This is home for the rural migrants, the poorly educated, and the unskilled who flock to the major cities but cannot find a decent job. Many get stuck there for years with the dubious status



of *neither rural nor urban*. They marry and transmit this intermediate culture to a younger generation that is growing up poor, uneducated, and often without values.

*Social Protest:* ‘Favelisation’ begets a host of social and political problems, such as poverty and marginalisation, which in turn generate discontent and unrest. The example of the inhabitants of the Adobe Belt around Bishkek serves as proof, as they were especially active in the Kyrgyz revolutions and the accompanying looting.

The increase in urban population puts pressure on major cities to expand. This, in turn, requires proper city planning. However, the construction of new residential neighbourhoods, civic centres, and transportation infrastructure, i.e. roads, bridges, etc., is hampered by the existence of the suburbs, most of which are illegal, with land and property undocumented. With new construction projects comes the problem of moving the residents, as became evident in clashes with the police in the Almaty suburbs of Bakai and Shanyrak-1 in 2006, and Duman-2 in 2011.

*Crime and Terrorism:* The impoverished suburbs also serve as ideal recruiting sites for organised crime and terrorist groups. This is an environment where it is easy to find shelter, and where persecution is unlikely because the areas are highly criminalised. Criminal groups are merging with international terrorist cells that resort to extortion, robbery, and drug trafficking to obtain funds for their attacks. Numerous villages, settlements, and country-house complexes around large cities are in fact the marginalised and criminalised *favelas* of the twenty-first century, which often serve as a refuge for extremists and terrorists, and they seem to be set to grow into a potent tool for political struggle in Central Asian countries. Recently, the region has seen a considerable uptick in Islamic State activity, and special operations have taken place both in the city centre and the suburbs.

## 20.6 The Impact of BRI on Urbanisation in Central Asia

China’s BRI provides financial and technological assistance to Central Asian countries. Despite the fact that experts consider the Belt and Road Initiative to mainly be a transport, logistics, and industrial project, sustainable urban development is also an element of the initiative. China sees urban development as inclusive of modernising energy infrastructure, developing transport and logistics, and maintaining security. Major Chinese projects that contribute to sustainable urban development include the modernisation of thermal power plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; projects of construction of transport infrastructure in Nur-Sultan, Almaty, and Bishkek; and the construction of a high-speed road from Almaty through Taraz and Kyzyl-Orda to Aktobe.

What then are the main problems regarding the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in local sustainable urban development programmes? First and foremost, the amount of Chinese financial aid for sustainable urban development is much smaller than the Chinese loans and investments that go into large-scale infrastructure projects and resource extraction. Thus, sustainable urban development does not seem to be a priority of Chinese investment. A second problem is the ineffectiveness

of Chinese financial aid. Financial support is provided without risk assessment. For example, funding allocation does not take into account the quality of governance in the countries where investments are made. The local Central Asian authorities are corrupt and cannot guarantee the efficient use of funds. This is illustrated by the unsuccessful example of light-rail transit construction in Nur-Sultan. Third, there is a severe shortage of skilled professionals in the industry, transport, and utility sectors in region. This is why Central Asian economies annually attract tens of thousands of foreign blue- and white-collar workers from China and other countries for the implementation of new industrial and construction projects. This also means, however, that Chinese projects do not provide a solution to the problem of the unemployment of unskilled workers in Central Asian cities.

## 20.7 Conclusion

Big cities in Central Asia such as Tashkent, Almaty, and Bishkek are increasingly important as centres of economic activity, but also as focal points of political and social disruption and dispute. In the 10–15 years to come, Central Asia's large cities are expected to keep growing, chiefly due to population expansion. Rural areas are overpopulated, with fertile land per capita at a virtual minimum and farmers forced to relocate. A third reason lies in the attractiveness of large cities due to the heightened economic activity and availability of jobs. As a result, hundreds of thousands of rural dwellers are moving to the major urban centres, particularly to the already crowded capitals. In the near future, infrastructure development will remain a burning issue. Two-thirds of the urban infrastructure in these urban centres, with perhaps the exception of Nur-Sultan, was built in the Soviet period. Managing social problems and political protests and riots, as took place in Kazakhstan in January 2022, in Central Asia's large cities will be key items on the political agenda of the region for the next two decades.

As section four of this chapter has shown, urbanisation has led to a shifting ethnic balance in Central Asia, especially in the cities. A dwindling number of well-educated and economically successful city-dwellers belonging to ethnic minority groups are increasingly facing mostly poor, uneducated people from the titular ethnicity that migrate to the cities from the countryside. Movement into the cities has also led to shifting power balances between clans, who are confronted with each other in the cities. These ethnic divisions could lead to conflict and political instability. Section five highlighted how the expansion of irregular settlements around big cities generates a host of social problems, including poverty and a lack of access to basic utilities, that make these areas a breeding ground for social protest, but also for crime and terrorism. Socio-economic divisions in the cities could hence also become a source of violence and instability.

In the face of this scenario, section six offered some reflections on whether BRI investments could (potentially) have any impact on these trends, coming to the conclusion that so far, the influence of the BRI has not been able to mitigate

the problematic political and social effects of urbanisation. Urban development in Central Asia should be stimulated gradually. To address the trends and challenges of urbanisation, the governments of Central Asia should gradually shift their priorities to urban infrastructure development and increase the absorption capacities of urban communities, especially by providing affordable housing and improving public utilities, as well as medical and educational services, for local communities. Last but not least, they should explore how Chinese BRI investments could better support these objectives.

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# Chapter 21

## Perceptions of Chinese Investments in Kyrgyzstan



Ilya Jones

### 21.1 Introduction

China has long seen Central Asia as an important part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially due to its location, linking Asian and European markets. But the region is incredibly diverse, requiring a nuanced and context-specific understanding from those seeking to invest or engage. Kyrgyzstan, on China's western border, is often lauded for its relative democracy in comparison with its neighbours, as well as for its vibrant civil society and healthy protest culture. It has also seen substantial political turbulence and conflict since independence, however, with the most recent unrest taking place in October 2020 when allegations of vote rigging led to the overthrow of the government amid calls for new elections (Furlong, 2020).

A country of over six million, Kyrgyzstan has experienced intermittent violent upheavals such as in the diverse southern part of the country in 2010 (Pannier, 2020b) and continuous clashes along its borders over disputed land and resources (including recent escalations with Tajikistan in 2021 and 2022) (Imanaliyeva & Ibragimova, 2021). Within communities, conservative gender norms can contribute to violence in the home, particularly against women and girls, while tensions over identity—ethnic, generational, religious—can at times turn violent. These dynamics can be compounded by heavy-handed responses from the authorities, or when violence goes unaddressed due to mistrust of police or other state structures.

This chapter looks at the impact of the BRI and Chinese investments on conflict dynamics in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the perceptions of communities towards these projects. These factors include perceptions of behaviour of Chinese companies and workers, perceived benefits and harms, notions of national identity and sovereignty,

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elite capture and the state-society gap, accountability and corruption, and lastly, the resulting protests and conflicts stemming from these. It concludes by outlining some potential avenues for improved engagement of companies and local government in a way that is sensitive to conflict dynamics and community needs.<sup>1</sup>

## 21.2 The BRI and China Investments

Despite greater international engagement since independence in 1991, Russia's influence is still strongly felt in Kyrgyzstan—especially in urban areas like its capital, Bishkek—through close linguistic, historical, economic, and security ties that have existed for many generations, and through a greater degree of positive public perceptions relating to its role as a partner for Kyrgyzstan (Laruelle & Royce, 2020).

However, since the 2000s, China has become a dominant economic power and the main source of foreign investment in Kyrgyzstan and the wider region (especially Kazakhstan). In 2021, nearly half of the Kyrgyzstan government's approximately \$5 billion debt was held by the state-owned Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM), which has been the case for many years (Standish, 2021). Since the announcement of the BRI in 2013, investments from China have been growing. According to the Kyrgyzstan government's own statistics (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021), the largest foreign direct investors in 2020 were Canada, via the Kumtor gold mine (prior to its complete transfer to the Kyrgyzstan government in April 2022), and China via other major investments in mining. Along with Russia, China has also become a major source for imports into Kyrgyzstan, accounting for \$736 million in 2020 (although this was a substantial decrease from the previous year) (Trading Economics).

While Chinese investments are often not “officially” named as BRI initiatives, they are seen to fall under its remit given their funding source and the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2013 as part of the BRI (Sacks, 2021). Few of these projects, especially in Kyrgyzstan, are seen as particularly profitable for Chinese companies, raising the question of whether alternative incentives and interests, including transit and infrastructure needed for trade elsewhere in the world, drive their implementation (Interview, 3 December 2020).

Loans from Chinese policy banks have declined in recent years, but FDI from private and Chinese state-owned enterprises continues to flow—often in coordination with local Kyrgyzstani ventures—largely in mining, geological exploration, and oil, but increasingly into other smaller-scale ventures in a range of sectors (Van der Klay & Yau, 2021). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on research originally carried out as part of a joint initiative by Saferworld and the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt on perceptions and impacts of Chinese investments in four conflict-affected countries—Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Uganda—for which interviews were conducted with experts, academics, and representatives of civil society (see Abb et al., 2021). Additional interviews were then carried out as part of an expanded briefing by Saferworld.

Development (OECD), the metals industry received over 79 per cent of all FDI in the country—over ten times the next largest sector, building and construction materials (7.1%). These were followed by transport (3.3%) and alternative energy (1.3%) (OECD, 2019). The Chinese government had previously financed several transport and energy connectivity projects as concessional loans, but these have largely tapered off and given way to small grants, including for improving or renovating transport infrastructure (Mogilevskii, 2019). More recently, at the online summit of China and Central Asian countries, President Xi Jinping promised an increase in trade turnover (up to \$70 billion by 2030) as well as \$500 in grants within the next three years (Kumenov, 2022).

A number of projects—either funded by Chinese government loans or at least partially by FDI from China—have gained notoriety at the national level. After the completion of a \$386 million project to modernise a Bishkek thermal power plant, a malfunction during the winter of 2018 left residents in the capital without heating in freezing cold temperatures, leading to accusations of corruption and an unfair tender process (Higgins, 2019) that ended with harsh penalties for former high-level officials (Fergana News Agency, 2019). Another case involves the cancellation of a \$275 million logistics centre in At-Bashy after local residents staged mass protests demanding the land not be leased to China as part of a new free trade economic zone (Yau, 2020). “A contract was signed, including a clause stating that land would be rented for 49 years to China for the logistics centre,” said one interviewee for this chapter. “There were worries that China will take part of Kyrgyzstan, and there were worries about the future generations of Kyrgyz. At Kichi-Chaarat and Salton-Sary, there have been many issues and protests related to land” (Interview, 29 April 2021). More recently, following the political upheaval in October 2020, several mining operations were seized or damaged by local residents and, in some cases, Chinese managers and workers were expelled during the unrest (Shaku, 2020).

### **21.3 Perceptions and Impacts of Chinese Investments on Local Communities**

Despite its growing economic presence in Central Asia and the frequent eagerness of the authorities (local and national) to attract funding, China is still widely mistrusted by the public in Kyrgyzstan. According to the Oxus Society’s protest tracker covering protests between January 2018 and June 2021, there were 43 rallies and protests in Kyrgyzstan which were in some way related to Chinese policy or investments (Oxus Society “Central Asia Protest Tracker”). According to the interviews conducted for this chapter between 2020 and early 2021, concerns over investments revolve around a range of issues.

First is an underlying perception that China is attempting to grab land or assets—a view that is hardly unique to Kyrgyzstan, but which is reinforced by narratives of historical competition and concern over “debt trap diplomacy,” in which land swap

agreements, leases, and asset seizures as a result of loan defaults are seen as pieces of an overall strategy to expand (Wang, 2022). As in other regions, China's investments are often seen as an attempt to gain footholds abroad to increase its influence, or to use economic leverage to guarantee alignment on key issues. The "expansionist" role of China, it is argued, means that Kyrgyzstan (and other Central Asian states) have limited autonomy in the face of China's growing influence and economic heft.

There are also widespread concerns over environmental contamination by Chinese projects, such as contamination of water or soil as a result of mining projects—along with a lack of community engagement over the environmental effects of such investments. Many also believe that investments are intended to benefit China and local elites, but not local communities. Chinese workers being paid more for the same work, or money going to corrupt officials, are cited as examples of this (Interview, 2 December 2020). This is compounded by a sense that projects are sometimes poorly planned. Examples of this can be found in the proposed transport links through Kyrgyzstan, such as the much-discussed China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway which avoids major towns or settlements and is seen to bring few benefits to locals. Such proposals have invited backlash from communities and officials alike (Pannier, 2020a)—although the railway project is now seeing some renewed enthusiasm from the leadership (Radio Azattyk, 2022). "Benefits are often only relevant to China," said one interviewee. "[For the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan railway], 80 per cent of the proposed territory is in the mountains, meaning there is no development at the local level. China chose to shorten the route to reach Uzbekistan" (Interview, 17 November 2020).

Other examples of social cleavages and citizen protest against China's BRI-related development plans arise in local communities. Community leaders have also cited as problematic the limited interaction between local people and Chinese workers, who often bring in armed security to protect their investments. The self-isolation of Chinese workers, who tend to live separately without interacting with the communities in which they live and work, can reinforce divisions and a sense of separateness (Interview, 17 November 2020). Such concerns spill over into xenophobic attitudes towards Chinese people, with protestors demanding that allegedly illegal Chinese immigrants (mostly men) be deported or that marriages between Kyrgyz and Chinese citizens be stopped (Imanaliyev, 2020). This can be driven by Kyrgyz nationalism as well as by gender norms that strongly disapprove of Kyrgyz women marrying foreign men, especially Chinese men (as this can in some minds be linked to another method of expansionism) (Eshaliyeva, 2019). One respondent indicated that these feelings were often driven by nationalist sentiment and were strongest among men and nationalist groups such as Kyrk Choro (Interview, 29 April 2021), stemming from prevailing gender norms that place expectations on Kyrgyz women to marry Kyrgyz men. "This is quite normal though," said one interviewee, "For a small state with low population density to have this fear of a big super populated country just over the border, and with the lack of information about the border, fear can build—you start thinking that one day this big neighbour will take your people, take your territory and create a lot of problems" (Interview, 12 November 2020). Kyrk Choro, with approximately 5,000 members, takes a nationalist line that points to the erosion

of Kyrgyz ethnicity and what it sees as associated values. The group has rallied around growing anti-China sentiment, looking to texts such as the epic *Manas* where the Chinese were cast as adversaries, and conducting raids or harassment of Chinese workers in Kyrgyzstan (Shailoobek kyzy, 2021a).

## 21.4 Benefits of Chinese Investment

It is not to say that these views are shared by everyone, or that opinions cannot lie somewhere in between complete support and distrust. Where some see threats or attempts at expansion, others have highlighted the benefits, both short and long-term. Firstly, there are the short-term benefits of Chinese investment bringing jobs and tax money to communities. While differences in pay, experiences of corrupt practices, and the ratio of local to Chinese workers can remain points of contention, the trends seem to be shifting towards more local labour employment (Van der Klay & Yau, 2021). Chinese projects can also bring training and skill-building programmes, as well as Chinese language instruction. For example, in response to discontent caused by mining activities, “social packages” are now expected to be provided for communities, including socioeconomic initiatives (Furstenberg & Toktomushev, 2021). In the longer term, better roads and transport links help move goods and facilitate business and can lead to knock-on effects such as boosts to local economies through increased demand for hospitality, shops, restaurants, and small businesses in locations with an influx of workers (Interview, 20 May 2021). For example, few can miss the highly visible improvements to roads in Bishkek, or from the capital to Lake Issyk-Kul and further south (Ministry of Transport and Roads of the Kyrgyz Republic). Some observers have also pointed to the fact that China is continuing to invest much-needed funds in what is considered to be a high-risk environment unstable for business, and one which is seeing a growing trend towards resource nationalism—not only against China, but against other “outsiders” who are not seen as having the interests of local residents at heart (*Financial Times*, 2021). When such sources of funding from outside the country are used effectively, it can free up government financing for other vital yet under-resourced areas such as health care or education (Interview, 20 May 2021).

Interviewees touched on the fact that local women and men tend to be employed in different kinds of jobs—with men being hired for hard labour in mining or oil refining while women can find opportunities that are often better paid than elsewhere such as cooks, cleaners or sometimes as translators or liaisons between communities and companies (although the latter would represent a relatively small proportion of those hired in total). Local and national government officials, despite being at odds with many of their constituents on this, often approve Chinese investments, seeing them as a crucial source of revenue, infrastructure development, or enrichment.

The interviewees suggest that, even within one town or village, there is no monolithic perception or view of Chinese investment or China more broadly. Perceptions can vary substantially depending on personal circumstances or other factors, such as



employment, social status, age, or gender—all of which help to determine how benefits or consequences are experienced or perceived. Views of investment can also vary depending on the stage of development of the project. For example, in areas with a history of such investments, communities are more likely to know what to expect and what benefits or consequences might come as a result—and companies themselves may have a better idea of the local context after having operated there for a while. On the other hand, where projects are in the scoping, exploratory or early stages of delivery, outcomes are more uncertain and were said to be viewed with greater suspicion (Interview, 17 November 2020). Media access and coverage also play a role—with media in different languages existing in different parts of the country. Rumours and dubious media reports can build on existing grievances or perceptions—COVID-19, for example, has led to growing misinformation and distrust of China, further entrenching opposition to any of its activities, although this seems to have died down as the virus has become more globalised and less tied to China as it was in the early stages. “Anti-Chinese sentiment and fake news is growing,” said one interviewee. “For example, there was official news that China is going to aid us [to prevent COVID transmission], but on private channels and social media, there were conspiracy theories that the masks would contain COVID” (Interview, 2 December 2020). Such perceptions have also been mitigated somewhat by China’s containment of the virus domestically. However, resistance, rumours, and discourse surrounding the various vaccines provided by different countries—namely China, Russia, Europe, and America—indicate that some scepticism remains (Eurasianet, 2020).

## 21.5 Impacts on Livelihoods and the Environment

The effects of Chinese investment projects on livelihoods vary substantially. Some projects provide direct jobs—both through direct employment as well as indirect increase in trade in the form of greater use of shops, hotels, and restaurants—and training, with a large local labour force feeling many of the benefits (Imanaliyeva, 2020). However, this can create resentment among local people who are not hired and feel left behind. For example, in Ala-Buka village, in Jalal-Abad province in the South of Kyrgyzstan, one respondent noted how those in the centre of the town benefited from infrastructure investments and jobs linked to the Full Gold Mining Company deposit, while those living further out felt they were neglected, leading to more negative associations with the investment projects there (Interview, 17 November 2020).

Many workers compare their pay or benefits to those of Chinese labourers, who are often brought in because of their specialised skills or project management experience. Some residents claim they face hardships because of the projects—including those who work on land or with livestock. They argue that their properties have been poisoned by contamination from mines or refineries (Shailoobek kyzy, 2021b). At some mining sites, artisanal and small-scale miners who once gathered gold or

other minerals close to the surface have now been squeezed out due to increased mining operations by Chinese companies (Ryskulova, 2019). “The arrival of corporate mining companies affects artisanal mining, which impacts local livelihoods,” said one interviewee. “This mainly affects men who do not find alternative employment” (Interview, 3 December 2020).

Apart from the effects on livelihoods, other environmental impacts of Chinese projects are a source of anti-Chinese protests. At deposits like Salton-Sary, which have seen violent clashes between locals and Chinese workers before (KABAR, 2019), cases of contamination of rivers and loss of livestock and crops are frequently cited in nearby settlements, although there has been limited evidence documented and few investigations have been carried out to measure these effects (Ryskulova, 2019). One interviewee described how residents in Kara-Balta, a region that depends on farming and livestock, began to complain of a strong sulphuric smell, as well as damage to crops and an ancient burial ground, leading to the suspension of the work. In Bishkek, the high-profile heat and power plant, which failed in 2018, leading to multiple arrests, is based on coal usage and is thus seen as a “nongreen” project (Mogilevskii, 2019) which contributes more visibly to the city’s dire pollution problem even if it is not the main cause (Interview, 12 November 2020).

Across the country, state inspections have been carried out, but there is little public trust in them (Interview, 10 November 2020). In some cases, Chinese companies have paid compensation, but this has done little to alleviate concerns or resolve grievances. It should be noted that Chinese companies operating abroad largely follow local environmental standards, and so host governments can also play a larger role in ensuring higher standards and enforcement. As we heard from interviewees, however, cleaner technology is more expensive and so is not always the preferred option for the host government when striking such deals (Interview, 20 May 2021). Though, with a greater appetite for green investments within China, and with the country’s desire to move away from its reputation as a polluter, future projects are likely to place more emphasis on environmental factors (Springer, 2020).

## 21.6 Corruption and Tensions with Chinese Companies

Corruption and lack of transparency are factors that significantly damage the reputation of local officials as well as Chinese investors. While the Chinese-funded Bishkek thermal power plant provides a high-profile case study where politicians were allegedly involved in corruption, the interviews suggest this is not unique. Many of the deals struck between Chinese companies and local decision-makers, which are opaque and closed to public scrutiny, involve dealings that often benefit elites or officials and undermine trust between state and society. “There are allegations because of the non-transparent nature of investment, which leads to questions,” said one interviewee (Interview, 2 December 2020). Both public and private Chinese companies prefer to deal exclusively with governments or local officials, without getting involved with civil society or communities directly. “Maybe the logic is, the

more closed you are, the fewer problems you'll have," said the interviewee. "But after years of this, it has made things worse" (Interview, 2 December 2020). If they encounter issues with communities in the course of their work, Chinese companies will work with local officials in the first instance and then escalate to higher level officials in Bishkek through backroom deals rather than engage directly with those affected (Interview, 3 December 2020). This approach—which is standard practice in China and so becomes the default in unfamiliar environments—solidifies public perceptions that the benefits of such projects are intended for a select few, and not for local residents, and can create considerable antipathy towards the companies, and sometimes China more broadly.

Isolation and securitisation of Chinese companies and workers also inflame tensions. Chinese workers often have their own compounds and live separately. Project managers hire Chinese private security companies who provide protection in the form of armed guards and equipment (Yau & van der Kley, 2020), which can lead to anxiety among communities due to a growing sense of militarisation and insecurity (Interview, 17 November 2020). These security companies are hired to protect Chinese workers from "hostile populations" and serve to increase the gulf between them and local communities (Interview, 2 December 2020). Some of the interviewees mentioned that, at times, Chinese workers can be seen to act "superior" to Kyrgyzstanis, hiring their own drivers, translators, cooks, and cleaners. While this can provide relatively well-paid jobs, it can also cause resentment and be seen as disrespectful of local people who wish to share in some of the more prestigious positions (Interview, 10 November 2020). "It can be a demeaning relationship, but it is very common in the region," said one interviewee. "It makes locals think Chinese people are there to make money from the country but that they are not respectful. The Chinese think they come to help and that locals are ungrateful" (Interview, 10 November 2020).

## 21.7 Avenues of Engagement

At the national level, despite multiple changes in leadership, many high-level officials or representatives (who are themselves not always popular) have voiced support for Chinese investments, often acting as major advocates for these projects. With few viable alternatives and an unstable investment climate, Chinese money and investments are welcome due to the relative lack of conditionality and willingness to play by local rules. Despite pledges to nationalise investments and the ongoing controversies surrounding the Kumtor mine, the government still faces a budget crisis and so is unlikely to turn away from the few outside opportunities available to fund projects (Eurasianet, 2021). In fact, most projects are launched at the initiative of the Kyrgyzstan government or businesses, which then seek funding from China (Interview, 10 November 2020). Given the unpopularity of many in the government, this support from national or local officials does not necessarily translate into greater sympathy from the public.

A pervasive trust deficit also affects the role of civil society organisations (CSOs). There are suspicions as to why CSOs—especially international entities—would want to get involved in “internal” or national matters, unless they represent the interests of foreign powers. Both the Kyrgyzstan government and Chinese companies therefore prefer to keep third parties out of the equation, meaning that no one benefits from the expertise that local or international CSOs can offer on specific issues, including those related to sustainable investment, local buy-in, and community engagement. Any social benefits or corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes are planned in coordination with the government, with few examples of work involving CSOs. In the interviews, it was highlighted that social, environmental, and economic impact assessments—either in conjunction with civil society support or not—are rarely carried out.

## 21.8 Conclusion

With all the negative perceptions of Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan—as well as the unstable political environment, relatively unprofitable ventures, unsustainable government debt, and clashes with local people—public enthusiasm for such projects is low, showing that business investments on their own do not necessarily reduce instability, especially when such investments are not broad-based and inclusive. Kyrgyzstan’s own political and economic challenges, which have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and unrest, compounded with increased animosity towards investors and China in particular, have reached a level that threatens the sustainability of Chinese investments and security of workers in the country.

For investments to be sustainable, Chinese investors and authorities in Kyrgyzstan will benefit from rethinking their approach, increasing their understanding of the local context and sensitivities, as well as the impact on local communities, including the variable impacts on women and other marginalised groups, and by considering a more transparent, inclusive, and responsive way of working with the public across all stages of the project. Taking a more inclusive approach to project planning and delivery, one that involves affected communities rather than sidestepping them, would be a first step towards building back trust and improving outcomes.

To more effectively mitigate the risks of conflict in areas that have seen Chinese investment, there are a number of avenues that companies, the government, and civil society could pursue which would improve transparency and accountability, trust, and engagement. With these preconditions in place, conflict should be less likely to occur and to disrupt communities’ lives and companies’ business operations.

One step would be to consult with civil society and the wider population about the content and design of transparent development strategies, including the national development plan and other documents guiding policy on foreign investments and more effective mechanisms for implementation. In this way, Chinese and other foreign investment in national development infrastructure and services will be

subject to greater public accountability within a transparent national development framework, and thus less open to potential conflicts of interest or accusations of corruption.

Any corruption case feeds nationalist discourses and dissonance between official and public attitudes. This is no different with regard to the attitudes in Kyrgyzstan towards China and its BRI-related investments. Greater transparency and practices that are in line with international anti-corruption standards and practices would also allow for more open dialogue and feedback on proposals. Complaint mechanisms should be introduced—or, strengthened where they exist—whereby communities can air their concerns. Such systems can be made stronger through increased capacity and response from relevant authorities.

The Kyrgyzstan and Chinese governments have yet to engage in building public confidence that loans will not result in a debt crisis or loss of autonomy, continuing (and clearly communicating) concessional policies for loans and pitching grants. More transparent policies are needed, such as public information on financing or information sessions for affected communities in Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere in the region, to provide a greater degree of transparency and as a measure to mitigate the risk of clashes. Where these transparency initiatives exist, outreach could be conducted to provide information in a way that is more widely accessible to and understandable for target audiences who may not have experience interpreting financial reporting (Furstenberg & Toktomushev, 2021). Current analysis tends to find that more exposure of investments to public scrutiny is risky given the potential dissatisfaction with aspects of projects that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. Done in the right way, however, such exposure could greatly increase the public's acceptance of Chinese projects and presence.

Chinese companies and local officials should also take into account factors that are often forgotten, such as how investments can affect dynamics between members of communities, including in relation to women of different ages and backgrounds. Assessments and consultations taking these factors into account can be held at various stages: before project implementation and at key milestones. Such measures could complement and enhance the commercial risk assessments which are already carried out by Chinese development banks. They would also create greater transparency and demonstrate Chinese concern for local people's well-being through the willingness to take into account their concerns and priorities. This would not only maximise benefits for communities and put their well-being front and centre, but it would also make commercial sense for companies to gain "buy-in" from residents, enhancing a company's social licence to operate. Such preliminary assessments, for example, might have raised people's concerns in a productive format in areas where clashes or protests occurred—especially over effects on livelihoods and practicalities around rental of land (Lemon & Jardine, 2020).

Local and national government officials in Kyrgyzstan can play a significant role in promoting transparency and conflict-sensitive business practice. Given that local actors have greater access to communities, they can have a large part to play in ensuring sufficient opportunities for public feedback on proposed projects, as well as via feedback mechanisms during the project cycle. In some cases, where government

officials may face public scepticism, they can work with trusted third parties or impartial groups to facilitate such initiatives, including CSOs where appropriate.

Increased communication through multiple channels—such as town meetings, radio, or social media, depending on how people access information in different locations—would help to raise public awareness of the ways in which existing projects already bring benefits to communities, including jobs, training programmes, and CSR programmes. These can increase access to opportunities for both women and men who may be interested in developing their skills. While budgets may be set aside for these programmes, the lack of information or substantial engagement between companies, workers, and communities can mean that perceptions shift little or that people will be unaware of the opportunities that Chinese investments can bring.

As reported in the interviews, China generally does not invest as much of its energy in tailoring its “soft power” to local conditions or perceptions. It chooses to focus on the economic sphere, with the assumption that better infrastructure will lead to development and, in turn, a better view of China and decreased conflict. While there have been some improvements through increasing exchanges between Kyrgyzstan and China—especially among younger generations, both among women and men, who are provided with scholarships to study Chinese or live in China through the Confucius Institute and other programmes—more work can be done to promote people-to-people ties and reduce animosity. This could involve “community engagement and benefit plans,” which could include activities such as cultural exchange events, free or subsidised health or education services, and sporting events.

Local media in Kyrgyzstan is one avenue through which the purpose of investments and the facts behind them can be better explained and presented—as well as an avenue to more openly discuss concerns and impacts on communities as they arise. While media outlets should not be treated as solely “public relations” opportunities to promote investment, trusted sources could provide the population with factual information as well as a space to raise their concerns.

Thus far, little research has been done on the effects of investment on gender dynamics, including factors such as access to opportunities, the workplace environment, and the changing pressures and expectations placed on women and men. Focusing on this area could help inform future engagement with women and men in communities affected by large investments.

In many parts of the country, there are strong suspicions not just of China but also international non-governmental organisations and foreign governments. These entities should be aware of how they may be perceived and focus on establishing strong collaborative partnerships with international, national, and community-based organisations that are trusted locally and which have a strong understanding of the dynamics in any given region. Such organisations can act as mediators for consultation or help monitor the implementation of projects to ensure they stay on the right side of the law and do no harm—especially where public trust in local officials is low. Where needed, requests for international organisations to provide training or other support should be discussed with local partners.

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# Chapter 22

## Opportunities and Risks from the Belt and Road Initiative in Ukraine



Yurii Poita

### 22.1 Introduction

The experience of Ukraine's cooperation with China, as well as its participation in the BRI, has its own characteristics, and in many respects differs from the models of China's interaction with other countries. Ukraine, unlike many post-Soviet republics, is characterized by a capacious market, developed industrial potential, access to the sea, and location in the region of Eastern Europe. This makes it attractive for China in terms of trade, exchange of technologies (especially in the field of mechanical engineering), purchase of raw materials and agricultural products, and creation of logistics routes for the delivery of Chinese goods to the EU (Goncharuk et al., 2016). Moreover, Ukraine is characterized by a developed defence industry, especially in the field of space, aircraft construction, shipbuilding, and missile technologies, which, in the context of the EU and US embargo on the supply of weapons to China, has made Kyiv an extremely valuable partner for Beijing (Gerasymchuk & Poita, 2018).

The second feature of Ukraine's interaction with China is that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, given its location in Central Europe, the country has for a long time adhered to a multi-vector and non-aligned policy, trying to be a "bridge" between West and East. This approach, obviously, has played out as a cruel joke for the government in Kyiv, since, not having joined the EU or NATO, Ukraine did not carry out the necessary political modernization or legal and economic reforms, and has remained a so-called "grey zone" of Russian influence (Horbulin, 2017). This aspect was probably also beneficial to China, which took advantage of the institutional and economic weakness of Ukraine to establish informal ties with the political elite and enter the Ukrainian market on preferential terms, purchasing

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military technologies cheaply and providing expensive and non-transparent loans under state guarantee in return (Samorukov & Umarov, 2020).

However, the situation changed after 2014, when, after the illegal annexation of Crimea and Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine, Kyiv drastically revised the priorities of its domestic and foreign policy, declaring membership in the EU and NATO as its strategic goal (Horbulin, 2017). China, being Russia's strategic partner, has formally distanced itself from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. However, Beijing's ambiguous position, as well as its negative vote on the resolutions related to Russian aggression in the UN General Assembly, was perceived in Kyiv as tacit agreement of China with the actions of Russia (Gerasymchuk & Poita, 2018). It is likely due to this and other reasons that, since 2013, the political dialogue at the highest level between Kyiv and Beijing has been practically frozen. From then until now, there has not been a single visit at the level of heads of state or government. However, this has not prevented the progressive increase in trade turnover between the countries. This fact confirms the possibility of separating politics from economics in bilateral relations between countries.

At the same time, the intensification of the United States' strategic competition with China has created a number of tough questions for Kyiv: how to build its policy with China, which in the US and the EU is viewed as a systemic adversary, and on some issues even as a threat? How can Ukraine, which is trying to integrate into European structures with a priority on liberal-democratic values, react to violations of human rights in Xinjiang, or China's actions in the waters of the East China and South China Seas? It is obvious that for Ukraine, which is trying to become part of the European and Euro-Atlantic communities, the strategy of keeping economics and politics separate in its interaction with China is becoming more and more difficult to implement. Moreover, since 2019, China has become the main trade partner for Ukraine, and likely has intentions to continue deepening economic cooperation, intentions which Ukraine likely shares.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the state of the Ukrainian-Chinese relations and the reasons why there are risks in the relationship for Ukrainian interests, and to provide an overview of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats presented by Ukraine's participation in the BRI in different spheres as well as in the national and geopolitical contexts. It also reflects on the implications of the BRI for democracy in Ukraine. The correctness of our assessment was confirmed by the reaction of China to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

## **22.2 Political and Economic Relations Between Ukraine and China**

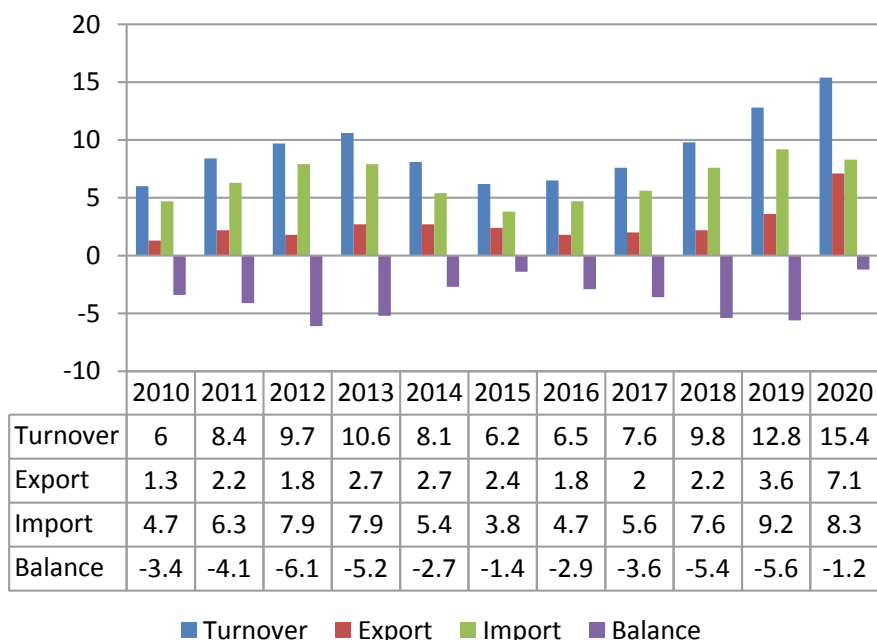
Bilateral relations between Ukraine and China are based on a broad regulatory framework. Since 1991, a significant array of agreements have been signed in the field of political relations, trade, law, science, defence, space exploration, transport, education, culture, sports, health care, etc. (Golovko et al., 2021). Since 2011, the two

countries have officially declared their relations strategic by signing a Joint Declaration on the Establishment and Development of Strategic Partnership Relations, and in 2013 the second set of documents was signed, according to which the parties pledged to deepen strategic partnership relations.

Only in 2017 did the Ukraine government sign agreements with China on the BRI, the so-called “Ukraine-China Action Plan for the implementation of the initiative to build an economic belt of the Great Silk Road and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.” In 2020, the parties signed the Program of Bilateral Cooperation between Ukraine and China for the period until 2025 as part of the joint construction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road.”

These agreements contributed to the progressive deepening of trade and economic relations. Trade turnover increased to US\$10.6 billion in 2013; after the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia and the occupation of part of the Ukrainian territories, the trade turnover between Ukraine and China fell to US\$6.2 billion. However, the turnover gradually recovered and, in 2020 reached its maximum (US\$15.4 billion), in which the share of Ukrainian exports was \$7.1 billion (14.5% of total exports), as shown in Fig. 22.1 (Ukrstat, 2021).

Trade with China in 2020 amounted to 10.9% of GDP and 15.1% of the total foreign trade turnover of Ukraine, whereas 20 years ago, these shares were 1.9% and 2.3% respectively (Goriunov et al., 2021).



**Fig. 22.1** Trade turnover between Ukraine and China, 2010–2020, (US\$ billion) (Source State Statistics Service of Ukraine [Ukrstat, 2021])

Military-technical cooperation was one of the most promising sectors of relations. Ukraine has become an important partner for China as a source of defence products and technologies for aircraft, spacecraft, and shipbuilding. For example, the first Chinese aircraft carrier, Liaoning, was originally purchased from Ukraine in 1998, then refined and put into service with the People's Liberal Army (PLA) Navy. It became the basis for the further construction of China's aircraft carrier fleet, and the first aircraft carrier built by the Chinese industry, "Shandong," has a design similar to the Liaoning. Another area of cooperation was in the supply of gas turbine installations for the Chinese Navy, as well as amphibious assault ships, aircraft engines, etc. (Poita, 2021a). According to SIPRI (2021), the volume of Ukrainian exports to China is estimated at approximately US\$ 80–90 million annually, although exact figures are unclear due to peculiarities of methodology.

However, economic relations have significant drawbacks. First, the quantitative and qualitative imbalance of trade should be noted. Since 2005, the balance has been negative, while, on average, Chinese exports were almost three times higher than Ukrainian, and in 2008 almost nine times. The exception was 2020, when Ukrainian exports were almost equal to Chinese ones. Bilateral trade is also unbalanced in its structure. Ukrainian exports are almost entirely raw materials (in 2020, iron ore was 35%, grain 25%, oil and fats 15%, ferrous metals 9%), while Chinese imports are predominantly high-tech (Goriunov et al., 2021; Ukrstat, 2021).

Second, the investment is far from the desired. Even though China is one of the largest investors in the world, the share of Chinese investments in the Ukrainian economy is negligible. According to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, direct investment in the Ukrainian economy from China in 2015–2019 was only \$127 million, bringing China's share over this period to only 0.07% of all foreign investment in the country (Ukrstat, 2021).

Third, most of the promising economic initiatives have remained unfulfilled. For example, the Ukrainian-Chinese industrial parks built as part of the Action Plan did not bring any results (Samorukov & Umarov, 2020), let alone create jobs, or any innovation and industrial production. Ukraine's efforts to be integrated into Chinese production chains ended in nothing. A series of negotiations on the establishment of a Chinese-Ukrainian aircraft plant in Odessa (Ukraine) did not bring about any positive outcomes. China, having received the required sample of weapons, as a rule, masters the technological cycle, copies the sample, and subsequently refuses the services of Ukraine. With significant production advantages and huge economic resources, China could squeeze Ukraine out of the global arms market (Poita, 2021a).

As a result, the economic participation of China in Ukraine remains weak. On the territory of Ukraine, with a few exceptions, there are no industrial Chinese companies. This suggests that China is not interested in creating production in Ukraine but is continuing to use Ukraine in order to access cheap raw materials and agricultural products, as well as a source of military technology. Most of the existing Chinese companies in Ukraine create little added value, few jobs, and no value to production chains. The largest Chinese assets were created by other companies and then bought or received as collateral (Goriunov et al., 2021).

Some Ukrainian politicians and experts believed that the signing of an Association agreement with the EU could breathe new life into Ukrainian-Chinese cooperation, allowing it to be taken from just trade to the level of joint production (Goncharuk et al., 2016; Venher, 2018). For instance, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has stated, “We have an Association Agreement with the EU and a deep and comprehensive free trade zone ... Therefore, the interests of Ukrainian business, EU business and Chinese business should converge not only in terms of logistics of goods from China to the EU, but in terms of production. To produce goods here, saturate the domestic market and also export to the EU.”

The geographical proximity of Ukraine to the EU, the availability of a fairly qualified and cheap labour force, and the liberalization of trade with the EU, in theory, should have facilitated a more active participation of Chinese business, which would help Ukraine create new jobs, produce products with high added value, and strengthen its economic security. However, these expectations did not come true. The share of Chinese investments in the Ukrainian economy did not increase, neither after the signing of the Association Agreement nor after joining the BRI. Most of the projects proposed within the BRI have remained on paper, and those implemented have not become elements of transport connectivity between China and Europe. As the late ambassador of Ukraine to China Sergii Kamyshev said in 2020, “The strategic partnership between Ukraine and the PRC remains largely declarative” (Gazeta Den', 2020). By contrast, in 2007 he had outlined colossal plans to deepen relations in a number of industries, from aircraft construction to the creation of joint technology parks (Gazeta Den', 2007).

### 22.3 Risks of Ukraine's Cooperation with China

In addition to these aspects, which are generally quite common for international cooperation, China has recently brought a number of risks and even threats to Ukraine. One of these concerns an attempt in 2016 by the Chinese company Beijing Skyrizon Aviation Industry Investment to acquire the Ukrainian company Motor Sich, which is one of the key defence enterprises of Ukraine in the field of aircraft engine building (Hurska, 2021). In 2017, the Security Service of Ukraine stopped the deal by opening a criminal case under the article “sabotage and destruction of the enterprise.” The situation remained unresolved until the US Department of Commerce added Skyrizon to the Military End User list due to ties to China and that country's People's Liberation Army (PLA). According to Washington, “Skyrizon is actively seeking to acquire intellectual property and technology to advance key military capabilities that threaten US national security, including the capability to develop, produce, or maintain military items, such as aircraft engines, satellites, and cruise missiles” (US Embassy in Ukraine, 2021).

According to the Kyiv-based Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies (CACDS), the cooperation of Motor Sich with Skyrizon creates both internal and external threats to Ukraine. For example, if China gains control over

the enterprise, Ukraine's capabilities in the development of aircraft and missile programmes in the interests of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and for export would be significantly reduced. Experts have also mentioned the possibility of critical technology being laundered to Russia via Chinese companies, particularly in connection with the implementation of joint Chinese-Russian programmes in the helicopter industry. Finally, Ukraine could see the development of military-political, military-technical, and military cooperation with NATO partners threatened. This includes a number of promising projects in the fields of aviation, navy ships, air defence, and missile defence—all of which are now urgently needed to build an effective defence system in the context of the military conflict with Russia (CACDS, 2021). The sensitivity of the situation was also confirmed when US National Security Advisor John Bolton visited Kyiv in 2019 to prevent the Chinese from acquiring Motor Sich. Based on these and other concerns, the Ukrainian government began the process of the nationalization of Motor Sich, drawing criticism from Beijing which has demanded US \$4.5 billion in compensation “for alleged unfair treatment of Chinese investors by Ukraine” (Global ). It is obvious that the Chinese leadership, when trying to gain access to the enterprise, clearly understood what threats this would present for Ukraine, but the desire to obtain technology for the PLA was more important than the consequences for Ukraine.

In addition, a number of other developments in 2021 demonstrated China's attempts to influence Ukraine. One of the most striking of these was Ukraine's withdrawal of its signature from a joint UN statement condemning human rights violations in Xinjiang.

According to several media reports, Kyiv's withdrawal was the result of Chinese pressure and threat to cancel the previously planned delivery of 500,000 doses of the COVID-19 SinoVac vaccine (AP News, 2021). This fact not only demonstrates that China is using vaccine diplomacy for political purposes but was also attempting to influence Ukraine's value priorities, forcing it to abandon its position on human rights, drawing criticism in the political and expert circles of Ukraine (Poita, 2021c). A number of subsequent developments made the situation more acute and uncertain: Ukraine's statement on the signing of a deal with China on deepening partnership in the construction of infrastructure and obtaining a soft loan; and statements by some Ukrainian politicians about their readiness to deepen relations with China and even use Chinese experience in state-building in Ukraine (Poita, 2021b).

In fact, the intensification of Ukrainian-Chinese relations in 2021 cannot be considered simply a return to multi-vector policy in Ukraine, a pivot towards China, or an attempt to use the “China card” to put pressure on the West. It is clear that integration into the EU and NATO are key in terms of the survival for the Ukrainian state in the face of a permanent threat from Russia. Moreover, Ukrainian society does not accept other vectors of development (Ukrinform, 2021), and China cannot substitute for Ukraine what the West offers in terms of economy, security, and values. Most likely, Ukraine is trying to be more pragmatic in its relationship with China, trying to expand markets for its goods, attract investment, and rebuild decrepit infrastructure. Simultaneously, Kyiv is trying to draw “red lines” in its relations with China, limiting

these to trade and investment issues, leaving strategic sectors of the economy, 5G networks, and critical infrastructure facilities closed to Chinese involvement. Foreign Minister Kuleba's statements that "China is not an enemy, not a friend, but just a trading partner," confirm such an understanding. This is also reflected in Kyiv's recent actions, including a bill on the screening of foreign investments and keeping Chinese companies away from strategic sectors in Ukraine (Poita, 2021b; EAST Center, 2021).

Nevertheless, the situation with Motor Sich, vaccine diplomacy, and the strengthening of the US-Chinese strategic competition raised a number of questions regarding what risks relations with China pose for Ukraine; what consequences the increased dependence on China will bring; whether Ukraine's values are being undermined; and how to shape Ukrainian-Chinese relations in such a way that the greatest possible economic benefits are derived from the cooperation while any possible threats are neutralized.

## 22.4 Analysis of the Impact of the BRI on Ukraine

An analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) helps us to better assess the possible long-term impact of the BRI in a country such as Ukraine. Since the BRI is not just a connectivity project for the transportation of goods but provides for the deepening of political, economic, and cultural cooperation with China (Sarker et al., 2018), this analysis includes Ukraine's participation in the BRI in a broader context—considering the advantages, disadvantages, risks, and opportunities not only of the BRI itself, but also of a general deepening of cooperation between Ukraine and China (Table 22.1).

The SWOT analysis shows that the **strengths** of participating in the BRI lie in the easy acquisition of membership (as opposed to, for example, EU membership) and likely easier subsequent financing for projects that China considers to be part of its transport initiative for interconnection with Europe or economic expansion. It is also likely that active participation in the BRI will allow Ukraine to more actively interact with China on investment and trade, and to do business with Chinese partners (Gerasymchuk & Poita, 2018; Goncharuk et al., 2016; Goriunov et al., 2021).

However, participation in the BRI also presents a number of **weaknesses** that Ukraine should take into account. First, there are geopolitical risks, such as a possible weakening of Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO, since the EU and NATO view China as a challenge or threat in a number of areas (*Financial Times*, 2021a, 2021b). Second, receiving Chinese funding will force Ukraine to adapt its legislation to something that differs from the approaches, norms, and standards of the EU (Mladen, 2019). This aspect is important in terms of the possible creation of problems for the further enlargement of the EU, as it can slow down reforms in Ukraine, in particular the adaptation of Ukrainian laws to common European practices.

Third, greater participation in the BRI will most likely increase Ukraine's economic, technological, and financial dependence on China, which, in the face



**Table 22.1** SWOT analysis of BRI impact on Ukraine

Strengths	Weaknesses
1.Ease of joining and obtaining project financing 2.More profitable investment, trade, and business contracts with China	1.Weakening of European and Euro-Atlantic integration 2.Contradictions between Chinese and European legal requirements for project financing 3.Increased dependence of Ukraine on China and susceptibility to pressure 4.China’s lack of interest in including Ukraine in global production chains, leaving Ukraine as a source of raw materials and agricultural products 5.Corruption practices in China’s foreign investment 6.Expansion of Chinese influence to other areas
Opportunities	Threats
1.Possibility of being included in global transport flows and logistics corridors (unlikely) 2.More active participation of China in regional affairs as a counterbalance to Russia (unlikely) 3.More profit from export to China 4.Alternative financing for projects (contains risks) 5.Development of military-technical cooperation (contains limitations and risks)	1.China’s acquisition of defence companies leading to leakage of technologies and/or de-industrialization of Ukraine 2.Weakening of defence partnership with Western partners; inclusion of Ukrainian defence companies on US sanctions list 3.Transformation of economic dependence into political influence of China 4.Strengthening of Chinese influence in the academic and scientific environment 5.Technological dependence on China, including 5G technologies 6.Weakening of Ukraine’s international position on the protection of human rights and international law

of increasing US-Chinese strategic competition, might be used by Beijing to put pressure on Kyiv, for example to prevent Ukraine from adhering to the position of Western partners on human rights violations in China (Poita, 2021c), the situation in the East China and South China Seas, or other initiatives that Beijing views as anti-Chinese.

Fourth, from an economic point of view, given the specifics of China’s geo-economics, it is unlikely that China will use the BRI to create value-added enterprises in Ukraine. Most likely, Chinese involvement will focus on loans for the construction of infrastructure and the obtaining of cheap raw materials and agricultural products (Goriunov et al., 2021). In this regard, the likelihood of Ukraine being able to use the BRI to benefit from inclusion in global production chains remains low. Fifth, it has also been shown that China’s foreign investments may contain a corruption component, or hidden conditions with benefits for China (Ferguson, 2017).

A final weakness concerns the possibility of the BRI increasing Chinese influence not only in the field of economics and financing but also in politics, education, culture, and ideology, which can bring more complex risks for Ukraine.

The list of **opportunities** for Ukraine is quite large; however, many of these are assessed as unlikely (their inclusion in the analysis was due to an ongoing discussion on them in the Ukrainian scientific and expert environment).

For example, Ukraine's prospects of being included as an element of transport corridors from China to Europe are low based on the fact that the cheapest and shortest overland route has already been built and passes through Belarus. The transport of Chinese goods through the territory of Ukraine is probably less profitable economically, and the use of Ukrainian seaports in the Black Sea requires the use of the BRI branch across the Caspian Sea, which is much more costly and time-consuming than the others (Samorukov & Umarov, 2020). Furthermore, full use of the northern branch of transport corridors will certainly be limited by Russia, which will use this route as a means of putting pressure on Ukraine.

Secondly, some Ukrainian researchers advocating deepening relations between Ukraine and China believe that China's more active participation in Ukraine will reduce the threats posed by Russia, and that, if China had had large economic assets in Ukraine, Russia would not have dared attack Ukraine in 2014. From our point of view, this hypothesis is untenable, since many cases confirm China's unwillingness to become involved in conflicts that do not directly affect it. China has kept distance from all Ukrainian initiatives related to Russian aggression, including participation in the Crimean platform. Additionally, its pattern of votes against UN resolutions on the conflict with Russia demonstrates its unwillingness to spoil relations with Moscow.

This relationship can also be seen in China's vote in abstention during the UN Security Council Resolution on the War in Ukraine in February 2022. China's position on the Russian-Ukrainian war is often phrased as "pro-Russian neutrality." China, on the one hand, says that it supports international law, the UN Charter, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the independence of Ukraine, but, on the other hand, never criticizes Russia for the invasion. China says instead that Russian so-called security concerns should be respected; the reason for the war is expansion of NATO and the irresponsible policy of the US. China also criticizes Western sanctions and even spreads Russian disinformation such as that Ukraine boasts 20 US biolabs, or even that the atrocities in Bucha have been faked.

This illustrates that, in the context of strategic competition with the US, China's partnership with Russia has much greater value for Beijing (Kashin, 2019).

Thirdly, it is possible that participation in the BRI will provide more opportunities for Ukrainian companies exporting to China, which will have a positive effect on revenues and the Ukrainian budget. At the same time, as practice has shown, expansion of trade can happen without active participation in the BRI. Also, the increase in exports would be quantitative, not qualitative, since high-tech development of the Ukrainian economy with the help of the BRI is unlikely due to China's interests and strategy in Ukraine.

Moreover, some of the opportunities offered by participation in the BRI may be associated with additional risks or disadvantages. For example, as mentioned above, the prospect of obtaining alternative financing for projects in Ukraine, including infrastructure renovation, requires adaptation of legislation to standards other than the EU standards. In addition, conditions for Chinese loans are often worse compared with the EU's; they are not transparent, contain hidden political conditions, and could have a corruption component (Goriunov et al., 2021). The same issues can be said about the possibility of developing military-technical cooperation between Ukraine and China. In theory, more active political ties within the BRI could enhance cooperation in the defence sector; however, in practice China will not undertake efforts to strengthen Ukrainian defence capabilities. Projects to create joint defence enterprises have not been implemented, and Ukraine's transfer of sensitive technologies to China is associated with the geopolitical risk of undermining defence cooperation with Western countries (New Europe Center, 2020; Poita, 2021a).

The list of **threats** is longer than the list of opportunities, and these are more complex. Many of these are implicit and might occur under certain circumstances. Obviously, if Ukraine is much more dependent on the Chinese economy, it will be more difficult for the Ukrainian leadership to resist China's attempts to acquire strategic assets in Ukraine. For example, China's purchase of strategic defence enterprises in Ukraine (as demonstrated by the Motor Sich case) entails a number of associated risks, such as the leakage of military and dual-use technologies, transfer of Ukrainian production assets to China, de-industrialization of the Ukrainian industry, and disruption of the implementation of existing promising defence programmes. It may also bring a deterioration of relations with allies and partners who regard China as a threat to their national security, the inclusion of Ukrainian defence companies cooperating with China on the US sanctions list, and the weakening of military cooperation between Ukraine and its Western partners (CACDS, 2021).

Furthermore, the financing of projects by China, including infrastructure projects, can bring significant risks. Ukraine's dependence on Chinese funding, equipment, and markets can be used by China to exert political pressure to achieve its political objectives. It is expected that, in the event of a further increase in China's share in Ukrainian exports, Chinese propaganda will intensify, using narratives of further deepening relations on the basis of an "important trade partnership," discrediting Ukraine's relations with the West, and creating conditions for the further penetration of Chinese companies into sensitive sectors of the Ukrainian economy.

Fourth, similar assessments can be made for technological dependence. It is expected that, via the BRI, China will promote its information and telecommunications services, including the construction of 5G networks, which will lead to: the formation of technological dependence on the products of Chinese IT companies; access of Chinese special services to the personal data of citizens of Ukraine, including those who work in government, government agencies, and strategic enterprise; threats of leakage of sensitive information from Ukraine to the PRC; and weakening of relations with partners of Ukraine who consider the PRC to be a threat in the cyber sphere (Kaska et al., 2019; New Europe Center, 2020).

Risks are also presented by the deepening cooperation in the field of education. The signing of an agreement on the creation of a Ukrainian-Chinese alliance of universities in 2021 (MON, 2021) can bring about the strengthening of the information and propaganda influence of China, the spread of Chinese narratives, the formation of pro-Chinese expert and public thought, and the creation of pro-Chinese lobbies in the academic environment.

Last but not least, deepening cooperation within the BRI could lead to a weakening of Ukraine’s position on human rights and international law. Economic, technological, financial dependence, and vaccine diplomacy can become an effective tool for Beijing to place pressure on Kyiv, including in the ideological and value spheres (Poita, 2021c).

### 22.5 Impact of the BRI on Democracy in Ukraine

In general, no evidence was found for the direct impact of the BRI on democratic institutions in Ukraine, including on free and fair elections, political rights and civil liberties, an independent judiciary, citizen participation, and civil society. Since Ukraine joined the BRI in 2017, the main indicators of democracy (for example, the Democracy Index, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index) have not changed, and have even shown a gradual increase (Table 22.2) (EIU, 2021; World in Data, 2021).

Free presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine in 2019 may confirm adherence to democratic norms, and in this aspect, the influence of Russia is much more significant and dangerous for Ukraine than that of China.

This may suggest that the BRI, in the case of Ukrainian, has not had a direct destructive influence on democratic processes. However, it should be noted that China’s influence on democratic processes can be indirect and may not be reflected in the indicators of democracy. Considering that the CPC’s efforts are aimed at achieving two main goals, expanding its influence abroad and promoting a positive image of China in the world, the following areas of Chinese activity in Ukraine, which may have an indirect impact on democratic processes, should be noted.

First, the use of vaccine diplomacy and economic dependence aids in the formation of a favourable attitude of Ukraine towards China, including on human rights and international law. This can be seen as an attempt to change the country’s values,

**Table 22.2** Changes in the democracy index in Ukraine, 2015–2020

Index of Democracy	Year					
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index	5.70	5.70	5.69	5.69	5.90	5.81
V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index	0.24	0.26	0.25	0.25	0.32	0.35

encouraging Ukraine to ignore basic human rights in exchange for medical and economic cooperation (Poita, 2021c; AP News, 2021).

Secondly, given that the main beneficiaries of trade with China are large agricultural holdings and metallurgical companies, it is possible that China, via ties with oligarch owners, will try to promote its interests among the political elites of Ukraine (EAST Center, 2021). These issues can increase the risks of a stronger Chinese economic and political lobby in Ukraine, as well as the development and encouragement of corrupt practices. This could have a negative impact on the political system of Ukraine in terms of democratic development, transparency, and the rule of law.

Third, China has made efforts to create a pro-Chinese lobby in the scientific, media, and expert environment. China's narratives in Ukraine generally do not differ from its narratives in other countries (for example, that China will never be a hegemon, that it helps other countries in the fight against the pandemic, that it maintains mutually beneficial cooperation, that the BRI initiative is a blessing for the rest of the world, etc.). However, other narratives, aimed directly at Ukraine, may contain risks as these are focused on changing Ukraine's foreign policy priorities and weakening liberal-democratic values. These include, for example, the narratives that Ukraine should build a policy towards China independent of the US and the EU; that Motor Sich should be handed over to China, since this issue will cause problems in trade; and that Ukraine should not endorse the statements of Western countries critical of the human rights situation and the situation in the South China Sea (EAST Center, 2021).

To spread these narratives, China has created and funded a few media, scientific, and expert organizations that actively criticize Ukraine's attempts to define so-called "red lines" around its cooperation with China, calling instead for closer cooperation with the PRC. These efforts already demonstrate results: academics and experts in Ukraine, as a rule, try to avoid talking about the risks associated with China, eschewing sensitive topics, for example, violations of human rights and the actions of the PRC in the East China and South China Seas, or Chinese cyber activity. According to sources in the media, China has entered into deals with a number of Ukrainian online media outlets that regularly publish positive information about China, often directly from Chinese media. These issues can create risks for democratic freedoms (such as restrictions on the freedom of academic and cultural expression, and media self-censorship).

## 22.6 Conclusion

From the case of Ukraine, one can draw some conclusions on how economically dependent countries in Eurasia will develop their political and economic relations with China in the light of the BRI. Relations between Ukraine and China could present prospects for the Ukrainian economy in terms of increasing its exports, obtaining

loans on favourable terms, and using Chinese companies to modernize Ukrainian infrastructure.

At the same time, these opportunities are accompanied by the risks of the use of economic, technological, financial, and vaccine dependence by Beijing to pressure Kyiv, penetrate critical sectors of Ukraine, gain access to sensitive technologies, and encourage corrupt practices.

Moreover, some of the risks relate to changes in the value priorities of Ukraine, which could affect the processes of democratization and the adaptation of Ukrainian legislation to the norms and standards of the EU. Other risks could undermine the geopolitical prospects of Ukraine in terms of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The effects of China's influence, and of the BRI in particular, on democratic processes in Ukraine have not been studied and require additional research. At the moment, however, it can be said that China has begun to use Ukraine's vulnerabilities (in terms of economy, technology, and health) to achieve its geopolitical goals. Achieving a balance between economic cooperation and threat reduction will depend on Kyiv's clear understanding of both the opportunities and risks presented by cooperation with China, as well as the willingness of Western partners to offer an acceptable alternative to the Chinese BRI "carrots."

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# Chapter 23

## Chinese Linkage and Democracy in Pakistan



G. van der Zwan

### 23.1 Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia, and especially in South Asia, has had a different reception in the various countries of the region. While India has not officially signed up for the BRI owing to security implications, Pakistan has been one of the biggest recipients of Chinese investment under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Other South Asian countries, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, have also joined China's BRI, whereas only India and Bhutan are not BRI members. Overall, South Asia has been a priority zone for the "Early Harvest Projects" of the BRI (Singh, 2019). The BRI projects in Pakistan fall within the comprehensive economic cooperation of the CPEC, initiated in 2013 and formally launched in 2015, with an initial investment amounting to US\$46 billion (Shah, 2015).

The first phase of CPEC under then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of the Punjab-based Pakistan Muslim League-N, or (PML-N) political party,<sup>1</sup> focused primarily on energy and infrastructure development projects. The second phase of CPEC corresponded with a change in government in 2018 to Prime Minister Imran Khan of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) political party. This led to a shift in dynamics for the corridor cooperation as Khan's new government renegotiated the CPEC terms and conditions and focused more on socioeconomic projects. While CPEC energy

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<sup>1</sup> Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy with federal governance and a multi-party political system. The major political parties are the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, Awami National Party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F), and Muttahida Qaumi Movement, among others.

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projects were at the core of the PML-N's development plans and re-election agenda, the new government revised the projects and budget allocations to fit its new political priorities. The second phase of CPEC has also allowed more space for military involvement, and further institutional build-up has strengthened its influence on the decision-making process, especially with the establishment of the CPEC Authority, initially chaired by a retired Army general, in 2019 (Baabar, 2019). More military control typically worsens the quality of democracy in Pakistan (Boni, 2019; Wolf, 2020).

As Pakistan's democracy has had a tumultuous history of governance, with multiple military takeovers since its independence in 1947, democracy has never fully consolidated in the country. However, over the last decade, two successive democratic governments successfully completed five-year terms, with relatively free and fair elections in 2008 and 2013 (Afzal, 2019). Moreover, the 18th Constitutional Amendment under the PPP-led government in 2010 marked a shift towards increased federalism and decentralization (Waseem, 2010). In 2013, the launch of CPEC, under Sharif's leadership, was welcomed by both federal and provincial governments. However, in the early years of CPEC, provincial grievances emerged, especially as the selection of CPEC road network "routes" and the allocation of funds prioritized Punjab and Sindh provinces (Boni & Adeney, 2020). With less space initially given to provincial perspectives, we have witnessed a shift towards more centralized decision-making. In 2018, under Khan's government, centralization continued along with an enhanced and institutionalized role for the military with the CPEC Authority and new military-led coordinating bodies for CPEC management. Pakistan has been moving towards a weak-civilian and strong military-state hybrid regime type (Siddiq, 2020) which hinders the prospects of democracy in the country (Boni, 2019).

Is this centralization and increased military involvement in CPEC decision-making due to increased Chinese engagement, or is it due to domestic political dynamics in Pakistan? To understand the impact of Chinese engagement under CPEC on the level of democracy in Pakistan, I use a multidimensional concept and framework of "linkage" to grasp various levels of engagement with China. The "international linkages" are the cross-border connections that countries develop across various socioeconomic and political aspects (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Given this, I analyse Pakistan's linkage with China under CPEC vis-à-vis the democratic decline in Pakistan and argue that the centralization under CPEC and the prominent role of the military in the CPEC decision-making can be understood to be one of the main factors for democratic decline in the CPEC period.

This chapter proceeds in the following manner. First, it carves out the CPEC portfolio in the light of the BRI, including its projects, financing and investment, sectoral allocation, and geographical distribution within Pakistan since 2013. Second, it discusses the Chinese Linkage under CPEC, its conceptualization, and patterns in the handling and implementation of projects. Third, the chapter examines the level of (de)democratization with increased Chinese engagement and traces the domestic political changes and mechanisms under the CPEC. Finally, the conclusion presents some key implications and the way forward.

## 23.2 What is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor?

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC, or 中国-巴基斯坦经济走廊 in Chinese) was initiated in 2013 when Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Pakistan and both countries agreed on “Deepening Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, 2020). Later, during President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Pakistan in April 2015, a series of memorandums of understanding were signed regarding an estimated investment of US\$46 billion for several energy and infrastructure projects which were later projected to be around US\$62 billion. In 2017, the Long-Term Plan for the CPEC (2017–2030) was signed elaborating on the CPEC concept and its financing and investment mechanisms, among other things. The CPEC is a 3000-km-long network and regional connectivity framework linking Kashgar in Xinjiang, China, to Gwadar in Balochistan, Pakistan, and also connecting with Karachi in Sindh province and other southern coastal cities via the Khunjerab Pass in Pakistan (CPEC, 2017). The geo-strategic position of Gwadar at the intersection of the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz makes it an ideal entryway for energy, oil, and trade supplies to Pakistan (Boni, 2016). The corridor routes aim to establish energy and logistic hubs and to promote trade and commerce, as well as industrial and agricultural cooperation between the two countries.

The CPEC cooperation framework focuses on four major areas namely, energy, infrastructure, Gwadar Port, and industrial cooperation (CPEC, 2019). For the purposes of implementation, the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) has been established with offices in Beijing and Islamabad (Rizvi, 2015). The JCC provides inter-ministerial coordination for CPEC projects along with ten joint working groups. Consulting with relevant ministries, the JCC holds regular sessions and reviews the progress of, discusses, and reaches agreements on the projects (CPEC, 2019).

### 23.2.1 CPEC Financing and Investment

As the debt-financing arrangements vary from project to project, it is crucial to map different investments within each sector under the CPEC framework. Most of the CPEC projects for electricity generation are commercial contracts, infrastructure projects are bilateral concessional loans with a subsidized interest rate, and other projects are interest-free loans or grants (CPEC, 2019). The initial estimates of Chinese investment under CPEC comprised 64% FDI, 24% concessional loans, 6% commercial loans, and 1% grants (Rafiq, 2017). Total investments until 2018 in initiated and completed CPEC projects amounted to US\$18.9 billion, covering 22 projects (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Islamabad, Pakistan, 2018). Moreover, with the second phase of CPEC projects, including the Mainline-1 rail project worth US\$9.2 billion, the estimated cost of total CPEC projects reached US\$29 billion in 2020 (Haider, 2020).

### 23.2.2 CPEC Sectoral Distribution

Most of CPEC investment in the first phase was dedicated to energy projects for electricity generation as Pakistan had been facing severe electricity outages. In 2011, the power crisis worsened, with huge gaps of 7,000 megawatts between the supply and demand for electricity (Kessides, 2013). The power outages in industrial areas and cities lasted for 14 h a day, and rural areas faced power cuts of up to 20 h a day (Aziz & Ahmad, 2015). Thus, the majority of the CPEC projects were allocated to reducing the power gap. Focusing on energy projects also aligned with the electoral priorities of the PML-N government and served as a token for re-election (Boni & Adeney, 2020).

Although some electricity generation projects involved hydropower plants, solar, and wind power plants, most of the electricity production has been through coal-fired power plants. There has been a “pull-factor” from Pakistan to use coal given its abundance, cost-effectiveness, and quicker integration into the national grid, and a “push-factor” from the Chinese companies to reduce their overcapacity, and export coal-power generation equipment overseas (Downs, 2019). Of the “Early Harvest Projects” from the first phase of the CPEC, 65% were energy, 18% infrastructure, 15% railway, and 2% Gwadar projects out of the total estimated US\$62 billion (Obortunity, 2020). According to data from the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, the financing of the 22 CPEC projects falls into the five categories listed in Table 23.1.

The infrastructure projects were funded by Chinese concessional loans of US\$5.87 billion, energy projects were financed by Chinese and partner companies for US\$12.8 billion, and Chinese interest-free loans, grants, and the upgrade to the Mainline-1 rail project were US\$143 million, US\$29 million, and US\$3 million in cost, respectively (Table 23.1).

For CPEC projects, the domestic political landscape and partisan politics in Pakistan had a huge impact in altering Sino-Pakistani cooperation (Adeney & Boni, 2021). The sectoral distribution of projects as well as the shifting dynamics in CPEC route controversies, the distribution of funds, and the asymmetric centre-province relations all highlight the intertwined nature of domestic political and economic priorities. Furthermore, China-Pakistan ties have strengthened along various dimensions under the CPEC cooperation. The next section discusses the strengthening of these linkages.

### 23.3 Chinese Linkage Under CPEC

Since 2013, under the global connectivity plan of the BRI, China has enhanced its relations with many regional and international players by reviving the ancient Silk Road trade routes and creating new economic corridors and maritime routes. The BRI investments across various countries have also reinvigorated China’s ties in terms of trade and commerce, people-to-people exchanges, cultural cooperation,

**Table 23.1** CPEC projects and financing

	<b>Project Name</b>	<b>Cost (US\$m)</b>	<b>Total Cost (US\$m)</b>
<b>Infrastructure Projects</b>	KKH Phase-II (Havelian-Thakot) Project	1315	5874
	Peshawar-Karachi Motorway (Sukkur-Multan Section) Project	2889	
	Lahore Orange Line Project	1626	
	China-Pakistan Cross-border Optical Fiber Cable Project	44	
<b>Energy Projects</b>	UEP 100 MW Wind Farm Project	252	12,815
	Dawood 50 MW Wind Farm Project	115	
	Sachal 50 MW Wind Farm Project	134	
	Zonergy Solar Power Project -Quaid-e-Azam Solar Park	460	
	Port Qasim Coal-fired Power Project	2085	
	Three Gorges Second Wind Power Project	224	
	Gwadar Port Operation and Development of Gwadar Free Zone	250	
	Suki Kinari Hydropower Station Project	1802	
	Thar Block II Lignite Mining and Coal Fire Power Plant Project	2000	
	Sahiwal Coal-fired Power Plant	1800	
	Karot Hydropower Project	1698	
	China Power Hub Generation 2 × 660 MW Coal-fired Power Project	1995	
	<b>Interest Free loans</b>	Gwadar East-Bay Expressway	
<b>Chinese Grants</b>	China-Pakistan Faqeer Primary School Project	0.4	29
	CPEC Emergency Medical Center, Gwadar	1.6	
	Gwadar Smart Port City Master Plan Project	4	

(continued)

**Table 23.1** (continued)

	<b>Project Name</b>	<b>Cost (US\$m)</b>	<b>Total Cost (US\$m)</b>
	Pilot Project of Digital Terrestrial Multimedia Broadcast (DTMB)	23	
<b>Pakistani Government</b>	Upgrading Mainline-1 and Establishment of Havelian Dry Port	3	3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>18,864</b>	<b>18,864</b>

Source Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Islamabad, Pakistan, "Latest progress on the CPEC," December 29, 2018

and intergovernmental relations. Although Chinese engagement predates the BRI, especially in Africa and Asia, the BRI projects have contributed considerably to enhancing Chinese presence outside its borders. How much "influence" such Chinese engagement has within the framework of the BRI, and in what capacity this influence manifests itself in the partner countries, are aspects that still have to be examined.

In the BRI literature, some scholars consider the BRI to be a "Chinese solution" to development needs, to facilitate modernization and poverty reduction in developing countries (see Liu & Dunford, 2016; Ruwitch & Blanchard, 2017). However, others have criticized China for its neo-realist agenda, for asserting its power and reshaping the international order (see Ferdinand, 2016; Callahan, 2016; Allison, 2017). Moreover, China's growing engagement and increased ties have been described as "debt-trap diplomacy," a threat to "liberal" order, and an impediment to democracy and peace in the countries involved in the BRI (Davidson, 2018; Spatafora, 2019; Tower, 2017). What is lacking in the literature, however, is a multidimensional concept and framework for understanding the various dimensions and levels of engagement with China. In the seminal work of Levitsky and Way, they consider "Western Linkage" to be a major explanatory factor for variation in democratization patterns. Could the "Chinese Linkage" under CPEC explain part of the variation in Pakistan's democracy levels? I assume that linkage to China, among other factors, partly explains some important aspects of regime development in Pakistan, and it might allow us to observe some variation in the de-democratization patterns. Therefore, based on the theoretical framework of Levitsky and Way's Linkage concept, I conceptualize the Chinese Linkage under CPEC along five dimensions. Such linkage thus involves intensifying or deepening economic ties, social ties, cultural ties, communication ties, and/or intergovernmental ties in terms of diplomatic and military cooperation between Pakistan and China along with participation in China-led regional or multilateral institutions such as the AIIB and SCO.

With several CPEC projects underway across Pakistan, closer ties with China have also manifested impacts on the ground. The CPEC stands to be an essential test case to map the impact of Chinese involvement under its flagship BRI project (Rafiq, 2019). Pakistan and China have had close bilateral ties in the past, but these ties

were further strengthened under the BRI as both countries expanded their cooperation on a variety of energy and infrastructure projects. CPEC investment is not only the largest infrastructure package for Pakistan but also the biggest Chinese investment in any BRI country thus far (Shah, 2015). The first phase of CPEC reportedly created 51,000 direct jobs in the road infrastructure sector, out of which 48,000 jobs involved local Pakistanis (Tang, 2019). With the increased mobility of workers and engineers under CPEC, there has been a huge influx of Chinese expatriates in Pakistan. There were 20,000 Chinese nationals residing in Pakistan before the CPEC launch in 2013. With more ongoing projects under the CPEC, this number has risen to about 60,000 (Subohi, 2018). Cross-border mobility has also increased dramatically as many Pakistani students are currently studying in China under the Chinese government's scholarship scheme (Dawn, 2017).

Additionally, numerous Chinese students are learning Urdu and participating in cultural exchange activities as part of the educational collaboration of the Confucius Institutes (CIs) in Pakistan. Before the CPEC, Pakistan had one CI which was founded in 2005 at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML) in Islamabad. However, after the launch of CPEC, four new CIs were established. Through these institutes, China and Pakistan have strengthened cultural collaboration, cultural exchanges, and language learning programmes.

Under the BRI, Sino-Pakistani media cooperation has also strengthened. The four CPEC Media Forums, and the meeting of media leaders, journalists, and a delegation of the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors to discuss further media collaboration demonstrate Sino-Pakistani efforts to enhance media partnerships (The Express Tribune, 2018). The major news outlets in Pakistan such as The Dawn, The Tribune, and The News have increased the coverage of China. In 2017, the media partnership between the Chinese ZTE Corporation and the Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) was formalized to enhance digital television technologies and services, staff training, and content (ZTE, 2017). This agreement later came under the CPEC. The strengthening of such media cooperation and partnership indicates increased communication ties between the two countries in the CPEC phase.

With regard to intergovernmental ties, the number of official and high-level state visits between China and Pakistan has also increased tremendously, including high-level provincial or ministerial-level visits. Moreover, during the CPEC period, we have witnessed more military and defence cooperation, such as high-level military exchanges, joint exercises, training of military personnel, joint ventures for defence production, and trade of military equipment, aircraft, and submarines (MOFA, 2020). Additionally, Pakistan is part of the China-led institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), indicating close partnership and association.

All these factors, individually as well as collectively, have contributed to high Chinese Linkage in Pakistan. This high level of Chinese Linkage, however, does not seem to explain Pakistan's low levels of democracy directly. Nevertheless, these linkages do overlap with the domestic politics and centralization patterns visible in the handling of the CPEC in Pakistan. To understand to what extent these linkages can explain the influences on varying levels of democracy in Pakistan, I examine

the state of democracy in Pakistan vis-à-vis Chinese engagement under the CPEC to assess their interplay with the (de)democratic shift in the country.

### 23.4 CPEC and Democracy

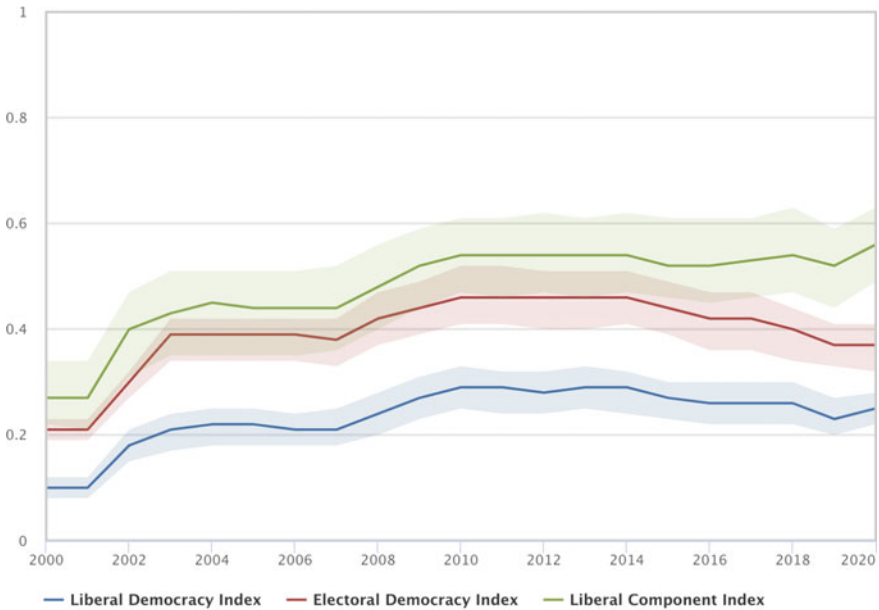
In Pakistan's political history, democracy has never fully been consolidated as the civilian governments were replaced by military governments thrice in the last 74 years (1958–1969, 1977–1988, and 1999–2008). This has weakened democratic structures and practices in Pakistan as the military has been pivotal in determining key policy areas even under civilian leadership (Boni, 2019). The democratic quality, hence, has remained low in terms of the level of transparency and accountability.

To examine the trajectory of democracy in Pakistan, I use Lührmann and Lindberg's definition of democratization as "the process of moving towards democracy" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), no matter how small that shift is. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data set covers different dimensions of democracy such as electoral, deliberative, participatory, egalitarian, and liberal democracy (Coppedge et al., 2020). I focus on the Liberal Democracy Index for the years 2000–2020 and the contemporary trend of both the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) and Liberal Component Index (LCI). The EDI, based on Robert Dahl's "polyarchy" (Dahl, 1971), captures essential electoral components such as clean elections, suffrage, elected officials, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, while the LCI captures liberal aspects such as protection of civil liberties, rule of law, and sufficient constraints on the executive by the judiciary and legislature (Coppedge et al., 2020).

Developed using the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data, Fig. 23.1 displays the range of democracy scores for Pakistan from 2000 to 2020. The PPP-led civilian government under President Zardari in 2008 paved a path toward more federalism and decentralization in Pakistan. Specifically, the 18th Amendment in Pakistan's Constitution and the 7th National Financial Commission Award allowed for more autonomy to the provinces (Waseem, 2010). These changes enhanced equitable distribution and revenue collection for the provinces. 2013, with the PML-N government, marked the first time that a democratically elected government successfully transferred power to the next democratic government (Afzal, 2019). This allowed civilian rule to flourish in the country. Following the launch of CPEC in 2013, we see increased centralization and a decline in democracy levels from 2015 onwards (Fig. 23.1). In 2018, with Khan in power, democracy scores declined further along with the increased role of the military under CPEC, especially with the military taking leadership in key positions for CPEC project management.

The scale ranges from 0 to 1, where 1 represents a higher score for democracy. Examining the LDI scores for Pakistan, the lowest score, of 0.1, was observed in 2000–01. From 2008 to 2013, democracy scores increased markedly from 0.24 to 0.29. However, in 2015, the democracy score declined to 0.27 and then to 0.26 in 2018. The democratic decline continued to an even lower score of 0.23 in 2019. This is partly due to the global decline in democracy (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021) and





**Fig. 23.1** V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index—Pakistan (2000–2020)

partly due to domestic centralizing trends observed in the CPEC period. However, the LDI score of 2020 shows a relatively increased value of 0.25.

As Pakistan’s democracy levels have declined over recent years, specifically in the CPEC period (2013–2020), we see a corresponding decline in civil liberties scores from 0.54 to 0.43, freedom of association scores from 0.79 to 0.61, and freedom of expression and alternate sources of information index scores from 0.82 to 0.61 (V-Dem, 2020). This highlights domestically driven changes contributing to Pakistan’s decline in democracy. However, to what extent have Chinese Linkage and engagement under CPEC affected these democracy levels? This is indeed a complex question to answer. In the following section, I attempt to analyse two distinct phases: the first phase focuses on the PML-N Sharif government and centralization tendencies, and the second phase on the PTI-led government under Khan with increased military involvement related to CPEC. These two phases allow us to unpack the domestic political developments vis-à-vis Chinese “influence” under CPEC.

### 23.4.1 Phase 1: PML-N and Centralization (2013–2018)

Under PML-N, the first development which reflects centralized decision-making during the early years of CPEC was the selection of CPEC routes. Out of the four

proposed CPEC routes, the emphasis on the Eastern route passing through well-developed Punjab (which is also home to PML-N's voter base) was criticized by other provinces (Rizvi, 2015). By contrast, the Western route passing through underdeveloped Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, was not on the government's priority list (Rafiq, 2017). The provincial parties and the opposition party led by Imran Khan demanded the routes be realigned in favour of the neglected regions (Hussain, 2019). This is evidence of partisan politics, asymmetric centre-province relations, and the Punjab-centric development policies of the Sharif government.

The second development related to centralization was the lack of discussion on CPEC in the Council of Common Interests (CCI). The CCI, being a constitutional body, deals with inter-provincial coordination for policymaking related to railways, electricity, mineral oil and natural gas, ports, and the development of industries (Zahid, 2013). As these come under the CPEC portfolio, the CCI was expected to play a visible role, however, the minutes of the CCI meeting in 2016 and 2017 indicated no major focus on CPEC (Boni & Adeney, 2020). The provinces insisted that the CCI should be given a deciding role in addressing the provincial disparities (Yousafzai, 2016). Moreover, the Senate Special Committee on CPEC also suggested granting the CCI the task of handling the provincial concerns of CPEC implementation (Ghumman, 2016). Despite the availability of the CCI, the Sharif government kept CPEC agreements and projects visibly centralized. Additionally, the provincial Chief Ministers were included in the meetings of the JCC in 2016 only. Although this step brought provincial representation to CPEC decision-making, it does not compensate for the side-lining of the CCI.

### ***23.4.2 Phase 2: PTI and the Role of the Military (2018–2020)***

With the change of government to Khan in 2018, the centralization trend continued, with an additional institutional role for the military in CPEC decision-making. The year 2018 was an “inflection point” for the democratic trajectory of the country (Afzal, 2019). As Khan's electoral victory was a positive development for the Pakistani military (Afzal, 2018), it tilted Sino-Pakistani relations back to the pre-CPEC period where the military played a central role in the relationship between the two countries. As Pakistan's internal security and foreign policy have historically relied on the military, even during civilian rule, the military continues to play a vital role in Sino-Pakistan relations (Boni, 2019). While a reliable civilian-led partnership with Beijing developed under the Sharif government in 2013, the post-2018 period reverted to the earlier dynamics (Small, 2020).

Under PTI, the first development indicating a growing role of the military under CPEC was the establishment of the CPEC Authority by a Presidential Ordinance in October 2019. The CPEC Authority was initially chaired by a retired Army general—Asim Saleem Bajwa (Baabar, 2019). The second development was the formation by the government of the National Development Council, which consists of the Army Chief of Staff and other members of the federal and provincial governments (Khan,

2019). As this council is responsible for formulating policies for development and providing guidelines for regional connectivity, it crafts more space for the military in the policymaking related to CPEC. The establishment of the Pak-China Relations Steering Committee, which consists of 15 members including government representatives, armed forces, and intelligence agencies, marks the third development. This steering committee aims to streamline and expedite coordination for the execution of CPEC projects (Rana, 2021). These three developments demonstrate how new institutions with visible military leadership have been created that further centralized the CPEC decision-making process under Khan's leadership.

The common denominator in both phases has been centralization. The difference between the two phases, however, is that the Sharif government kept centralized control over the CPEC matters more under civilian-led authorities, as exemplified by the coordinating body of JCC. In turn, the Khan government centralized with a stronger military presence in key decision-making on CPEC implementation. Although Pakistan's military has always carried great weight in major policy areas, be it in a direct or indirect capacity, CPEC affairs have allowed the tilting of the scale towards more direct, top-down involvement of the military. Therefore, we can categorize the first phase of CPEC as more civilian-led governance with an "indirect" military influence, and the second phase as civilian rule along with more visible military involvement, particularly with Army officials in charge of CPEC management. As the notion of civilian control over the military is a prerequisite for democratic rule (Dahl, 1989), it becomes crucial to understand the extent of civil-military control under CPEC and its impact on democracy in Pakistan. As Wolf highlights, more military control constrains the civilian authority in its decision-making, and this is deemed antithetical to the prospects of democracy (Wolf, 2020). Thus, for Pakistan's fragile democratic structure, such a centralization shift with more military-led institutions related to CPEC management could greatly influence de-democratization processes in the country.

This centralization and increased military involvement under CPEC may not be indicative of active Chinese influence but rather a passive "influence." As China prefers centralized and effective implementation when it comes to CPEC matters, there is "pressure" on its Pakistani counterparts to deliver efficiently (Boni & Adeney, 2020, p. 450). Indisputably, Pakistan has accommodated Chinese concerns by providing more security for the CPEC projects and centralizing processes to ensure effective project implementation. Nevertheless, these "influences" are not strong enough to infer causation for de-democratization and specify cause-effect relations, at least not with the limited data and time frame at hand. These centralizing tendencies may occur in parallel with the handling of the CPEC, but these dynamics seem to be more strongly influenced by the politicization of the CPEC and domestically driven political changes and partisan politics in Pakistan, rather than being China-driven. Therefore, I find that domestic influences on Pakistan's de-democratization are stronger than China's influences.

## 23.5 Conclusion

This chapter provided an in-depth assessment of CPEC investment, projects, and sectoral allocation since the BRI's official launch in 2013, and the impact of these on Pakistan's democracy. Tracing the Pakistan-China dynamics in the early stages of CPEC implementation, one can say that all the aspects and events—the PML-N's energy-focused project selection, the CPEC controversies, the partisan politics, the non-inclusion of Chief Ministers in the JCC until 2016, and the emergence of the provincial grievances—have helped to shape and reshape the trajectory of the CPEC and indicate a strong shift towards centralization. The first phase of CPEC showed patterns of centralized decision-making under the civilian-led government of Sharif. However, centralization further deepened with the 2018 change of government. The PTI-led second phase of CPEC was not devoid of partisan dynamics as the terms and conditions of the projects were renegotiated and budget allocations were revised. Centralization continued despite these changes, in addition to more visible and institutionalized military involvement in CPEC policymaking and implementation. Pakistan's change in government, shifting political priorities, and efforts to maintain the CPEC successfully have taken a toll on the country's democratic processes. The enhanced role of the military in CPEC related decision-making, as well as the above domestic developments implying centralization under CPEC, are considered to be the main factors, among others, contributing to the decline in the level of democracy in Pakistan during the CPEC period.

In putting forth the concept of Chinese Linkage under the CPEC, this chapter has argued that ties in all five dimensions—economic ties, social ties, cultural ties, communication ties, and intergovernmental ties—have increased in the CPEC period. However, this high degree of linkage in all five dimensions of Sino-Pakistani cooperation does not provide sufficient evidence to explain the declining trend in Pakistan's democracy. More trade and investment, in fact, indicate the openness of the economy and increasing liberalization which, in turn, may contribute to processes of democratization rather than de-democratization. With the limited time frame and data, the analysis did not find a strong or substantial mechanism to show a de-democratizing effect of Chinese Linkage under the CPEC. Nevertheless, including the measurement of civil-military control as part of the linkage indicators might allow us to understand the varying patterns of de-democratization in Pakistan vis-à-vis its relations with China.

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# Chapter 24

## Democracy and Human Rights in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative



Marketa Jerabek

### 24.1 Introduction

This chapter elaborates on how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), created in 2013, offers states less restrictive access to investment that is not tied to conditions related to corruption control, democracy, human rights, or financial stability (Sutherland et al., 2020). Many developing countries had long complained about the rigid rules the major Western lenders such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and bilateral development agencies imposed on them in terms of financial sustainability, environmental standards, human rights, and good governance. By contrast, the BRI allocates investments without taking democratic progress or human rights records into account.

The BRI was created to boost economic development and increase regional connectivity. It does this done through support for infrastructure development related to connectivity (Swaine, 2015). State-owned enterprises drive the infrastructure-based projects while non-infrastructure projects are primarily driven by private Chinese firms (Du & Zhang, 2018).

Some scholars view the BRI as a multifaceted strategy that serves China's geostrategic and geo-economic interests (Lisinge, 2020). Various motivational factors that drive the BRI have been identified, such as the slowing down of the Chinese economy (Wang, 2016), China's security and power status aspirations of moving from being a rule-taker to rule-maker (Zhou & Esteban, 2018), and China's industrial redeployment and increased focus on outward investment strategies.

This focus on development led scholars and policymakers to quantify the BRI's economic impact in those countries involved in the initiative. However, an official

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list of participating countries does not exist, and the number of participating countries varies depending on which source is consulted. Since the BRI is conceptually flexible and not a well-defined action plan, and a fixed agreed-upon classification of projects as BRI projects does not exist (Hillmann, 2018), there are thus far only few systematic quantitative analyses of the BRI's economic outcomes (Zhai, 2018). Chen and Lin (2018) showed that the reduction of travel time and transportation costs as a result of BRI projects can boost investments and increase growth in gross domestic products. Hurley et al. (2019) examined the debt implications of the BRI from a policy perspective and argued that Chinese practices raise the risk of debt distress in some borrower countries.

Assessment of political and human rights aspects in the context of the BRI have likewise provoked lively debates. Since its inception, journalists and investigators from different human rights organizations have pointed out human rights abuses in countries involved in BRI projects. Amnesty International (2019) reported on the case of the Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) that hundreds of construction workers were underpaid by millions of US dollars. Ultimately, former MCC employees sued the company for forced labour, human trafficking, and failure to compensate for physical injuries during the project.

Risberg (2021) recognizes the importance of criticism towards China's "debt trap diplomacy," but suggests that other aspects, such as the political influence of Chinese authoritarianism and surveillance technology should be viewed with scepticism. Nevertheless, Risberg (2021) underlines the African context as an example of a nuanced reality depicting how the initiative works in the developing world. BRI projects have positive economic implications and political externalities are often of secondary concern, so it is rather imprudent to claim that all of China's engagement along the BRI is harmful. He proposes instead to distinguish between detrimental consequences of the BRI and essential BRI engagement that is important for development.

Nevertheless, systematic analyses of the political and human rights effects of the BRI are rare. It is of both policy and academic interest in the international political economy literature to advance knowledge on the effects of foreign (direct) investment on regime type and how the regime type of the investor country might influence this relationship. This chapter is therefore focused on the political impact of the BRI, in particular on different aspects of democracy such as freedom, equality, and accountability, and human rights. In this chapter, I analyse the effect of the BRI using a difference-in-differences approach. I use data from the years before and after the inception of the BRI, beginning with 2005 and continuing to 2019 (inclusive). The difference-in-differences (DID) technique originates in the field of econometrics, but the underlying logic is known as the "controlled before-and-after study" in social sciences. DID is a quasi-experimental design that makes use of longitudinal data from treatment and control groups to obtain appropriate counterfactuals to estimate a causal effect (Angrist & Pischke, 2008).

## 24.2 Current State of Knowledge About the BRI's Effects

Analyses of the outcomes of the BRI have sprung up since 2015. The main focus has been on global power shifts and the changing world order (Ly, 2020), the economic effects of foreign direct investment across the BRI countries (Chen & Lin, 2018), trade creation resulting from the BRI (Herrero & Xu, 2017), and general effects on poverty and global carbon dioxide emission levels (Maliszewska & van der Mensbrugge, 2019). Research focusing on economic effects has shown predominantly positive results regarding trade gains, poverty reduction, and economic development.

The only cross-country study—to the best of my knowledge—that scrutinized the BRI from an economic and political perspective is by Sutherland et al. (2020), who conclude that the BRI facilitates economic growth via infrastructure development, and consequently aspects of human development, in less-developed countries, but that the impact on political features is less encouraging. Their argument is that the Chinese FDI volumes are positively related to the host-country institutional fragility. BRI policy facilitates FDI to countries with weaker rule of law and less government accountability. Although the authors did not directly estimate the political effects of the BRI, their inverse approach, investigating how institutional quality impacts Chinese FDI volume, provides food for thought. They did not, however, investigate whether increasing Chinese FDI in an already institutionally fragile country would result in even worse government and accountability. Other comments on BRI outcomes related to democracy and human rights are more journalistic in nature (Fontaine & Kliman, 2018; Popovich, 2020), while others come from human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch (2020).

Despite acknowledging that BRI facilitates the much-needed development in developing countries, Faiz (2019) argues that most of the countries participating in the BRI are heading towards a China model. Countries in Asia and Africa see the BRI as an initiative that has the potential to bring economic and human development to their countries and to contribute to global power shifts by strengthening China's position and weakening their former colonial powers in the West. Apart from promising more development, many participating countries imitate the Chinese model in terms of repression of freedom of expression, less democratic accountability, and implementation of China-inspired cybersecurity laws.

Salamatin (2020) looks at the BRI outcomes from a human rights law perspective and shows how China's methods of obtaining more influence through the BRI and related actions within United Nations organs are harmful to human rights. The author claims that, although some states have taken notice of these developments, there is a lack of meaningful response from international monitoring bodies, such as the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council and the UN Security Council. Additionally, she suggests that countries should invest time and money into response actions. Unfair and unjust practices should be curbed by the UN Human Rights Council, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the International Law Commission (ILC) to prevent the growth of practices that are

detrimental to human rights. Partnerships with China that aim to protect human rights are of equal importance.

This chapter draws on these previous arguments and analyses and is theoretically embedded in the international political economy literature to give understanding to the interactions between foreign investment, democracy, and human rights.

### **24.3 Argumentative Framework, Chinese Investment, and BRI**

The theoretical argument on the possible effects of the BRI on human rights and democracy is based on the international political economy literature that focuses on the relationships between foreign direct investment, political regime, and human rights. Empirical analyses show diverging effects of economic liberalization (and FDI, in particular) on democratization, and of the levels of democracy and human rights on FDI attraction.

Stiglitz (2017) criticizes the “overselling” of globalization given its negative consequences on income distribution and on the confidence in the elites that endorsed globalization. Multinational companies—as source of FDI inflow—have the ability to pressure host governments to cut welfare expenditures, reduce wages, and diminish working standards (Reuveny & Li, 2003). Since governments compete for foreign capital and therefore design their policies to please global investors and enterprises rather than being accountable to the voters, the level of democracy might decline when a country becomes economically globalized (Lindblom, 1980). Escribà-Folch (2017) did not find evidence in support of the liberalization and democratization hypothesis and concludes that FDI is found to reduce the likelihood of democratic transitions. It is often assumed that high levels of investment are achieved in autocratic political contexts given that such contexts are better in maintaining stability (Haggard, 1990). Nevertheless, the last few years have seen an increasing demand for corporate social responsibility and civil responsibility (Escribà-Folch, 2017).

Most empirical studies have actually found that democratic countries receive more FDI inflows than autocratic countries because they are better at protecting property rights (Jensen, 2003). Blanton and Blanton (2007) argue in a similar direction and find evidence that respect for human rights has a positive impact upon FDI. They contend that respect for human rights reduces risk to FDI as it points to increased political stability and a socially conscious consumer public.

In the context of the BRI, different scholars have looked at the relationship between Chinese investment and accountability, institutional quality, and the political system more generally. A number of studies have found a positive correlation between Chinese FDI volumes and the degree of institutional weakness in the recipient country (Sutherland et al., 2020). Blomkvist and Drogendijk (2013) provide empirical evidence that language, culture, and the level of industrialization and democracy

are related to Chinese FDI. Chinese FDI is generally more attracted to countries with less respect for democratic or human rights.

A distinction needs to be drawn between general Chinese investments and BRI investments. BRI projects include a significant amount of hard infrastructure such as new roads, bridges, and railways, as well as infrastructure with trade and transportation agreements related to development projects. Infrastructure development and connectivity investments are the main pillars of the BRI (Hillmann, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2020). BRI countries mainly receive infrastructure investment based Chinese FDI for sizeable infrastructure projects, such as power plant construction (Sutherland et al., 2020).

The main argument on which the empirical analysis in this chapter is based goes as follows: Giant infrastructure projects seem to be easier to plan and execute in institutionally weak environments. The construction of power plants, dams, ports, and roads has a significant impact on local communities, which is why more authoritarian countries are better able to repress opposition, critical civil society groups, or non-governmental organizations, and criticism from the media. The legal complexity of such gigantic projects is another aspect that requires attention. Autocratic regimes may be more able to provide the necessary institutional frameworks to approve these projects and circumvent complex legal consultations and the rule of law (Sutherland et al., 2020). BRI projects are more likely to be planned and executed in institutionally fragile contexts with more violations of human rights and weaker labour standards, freedom of opinion and information, and rights to peaceful assembly and association (see Amnesty International, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2021).

I therefore hypothesize, in line with the argument provided by Sutherland et al. (2020), that BRI policy facilitates FDI to countries with low initial levels of rule of law and government accountability, and that countries that are part of the BRI experience decreases in democracy and human rights. This is based on the assumption that countries compete for Chinese BRI investment and are therefore willing to reduce democratic accountability and human rights standards in terms of labour rights or freedom of information and association in order to attract more BRI investment.

Table 24.1 summarizes general Chinese investment and BRI investment by region and Table 24.2 outlines both investment categories by income group. Chinese investments are highest in value in Europe and Central Asia, followed by East Asia and the Pacific and then Sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast, for BRI investments, East Asia and the Pacific come first, followed by Sub-Saharan countries, and Europe and Central Asia in third place only. Regarding the comparison across different country income levels, general Chinese investments are the highest in high-income countries, followed by upper and lower middle-income countries. BRI investment, however, is highest in lower middle-income countries followed by higher middle-income countries. The income and region groups follow the World Bank classification.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>. Accessed 15 December 2021.

**Table 24.1** BRI investment versus general global Chinese investment by region

BRI Investment			Chinese Investment		
Region	% of BRI investment	Total BRI investment	Region	% of total Chinese Investment	Total Chinese investment
East Asia and the Pacific	29,52%	2404.78 bi US\$ <sup>2</sup>	Europe and Central Asia	23,03%	2832.55 bi US\$
Sub-Saharan Africa	21,70%	1767.85 bi US\$	East Asia and the Pacific	20,07%	2468.38 bi US\$
Europe and Central Asia	17,74%	1444.71 bi US\$	Sub-Saharan Africa	16,30%	2005.27 bi US\$
Middle East and North Africa	16,99%	1383.95 bi US\$	North America	12,12%	490.9 bi US\$
Latin America and the Caribbean	7,22%	587.96 bi US\$	Middle East and North Africa	12,04%	1481.57 bi US\$
South Asia	6,83%	555.988 bi US\$	Latin America and the Caribbean	9,85%	1211.17 bi US\$
			South Asia	6,34%	779.548 bi US\$
Total	100%	8145.238 bi US\$	Total	100%	12,300 bi US\$

Source Author's tabulation, based on data from the China Global Investment Tracker

## 24.4 Data and Methodology

I apply a difference-in-differences (DID) regression, a quasi-experimental research method, to mimic an experimental research design with observational data which does not rely on randomization as a necessary element of the experiment. This research design enables the study of the differential effect of the BRI on the treatment group, which is composed of countries that are part of the BRI, versus the control group, which is composed of countries that receive Chinese investment (such as the United States, Switzerland, Norway, Brazil, or India) but which are not part of the BRI. Although the literature sometimes classifies all Chinese investments as BRI investments, I opt to separate general Chinese investments from BRI investments, as has been suggested in the China Global Investment Tracker (CGIT) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI, 2021). Different studies conducted by the World Bank have relied on this data set since it provides unique comparative information on global Chinese investment from 2005 to 2019 (Chen & Lin, 2018). Countries that

<sup>2</sup> 1 billion = 1,000,000,000 (or 1,000 million).

**Table 24.2** Comparison of Chinese investment with BRI investment by income group

BRI Investment			Chinese Investment		
Region	% of BRI investment	Total BRI investment	Region	% of total Chinese Investment	Total Chinese investment
East Asia and the Pacific	29,52%	2404.78 bi US\$ <sup>3</sup>	Europe and Central Asia	23,03%	2832.55 bi US\$
Sub-Saharan Africa	21,70%	1767.85 bi US\$	East Asia and the Pacific	20,07%	2468.38 bi US\$
Europe and Central Asia	17,74%	1444.71 bi US\$	Sub-Saharan Africa	16,30%	2005.27 bi US\$
Middle East and North Africa	16,99%	1383.95 bi US\$	North America	12,12%	1490.9 bi US\$
Latin America and the Caribbean	7,22%	587.96 bi US\$	Middle East and North Africa	12,04%	1481.57 bi US\$
South Asia	6,83%	555.988 bi US\$	Latin America and the Caribbean	9,85%	1211.17 bi US\$
			South Asia	6,34%	779.548 bi US\$
Total	100%	8145.238 bi US\$	Total	100%	12,300 bi US\$

Source Author's tabulation, based on data from China Global Investment Tracker

are registered in the CGIT and have received different amounts of Chinese investments between 2005 and 2019, whether as part of the BRI or as general foreign direct investment, were included in the sample for analysis.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 1 billion = 1,000,000,000 (or 1,000 million).

<sup>4</sup> Countries listed in the China Global Investment Tracker as part of a general strategy of foreign direct investment, but not as part of the BRI: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Eritrea, Finland, France, Germany, Guatemala, Guinea-Bissau, Honduras, India, Ireland, Japan, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Netherlands, Nicaragua, North Korea, Norway, Sao Tome and Principe, Slovenia, Spain, Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Taiwan, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, The United Kingdom, The United States, and Yemen. Countries listed in the China Global Investment Tracker and classified as part of the BRI: Afghanistan, Algeria, Angola, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Benin, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Djibouti, Ecuador, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Fiji, Gabon, Georgia, Ghana, Greece, Guinea, Guyana, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Ivory Coast, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Latvia, Lesotho, Liberia, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Malta, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, New Zealand, Niger, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Oman, Pakistan, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of the Congo, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Africa,

The data set is composed of 149 countries from different world regions, such as East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, North America, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, and belong to different income groups (high income, upper middle income, lower middle income, and low income). 108 countries are part of the BRI, whether since its beginning in 2013 or after, while the rest receive Chinese investment but are not part of the BRI. I used a binary classification for each country in the data set where 0 = not part of the BRI and 1 = part of the BRI. As mentioned above, this distinction is based on the information taken from the CGIT.

The main dependent variables to be tested measure democratic freedom, equality and control, and two aspects of basic human rights. Democratic freedom is measured by freedom of expression and access to alternative information, government censorship of media, media self-censorship, media bias against opposition, internet censorship, government social media censorship, freedom of academic and cultural expression, freedom to associate, and civil society organization repression. The human rights aspects are based upon as freedom from torture and political killings, and freedom from forced labour, looking at men and women separately. Aspects of democratic equality are measured as civil society participation and equal protection of rights and liberties across different social groups. Finally, democratic control is determined based upon free and fair elections (vertical control), and judicial control over executive and legislative constraints on the executive (horizontal control). All variables are on the interval, with 0 designating low level and 1 high level, and are taken from the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2020).

The control variables are included to guarantee the robustness of the model and rest upon previous studies about determinants of democracy. The most relevant variables are: Natural logarithm (ln) of trade, secondary school enrolment, infant mortality rate, (ln) GDP per capita, urban population growth, and oil rents (Gerring et al., 2012).<sup>5</sup> To create the DID setup, I first constructed a dummy variable to indicate the time when the treatment started, which is in the case of this paper is 2013 with the initiation of the BRI. The years before 2013 receive a value of 0 and the years after 2013 a value of 1. In the second step, I identified the group of countries exposed to the treatment (in this case: the BRI). Countries that are part of the BRI are coded as 1 and the others are coded as 0. The DID estimator is the interaction between time of treatment and the countries treated (Torres, 2015). The DID methodology requires the setting of a single specific date for the treatment and does not permit the coding of treatment with different years.

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South Korea, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (based on AEI 2021).

<sup>5</sup> All controls are taken from the World Bank data set. Trade is measured as per cent of GDP; secondary school enrolment as per cent gross with the gross enrolment ratio as the ratio of total enrolment, regardless of age, to the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education shown; infant mortality is per 1,000 live births; urban population growth is the annual growth of the population; GDP per capita is in natural logarithm in constant US\$; and oil rents are in per cent of GDP.

The outcome  $Y_i$  is modelled by the following equation:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + \gamma t_i + \delta(T_i * t_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

The coefficients given by the Greek letters are unknown parameters and  $\varepsilon_i$  is a random unobserved “error” term which affects  $Y_i$  from the dependent variables for democracy and human rights, but which is omitted in the models.  $\alpha$  is the constant term and  $\beta$  is the treatment group specific effects to account for average permanent differences between treatment and control group,  $\gamma$  is the time trend common to the control and treatment group, and  $\delta$  is the true effect of the treatment.

## 24.5 Some Insights on the BRI’s Impact on Democracy and Human Rights

Only statistically significant results of the many different variables that were tested are presented in this section. The results support the hypothesis that countries that are part of the BRI show decreased levels of different aspects of democracy and human rights following its inception (represented by the negative coefficients in Table 24.3). Not all features of democracy and human rights are equally impacted. The main aspect that suffered setbacks is related to democratic freedoms. This is confirmed by different variables related to democratic freedom, such as media self-censorship (represented by equations 1a and 1b in Table 24.3), freedom of association (represented by equations 2a and 2b in Table 24.3) and repression of civil society organizations (represented by equations 3a and 3b in Table 24.3). Likewise, human rights regarding freedom from forced labour for men (equations 4a and 4b) and women (equations 5a and 5b) deteriorated in BRI countries. The biggest effects in terms of coefficient size are observed for media self-censorship (equations 1a and 1b) and civil society organization repression (equations 3a and 3b) (see Table 24.3). Given the high negative correlation between infant mortality and secondary school enrolment (see key correlations in Table 24.3), two different models have been estimated for each dependent variable. The difference-in-differences effect regarding the level of democracy and human rights is between the countries that are part of the BRI (black line) and those which are not part of it (grey line) visualized in Fig. 24.1.

1,000 live births; urban population growth is the annual growth of the population; GDP per capita is in natural logarithm in constant US\$; and oil rents are in per cent of GDP.



Table 24.3 Difference-in-Differences estimations, random effects

VARIABLES	Media self-censorship		Freedom of association		Civil society repression		Freedom from forced labour, men		Freedom from forced labour, women	
	(1a)	(1b)	(2a)	(2b)	(3a)	(3b)	(4a)	(4b)	(5a)	(5b)
I BRI_2013	0.0200 (0.0858)	-0.00532 (0.0908)	0.0358 (0.0252)	0.0206 (0.0237)	0.0636 (0.141)	-0.0122 (0.137)	-0.0293 (0.0484)	-0.0327 (0.0458)	-0.0371 (0.0461)	-0.0367 (0.0434)
I Country_treated	-0.581* (0.256)	-0.734*** (0.243)	-0.0814 (0.0526)	-0.120* (0.0495)	-0.189 (0.256)	-0.395 (0.242)	-0.0403 (0.235)	-0.0953 (0.228)	-0.0177 (0.221)	-0.124 (0.225)
<b>I. BRI 2013#1. Country_treated</b>	- <b>0.315***</b> <b>(0.106)</b>	<b>-0.287**</b> <b>(0.114)</b>	<b>-0.0490**</b> <b>(0.0243)</b>	<b>-0.0443*</b> <b>(0.0250)</b>	<b>-0.289**</b> <b>(0.147)</b>	<b>-0.252</b> <b>(0.154)</b>	<b>-0.0986</b> <b>(0.0627)</b>	<b>-0.122**</b> <b>(0.0566)</b>	<b>-0.111*</b> <b>(0.0585)</b>	- <b>0.112**</b> <b>(0.0551)</b>
Ln (Trade)	-0.233* (0.141)	-0.145 (0.116)	0.00992 (0.0145)	0.0142 (0.0162)	-0.107 (0.145)	0.0273 (0.123)	-0.141 (0.0890)	-0.0812 (0.0720)	-0.0414 (0.0841)	0.0115 (0.0647)
Secondary school enrolment	-0 00,809*** (0.00314)		-0.00193* (0.00101)		-0.0105*** (0.00411)		-0.00305 (0.00237)		-0.00209 (0.00195)	
Infant mortality		-0.00526 (0.00441)		-0.000793 (0.000686)		- (0.00481)		-0.00200 (0.00322)		- (0.00336)
(Ln) GDP per capita	0.313*** (0.0915)	0.00725 (0.121)	0.0543*** (0.0197)	-0.00954 (0.0261)	0.465*** (0.110)	0.138 (0.138)	0.161** (0.0771)	0.0408 (0.0777)	0.199** (0.0790)	0.0229 (0.0789)
Urban population growth	0.0464 (0.0355)	0.0110 (0.0167)	0.00808 (0.00533)	0.00276 (0.00246)	0.0332 (0.0466)	0.0195 (0.0187)	-0.0119 (0.0236)	- (0.00925)	-0.00948 (0.0167)	0.0312** (0.0124)

(continued)

Table 24.3 (continued)

VARIABLES	Media self-censorship		Freedom of association		Civil society repression		Freedom from forced labour, men		Freedom from forced labour, women	
	(1a)	(1b)	(2a)	(2b)	(3a)	(3b)	(4a)	(4b)	(5a)	(5b)
Oil rents	— 0.0154*** (0.00549)	-0.0148** (0.00693)	-0.00216*** (0.000785)	-0.00206* (0.00107)	— 0.0148*** (0.00523)	— 0.0167*** (0.00789)	— 0.00896*** (0.00293)	— 0.00744*** (0.00280)	— 0.00784*** (0.00352)	— 0.00398 (0.00279)
Constant	0.253 (1.038)	2.129* (1.181)	0.39** (0.168)	0.827*** (0.223)	-1.471 (0.995)	0.159 (1.228)	0.712 (0.849)	1.377 (0.854)	-0.281 (0.765)	1.108 (0.830)
Observations	1,369	1,877	1,369	1,877	1,369	1,877	1,369	1,877	1,369	1,877
Number of countries	133	139	133	139	133	139	133	139	133	139
R2 overall	0.2192	0.2049	0.1189	0.1396	0.2153	0.2497	0.1824	0.2173	0.2428	0.1811
R2 between	0.2050	0.2012	0.0782	0.1278	0.1753	0.2607	0.1570	0.2089	0.1809	0.1844
Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1										
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Ln (Trade)	Secondary school enrolment	Infant mortality	(Ln) GDP per capita	Urban population growth	Oil rents
1										
0.8392	1									
0.8522	0.8710	1								
0.6370	0.6312	0.6281	1							
0.6579	0.6334	0.6500	0.9232	1						

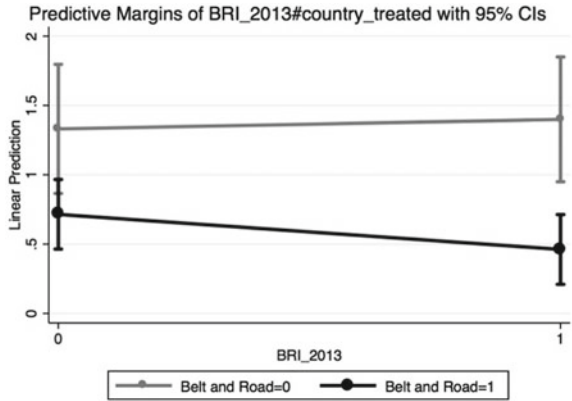
(continued)

Table 24.3 (continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Ln (Trade)	Secondary school enrolment	Infant mortality	(Ln) GDP per capita	Urban population growth	Oil rents
Ln (Trade)	0.0679	0.1231	0.16077	0.2034	0.2275	1					
Secondary school enrolment	0.2749	0.2136	0.3330	0.3990	0.4124	0.2884	1				
Infant mortality	-0.1950	-0.1802	-0.2974	-0.37723	-0.3913	-0.2929	-0.8541	1			
(Ln) GDP per capita	0.3739	0.2690	0.4112	0.3923	0.4211	0.3070	0.8203	-0.7949	1		
Urban population growth	-0.2891	-0.3429	-0.3642	-0.4942	-0.4876	-0.1259	-0.5811	0.5858	0.4529	1	
Oil rents	-0.3089	-0.5020	-0.4017	-0.3414	-0.3534	-0.296	-0.877	0.1156	0.0415	0.3355	1

Source: Author's tabulation

**Fig. 24.1**  
Difference-in-Differences margins plot (Source Author’s calculations)



### 24.6 Discussion

This chapter analysed, using a DID approach, whether BRI countries show different levels of democracy and human right fulfilment in the dimensions included in the analysis after becoming part of the initiative as compared to countries that receive Chinese investment but are not part of the BRI. The results support the hypothesis that those countries involved in BRI projects are prone to a diminishment of certain democratic freedoms and labour rights. BRI projects consist of huge infrastructure projects that are easier to plan and implement when labour rights and criticism from the media or civil society are kept to a low level.

However, the results do not imply determinism regarding the long-term consequences in BRI countries. Long-term consequences may depend on multiple factors, such as actions of international actors, including multinational companies, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations, and the Chinese government itself, as well as on political and economic developments in the recipient countries, e.g., preferences of the national governments and the respective population, as illustrated recently by the case of Australia, where the government cancelled two BRI agreements.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-says-it-cancelled-state-deals-chinas-belt-road-over-national-interest-2021-04-22/>. Accessed 10 September 2021.

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# Chapter 25

## The Belt and Road Initiative and Autocracy Promotion as Elements of China's Grand Strategy



Henoch Gabriel Mandelbaum and Brigitte Weiffen

### 25.1 Introduction

The economic and military rise of China in the twenty-first century, along with the ascension of Xi Jinping to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, has led the country to re-evaluate its grand strategy in the international arena. A grand strategy can be broadly defined as a “state’s theory of how it can achieve its strategic objectives that is intentional, coordinated, and implemented across multiple means of statecraft—military, economic, and political” (Doshi, 2021, p. 6). In China’s case, the grand strategy adopted under Xi Jinping aims to challenge the American leadership over the global order, known as the liberal international order (LIO) (Doshi, 2021; Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018; Liu, 2015).

To realise its grand strategy, China needs to achieve hegemony at the regional and global levels (Doshi, 2021). To achieve hegemony at the regional level, China would ultimately have to drive the United States (US) Navy out of the Western Pacific and resolve maritime disputes with its neighbours in the East and South China Seas while gaining recognition as the leading nation by the countries at its periphery. At the global level, in response to the US’s refusal to acknowledge its status as a dwindling superpower, Beijing would need to undermine the norms and institutions that underpin the LIO and use coercive measures, incentives, and instruments of legitimacy to consolidate an alternative Sinocentric order (Doshi, 2021).

This chapter analyses the role of autocracy promotion in China’s grand strategy and the role of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in this context. We argue that both

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the BRI and autocracy promotion can be considered tools Beijing uses to undermine the LIO. The BRI has a dual role in realising China's grand strategy: first, it expands Beijing's power projection; and second, it helps promote autocracy. Autocracy promotion refers to "political actors' attempts to consciously support autocratic regimes from the outside or to slow down processes of democratisation in transformation countries" (Kästner, 2019, p. 411). China does not engage in obvious activities to export its political system, but rather in what could be called *de facto* autocracy promotion. Its efforts are aimed at preventing the spread of Western democracy in its immediate vicinity, guaranteeing CCP rule, and ultimately damaging the liberal values at the heart of the current international order (Bader & Hackenesch, 2021; Diamond, 2019; Doshi, 2021; Rolland, 2020).

The first section of the chapter situates Beijing's autocracy promotion efforts in China's grand strategy. In the second section, we outline different strategies China uses to promote autocracy abroad and investigate how autocracy promotion in various regions of the world serves Beijing's core strategic objectives. The third section assesses how Beijing utilises the BRI to promote autocracy abroad, targeting autocracies and democracies alike. The conclusion provides a final assessment of the relationship between the BRI, autocracy promotion, and China's grand strategy.

## 25.2 Locating Autocracy Promotion in China's Grand Strategy

China's grand strategy has been a matter of debate among Western and Chinese scholars. According to Swaine (2000), China aims to achieve three interconnected goals: first, the maintenance of domestic stability and prosperity even in the context of social unrest; second, the protection of national sovereignty and its territory against external threats; and third, the achievement and preservation of its geopolitical clout as a great power, and perhaps a hegemon, in the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere. To support these objectives, China has pursued market-led economic growth, cultivated positive relations with all states—particularly the major powers—, exercised restraint in using force, and expanded its involvement in regional and global affairs (Li & Poh, 2019).

Goldstein (2020) points out three main transformations of China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping: first, Xi has made an effort to reassure the international community of the benevolent intentions of a more powerful China; second, he has adopted a more confident stance in pushing for reforms of the existing international order, while embracing the elements that have supported China's rise, such as economic openness; and third, unlike his predecessors, Xi has been more prone to resisting challenges to what the CCP defines as the country's core interests. These core interests include physical security and safeguarding the one-party state under the CCP's leadership (Khan, 2018).



Among Chinese scholars, Liu and Hao (2014) argue that China's long-term strategic goals include developing a wealthy, robust modern nation that can compete with the developed world. Zhang (2016) contends that, while economic growth is important, China's neighbourhood ties should be the primary focus of its grand strategic thinking. Alongside regional economic cooperation, building military capabilities is therefore crucial for China to control the situation in the region, ward off the influence of other countries such as the United States, and prevent the outbreak of war in its neighbourhood (Zhang, 2016). In turn, Yan (2018) suggests that, in the face of a fading US liberal hegemony, China should combine Chinese traditional values (such as benevolence, righteousness, and observance of rites) with selected liberalist values (such as equality, democracy, and freedom) to produce a new set of principles of "humane authority," such as fairness, justice, and civility, that should prove universally acceptable to people of different countries and could shape the future international normative order (Yan, 2018). In general, Chinese analysts tend to agree that Chinese foreign policy is designed to help maintain national security and regime stability, secure access to commodities for domestic economic development, and boost the nation's international influence (Li & Poh, 2019). The different conceptions of Chinese grand strategy can be largely summarised into two main goals: securing the CCP's unchallenged rule in the short term and outcompeting the US-led liberal international order in the long term.

In the CCP's view, China is still in the dynastic cycle that existed in Imperial China, where the struggle for political power is a zero-sum game in which winners take all and losers face extinction (Prestowitz, 2021). Therefore, maintaining "ideological security" and defending the country against "negative cultural infiltration" are paramount goals for the Party (Brady, 2017). This notion can be found in the *Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere*, known as "Document 9," which was distributed to all high-level Party organisations in April 2013 (ChinaFile, 2013; Prestowitz, 2021). The document orders cadres to wage "intense struggle" against "false ideological trends, positions and activities," such as the promotion of Western constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, neoliberalism, Western ideas of journalism, and the questioning of socialism with Chinese characteristics (ChinaFile, 2013). Similar views are expressed in a white paper titled "China: Democracy That Works" (PRC, 2021a) and a report on the state of democracy in the United States (PRC, 2021b) released in December 2021. Both documents question Western criteria for democracy and (using the example of the United States) Western interference in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of promoting democracy.

These documents reflect the CCP's belief that the liberal values of the West threaten it. They also explain why China, despite its claims that it does not aspire to export its political regime, is pursuing de facto strategies to promote autocracy, since helping leaders abandon democratic practices and helping authoritarian strongmen stay in power makes the world a safer place for autocracies like itself. Beijing's rationale is to shield itself from Western democracy promotion by counteracting it. Therefore, in the short run, autocracy promotion is primarily a defence strategy

to guarantee the survival of the Communist regime (Bader, 2015; Diamond, 2019; Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018).

In the long run, however, Beijing contends its authoritarian capitalist model can outcompete the US-led LIO. As China rises, Chinese politicians and intellectuals have become more outspoken about ideas such as the fight for Chinese dominance on the Asian continent, international recognition of the country's status as a great power, and the construction of a China-centred global order that would enhance the current international system (Jiang, 2018; Liu, 2015; Xi, 2017). These ideas are derived from the ancient concept of *Tianxia* (天下). Translated as “all-under-heaven,” this concept defines an ordered system with Imperial China at the centre of a world organised into concentric circles. According to this historical conception, the emperor and the Han people were located at the core, with the first circle inhabited by peoples of different ethnicities living under the occupation of Chinese peasant-soldiers. The second circle was populated by vassals who paid tributes as a gesture of submission. Finally, the last circle was composed of “barbarians” and considered to be a hotbed of tension and strife (Struye de Swielande & Orinx, 2021).

### 25.3 Varieties of Autocracy Promotion by China

We use the term “autocracy promotion” broadly and as an analytical term to denote strategies that help make the “world safe for dictatorship” (see Dukalskis, 2021). Autocracy promotion includes not only measures to support and strengthen existing authoritarian regimes, to slow down democratisation processes, or undermine democracies (Kästner, 2019), but also efforts directed at foreign audiences to legitimise an autocratic political system, which Dukalskis (2021, p. 135) describes as “authoritarian image management.” China views itself as a democracy with “distinctive Chinese characteristics” or as “a people's democratic dictatorship” (PRC, 2021a). Thus, while China does not openly state its intention to promote autocracy, it is in fact pursuing a number of strategies that strengthen other autocracies and undermine Western democracies.

To strengthen autocracies and help dictators stay in power, the country uses five main strategies. First, China provides a model for authoritarian governments that seek economic development while maintaining unchallenged rule (Nathan, 2016). The so-called China Model is largely understood as “China's approach to the establishment of free-market capitalism under the umbrella of an authoritarian one-party state that emphasises political stability above all else” (Bell, 2015, p. 179). In this regard, Beijing and several of its African partners, including Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Zambia, have implemented Chinese-led special economic zones to foster manufacturing and exports. It is noteworthy that many of these fellow regimes are authoritarian (Economy, 2019).

Second, China is using international media platforms to disseminate its propaganda (Nathan, 2016). Using conventional and social media, alongside public and cultural diplomacy, the CCP's Central Propaganda Department enhances China's

foreign image by manipulating foreign audiences' perceptions of it. The free content from China's *Xinhua News Agency* has become a key source of news material in places like Africa, where local media are underfunded. Obviously, none of the content is anti-China (Nathan, 2016).

Third, China is creating and disseminating censorship and repression techniques (Nathan, 2016). For instance, Chinese firms have delivered modern mass surveillance devices to South American nations like Bolivia and Ecuador during periods of major democratic regression. In 2018, the Chinese company ZTE provided the technology for Venezuela's "Fatherland Card," an ID card with a QR code that allows the autocratic government of President Nicolás Maduro (since 2013) to keep personal information of citizens and track their communication and activities (Ellis, 2019).

Fourth, China is collaborating with autocratic or competitive authoritarian countries that serve as major economic and geopolitical allies. China has won favourable economic access and political-diplomatic support from Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and Southeast and South Asian states such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Nepal, in extraditing Uyghurs, Tibetans, and democracy campaigners, as well as in isolating Taiwan. These regimes gain from China's assistance in the form of capital, markets, armaments, diplomatic support, and other advantages (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018; Nathan, 2016; Wong, 2021).

Fifth, China and other authoritarian powers are working together to alter international standards to prevent international monitoring of their repressive actions (Nathan, 2016; Wong, 2021). In international forums such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), China has collaborated with like-minded governments, particularly Russia and Saudi Arabia, to promote the Universal Periodic Review process, reducing the degree to which specific countries are scrutinised (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018; Nathan, 2016). China also backed a UNHRC initiative requiring every state to submit a Human Rights Action Plan, which would enable each member state to express their own understanding of how international human rights norms should be interpreted and applied (Nathan, 2016).

China's strategies for undermining democracies consist mainly of political influence activities, which can be grouped into three categories. First, democracies, like autocracies, are besieged by a worldwide multi-platform strategic communication strategy (Brady, 2017; Dukalskis, 2021; Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020). Cultural and public diplomacy, strategic mergers and acquisitions of China's party-state media corporations with international media and cultural businesses, and the "harmonisation" of overseas Chinese media with Chinese mainland media are all part of this strategy (Brady, 2017). For example, after an agreement with the *Shanghai Media Group*, a company backed by Beijing, the Australian state-supported *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (ABC) made the unprecedented concession to delete news and current affairs information from its Chinese language programming in 2014 (Brady, 2017).

Second, China attempts to influence and exploit the overseas Chinese populations in democratic countries in order to advance its foreign policy agenda (Brady, 2017). This strategy includes tools like claiming extraterritorial legal authority, using

Chinese ethnic organisations to watch local Chinese communities, and luring key diasporic Chinese personalities to mould the opinion of their compatriots abroad on political matters (Brady, 2017; Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Rotella, 2021). For example, the *Peaceful Reunification of China Association of New Zealand* (PRCANZ) promotes Beijing's foreign policy objectives via various initiatives, including campaigning for and seeking financial support for overseas Chinese political candidates who agree to accept the organisation's mission (Brady, 2017).

Third, China aims to co-opt foreigners to achieve its foreign policy objectives. To do this, Beijing mobilises human-to-human, party-to-party, and Chinese company-to-foreign company relations (Brady, 2017). For instance, China nominates foreigners with access to political power to high-level posts in Chinese enterprises or Chinese state-sponsored organisations in the host country and uses city partnerships to push its economic agenda independent of the target nation's foreign policy (Brady, 2017; Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020). For example, in exchange for the Czech Republic's complete reorientation of policy towards Beijing, the populist President Miloš Zeman (since 2013) secured a prized licence for Czech business in China, becoming a vocal supporter of the CCP (Diamond, 2019).

China's autocracy promotion strategies serve both of its two core strategic objectives: the short-term goal of stabilising CCP rule and the long-term goal of undermining the LIO through supporting autocracies and undermining democracies, as Beijing increasingly aspires to challenge Washington's global leadership in the economic, political, and, eventually, military spheres. For the Chinese government, opposing US efforts to promote democracy is part and parcel of contesting Washington's influence in the international arena (Diamond, 2019; Hsu et al., 2020; Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018).

In its immediate vicinity, China's autocracy promotion is closely related to the CCP's regime survival, as it protects the country from potentially contagious democratisation processes in neighbouring states and bolsters Beijing's influence in the region while diluting Washington's clout (Bader & Hackenesch, 2021; Diamond, 2019). Moreover, the presence of other autocratic countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with whom China can negotiate simplifies Chinese diplomacy; this is in complete contrast to its dealings with democracies, where a plurality of actors need to be considered, including critics of China whose objections are protected by freedom of speech (Bader, 2015; Emmerson, 2021).

In turn, autocracy promotion in faraway places such as Latin America, Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe is linked to Beijing's quest to undermine the US-led LIO and to challenge US hegemony in those places. China's modus operandi in such regions is "filling the void," that is, imprinting a geopolitical footprint, mainly through trade and investments, in countries largely taken for granted by Western powers due to their fragile economies and low credit ratings (Jacoby, 2014; Jenkins, 2019; Urdinez et al., 2016). China is now the leading source of imports for about 35 countries and the top destination of exports for around 25 countries (Wong, 2021). This is a favourable situation for Beijing's autocracy promotion, as its strategies for

strengthening autocracies and undermining democracies are more impactful in countries with extensive Chinese economic, political, and military presence (Diamond, 2019; Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020; Hsu et al., 2020; Nathan, 2016).

## 25.4 The Belt and Road Initiative and Autocracy Promotion

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), inaugurated by Xi Jinping in October 2013, is a gigantic project which includes the financing and building of a network of roads, railroads, oil and natural gas pipelines, fibre-optic and communication systems, harbours, and airports. The BRI aims to assemble and enhance a dense network of bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTA) into a multilateral structure rooted in China's gravitational pull and enormous open market. Crossing Russia and Central Asia, the "belt" connects China to Europe. It also heads to the Middle East via Central Asia and has ramifications in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, the "road" aspires to link China and Europe across the South China Sea (Zhang et al., 2018). As of January 2021, 140 countries had joined the initiative (Green Belt & Road Initiative Center, 2021).

As highlighted in the introduction to this special section (see chapter 16 of this volume), the BRI is primarily an economic and geostrategic project. Yet, political-ideological motives are closely interlinked with economic and geostrategic ones in the Chinese grand strategy. The BRI, therefore, has a dual role in the realisation of China's grand strategy: first, to expand Beijing's power projection through the establishment of various forms of control to influence the behaviour of other states, fostering the building of a future Sinocentric order (Doshi, 2021; Reeves, 2018; Rolland, 2020; Smith, 2021); and second, to uphold and spread its authoritarian model (Doshi, 2021; Lee, 2018; Rolland, 2020; Yu, 2019).

Xi Jinping's China utilises the BRI to pave the way for a Sinocentric international order. In line with the concept of *Tianxia*, this new Sinocentric order would first establish a "zone of super-ordinate influence in Asia" and "partial hegemony in swaths of the developing world" (Doshi, 2021, p. 4), which might subsequently expand to Western industrialised countries. This approach has been compared to Mao Zedong's revolutionary guidance to "surround the cities from the countryside" (Doshi, 2021, p. 4).

The spread of autocracy is mainly based on the degree of linkage and leverage among states (Hasenkamp, 2021; Levitsky & Way, 2010). These concepts were originally coined for analysing the influence of external actors on democratisation. Levitsky and Way (2010, p. 43) defined linkage as "the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organisational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information)" among particular non-Western countries on the one hand, and Western democracies and Western-led multilateral institutions on the other. In turn, leverage "refers not to the exercise of external pressure, per se, but instead to a country's vulnerability to such pressure" (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 41; also see Hasenkamp, 2021).

The BRI works as an efficient tool for creating linkage between China and other countries (Lu et al., 2021). The prevalence of illiberalism in Eurasia offers the ideal setting for China's distinctive political-economic model to expand and its geopolitical endeavour to flourish (Yu, 2019). The BRI facilitates Chinese investments towards countries with poor rule of law and government accountability, which are often ruled by autocrats. The boosting of such regimes happens at the expense of the political rights of the citizens in the BRI countries (Sutherland et al., 2020). As far as leverage is concerned, Beijing has amassed a significant level of influence in several BRI countries. Countries with high levels of corruption and large ethnic Chinese populations (such as Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Singapore) seem to be more vulnerable to Chinese influence (Mazarr et al., 2021).

The BRI has amplified these two variables. Regarding corruption, Ping et al. (2022) have found that China's resource-related projects are damaging recipient nations' institutional capacity to impose constraints on executive power. To ensure the swift delivery of projects, governments in partner nations may try to undermine horizontal accountability. Once horizontal control institutions are weakened, corrupt government officials are less likely to be identified and penalised (Ping et al., 2022).

Concerning Chinese communities abroad, BRI projects promote the movement of workers, managers, and technicians and all types of "camp-followers" (from accountants to tour guides) to attend to their professional and personal needs (Nyiri, 2021). In the regions along the BRI, already in 2015, the stock of migrants from China had increased substantially compared to the early 1990s. The most significant percentage increases could be observed in West Asia (524%), Eastern Africa (297%), and Southern Africa (126%) (Muttarak, 2017). While the increase of corruption along the BRI and Chinese outward migration to the participating countries are not engineered by China, they are externalities produced by the BRI that benefit Beijing's autocracy promotion abroad.

When it comes to promoting autocracy, the BRI cuts across the strategies presented in the previous section of this chapter in that it targets both autocracies and democracies. The BRI is one of several tools used by China to make the world safe for autocracy by taking advantage of the linkage and leverage with the BRI countries enabled by the Initiative. Table 25.1 maps how China's BRI activities feed into several of its autocracy promotion strategies.

In addition, most countries which have joined the BRI are ruled by nondemocratic regimes (Schaffar, 2021), and the Initiative motivates China to support existing autocracies as it needs a stable political environment to protect its investments, assets, and citizens abroad and to implement its projects effectively. During the first meeting of the CCP Central National Security Commission (CNSC) in April 2014, Xi Jinping outlined the concept of Holistic National Security, which entails "the security of the people as a compass, political security at its roots, economic security as its pillar, military security, cultural security, and social security as its protections, and that relies on the promotion of international security" (quoted in Ghiselli, 2021, p. 36). Thus, the well-being and property of Chinese nationals and businesses overseas are

**Table 25.1** The BRI and China's autocracy promotion strategies

Autocracy promotion strategies	Corresponding BRI activities
Wielding the power of its example	a) Offering China-based "China Model" training programmes and exchanges to foreign government officials, journalists, and students
Disseminating propaganda and strategic communication	b) Boosting Beijing's soft power and capacity to shape international norms by financing both domestic and foreign BRI think tanks c) Using the BRI as a unifying theme to seek cooperation with overseas media outlets that will absorb and deliver Chinese propaganda through their local media platforms d) Exploiting Chinese and foreign print, broadcast, and digital media to spread the official BRI narrative of "win-win relations" worldwide
Providing economic support	e) Transferring development assistance and non-concessional loans to bolster autocratic governments f) Granting loans to authoritarian regimes in BRI countries via China's financial sector and China-led financial institutions
Influencing overseas Chinese communities	g) Drawing on the resources and assistance of overseas Chinese entrepreneurs to extend the objectives of the BRI
Co-opting foreigners	h) Getting foreign governments to promote China's BRI to their citizens and neighbouring states i) Working closely on BRI projects with both national and local government leaders (who may allow the infiltration of Chinese influence bypassing national executives) j) Taking advantage of business communities as lobby groups to gain access to high-ranking government officials and persuade them to favour policies towards the BRI

*Source* Authors' elaboration (based on Hsu et al., 2020; Lee, 2018; Nathan, 2016; Poon, 2018; Rolland, 2019)

among the most important referent objects in Beijing's security policy (Ghiselli, 2021).

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that China uses the BRI to strengthen autocracies but refrains from fostering regime change in democracies since that could lead to political instability and endanger the Chinese investments there. However, Schaffar (2021) observes that in some BRI countries, evolving autocratisation processes were reinforced by the Chinese financial flows fostered by the Initiative. Hungary and Thailand are two paradigmatic cases in which seemingly consolidated democracies lapsed into autocratic forms of rule. Autocratisation processes started in Hungary in 2010 under the government of far-right Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and in Thailand



with the military coup d'état in 2014, which installed General Prayuth Chan-o-cha as Prime Minister. The Southeast Asian nation joined the BRI in 2014, and the Central European country did the same in 2015 (Nedopil, 2022). In both cases, BRI-related economic flows intensified political conflict and increased intra-elite competition. The outward-oriented economic projects of the former Hungarian and Thai elites were derailed by an economic crisis and the rise of a new inward-oriented elite. These new actors have backed developmentalist approaches and instrumentalised Beijing's investments to secure their dominance. Even though neither regime was installed by Beijing, the Chinese capital indirectly facilitated regime change in these countries (Schaffar, 2021).

It should also be noted that Beijing exports elements of the "China Model" to democracies, particularly to Central, Eastern, and Southeast European countries, via the BRI. In this process, liberal ideas give way to a more state-controlled perspective, with European countries—intentionally or not—increasingly resembling China (Vangeli, 2021).

## 25.5 Conclusion

China's rise in the twenty-first century has seen the country gain confidence and assertiveness abroad. While Beijing's grand strategy is to secure CCP rule in the short term, the long-term goal is to surpass the US-led LIO. Under Xi Jinping, China uses the BRI as a tool to create a Sinocentric economic order in Asia, which will be an important cornerstone of its future leadership in a non-liberal world order.

The BRI makes a twofold contribution. As an economic and geostrategic project, it contributes to China's grand strategy by expanding Beijing's power projection. However, its political ambitions should not be underestimated. Since economic, geostrategic, and political-ideological motives are closely linked in the Chinese grand strategy, the second contribution of the BRI consists of promoting autocracy via the development of linkage and leverage between China and the BRI countries. As illustrated by Table 25.1, the BRI's role is to facilitate many of China's strategies for the promotion of autocracy abroad.

The BRI is an attempt to build a "community of common destiny," an idea derived from the concept of *Tianxia* (Smith, 2021). Both of the two BRI contributions—power projection as well as autocracy promotion—seem to work following a logic of concentric circles, in which China prioritises the states in its vicinity over states further away. Large portions of BRI investment since 2013 have gone to Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. China's economic and diplomatic relations and autocracy promotion strategies towards neighbouring states strengthen the authoritarian regimes of those states. The purpose is to cement the CCP's rule at home and to guarantee a stable political environment for its citizens and projects abroad. At the same time, China uses these strategies to protect itself against and counteract Western democracy promotion, both in its vicinity and on the global stage.



The BRI contributes to the expansion of Chinese influence in Asia, in the course of which the region is permeated by non-liberal values and tends to prioritise national sovereignty over individual liberty, market authoritarianism over market liberalism, political authoritarianism over democracy, and civil obedience over civil liberty (Yu, 2019). If this endeavour progresses, China will establish itself as a normative power in the region and be well-positioned to ultimately spread non-liberal ideas around the globe and to shape a future international order with itself at its centre.

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# Chapter 26

## European democracy's Response to the BRI



Anja Mihr

### 26.1 Introduction

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, has thus far neither been a curse nor a blessing for democracy. Instead, China's BRI activities in over 140 countries worldwide have triggered many global and local movements and initiatives which have led to both stronger autocratisation and democratisation in some regions, such as across Eurasia. The quantity of investments under the BRI is not a determinant of whether a country democratises or autocratises.

The BRI has instead made trade and people-to-people connectivity both more global and local at the same time. Hence, it has to a certain extent glocalised societies along the New Silk Road initiatives worldwide. The investments and development projects have led to modest economic growth and subsequently, albeit unintentionally, to social movements, worker protests, and grassroots initiatives against governments in countries receiving investment. These movements have often been taken down by restrictive and repressive measures by governments, and this has led to political violence. Inside China, the BRI has led to further autocratisation of the autocratic regime, despite the country's economic growth.

Yet, over the past ten years, China's global investment policies have triggered infrastructural investments across the Eurasian continent. Along this "New Silk Road Initiative," Chinese BRI investments have triggered civil society engagements in the form of local protests criticising the practices of Chinese investors and their local counterparts. BRI investments operate based on intergovernmental agreements between the governments of China and the partner country without including local communities, labour unions, or other forms of civil society. This has triggered a

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plethora of anti-Chinese sentiments and protests, many of which have been violently suppressed by local police forces and increasing autocratic ways of governance.

Even though the BRI provides opportunities, jobs, and a decent income for millions of people across the world, it overall follows the purpose of creating an alternative market for China's vast state-owned companies beyond its borders. Having already seen Chinese government investment of approximately one trillion dollars, however, the initiative has not led to either the global or local stability that the government had anticipated in 2013. Thus, the long-term and sustainable goal of the BRI, namely the return on investments and social peace and stability inside China, as well as in the recipient countries in Eurasia, has not been achieved.

The BRI, as will be argued in this chapter, has turned into a boomerang both for China's internal social welfare policies and for its foreign policies across the continent. That said, the BRI was never aimed at leveraging democratic movements or institution building. It has instead unintentionally triggered social upheaval against suppressive policies and created anti-Chinese sentiments and, hence, often strengthened autocratic regimes that suppressed these sentiments.

China itself is far from building a democratic regime domestically, let alone fostering this in other countries. According to V-Dem's 2022 report, China is among the most autocratic regimes in the world, next to Afghanistan, Belarus, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Venezuela (Varieties of Democracy, V-Dem, 2022, p. 12). Hence, one of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decisive objectives of the BRI is to increase state-level cooperation between governments, not between civil societies.

The fact that BRI stakeholders only cooperate on a governmental level between states has influenced the autocratisation process in the countries of operation because the focus is on intergovernmental cooperation and multi-level intergovernmental macro policy exchange. Participatory measures, let alone human rights compliance, are not envisioned under the BRI connectivity strategy.<sup>1</sup>

The BRI is thus indirectly strengthening autocratic regimes because most authoritarian governments are predominantly busy with safeguarding their status-quo, albeit while allowing technological innovation and economic development thanks to Chinese billion-dollar programmes in these countries. Apart from the BRI's effects on modernisation and economic growth; this economic stability also paves the grounds for citizens and workers to engage in civic movements and protests, often against Chinese companies and investors. Therefore, one can argue that the BRI increases political violence and hence autocratic tendencies, as seen in 2022 in Kazakhstan and the Russian-Ukrainian war.

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<sup>1</sup> The State Council of the Peoples Republic China, "The Belt and Road Initiative" <http://english.www.gov.cn/beltAndRoad/>

## 26.2 China's White Paper and Democracy that Works

On 4 December 2021, the CCP's China State Council (CSC) released its White Paper, titled "Democracy that works," proposing a new model of democracy for China and the world, and at the same time celebrating the centenary of the Party's foundation in 1921 in Shanghai (China State Council, 2021). The date and the paper's title were not coincidental. It was a direct response to the upcoming global Summit for Democracy orchestrated by the US Administration in Washington DC on the International Day for Human Rights on 10 December 2021. The paper was therefore a direct response and positioning vis-à-vis the New Cold War rhetoric and the battle between autocratic and democratic systems which has been emerging dramatically in recent years.

A few weeks later, in January 2022, one of China's strongest allies on the Eurasian continent, the Russian Federation, would send troops to Kazakhstan to crack down on anti-BRI-related protesters, and to thus also protect and safeguard Chinese investments, and a month later would invade Ukraine to protect its own Russian acclaimed assets. These two events are not coincidental and only illustrate the tip of the iceberg. China has played a vital role in the war between Russia and Ukraine, precisely because of its BRI investments, both in Kazakhstan and in Ukraine, and the potential loss of these.

The much-praised connectivity between Europe and China, via Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and Kazakhstan, has suffered significantly in 2022. Under the BRI, a direct freight train linking Ukraine with China began operating in 2021, with significant impact on the development of trade relations,<sup>2</sup> and for that reason, the Ukraine had been a success story for China's BRI development strategy, and a win-win situation for Ukrainians because of its geopolitical proximity to Europe and Central Asia. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Ukraine-China trade increased annually by almost 50% to (approximately 12 billion Euro) in 2021 and provided people with prospects in the region, allowing them to turn even more strongly towards Europe and EU membership.

Across the Eurasian stretch, BRI investments have set free resources and energy for people and, for those not governed by a suppressive autocratic regime, allowed them to opt for a democratic model of governance, as in the case of the Ukraine. Not surprisingly, across the heartland of the BRI's "Iron Railroad" project which connects China with the European Union (EU) via Central Asia and Russia, unrest has been triggered by civil society and governments alike.

The Chinese government has long acknowledged that it cannot detach itself from global dynamics if it wants to become an even stronger global player and, hence, has to embrace elements of democracy, sustainability, and even human rights. Thus, in the White Paper the CCP and CSC even confirm that democracy is a "humanity's universal desire." This illustrates the degree of domestic pressure the CCP faces

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<sup>2</sup> Xinhua, News Net, Interview, 07.01.2022, "China, Ukraine have broad prospects for BRI cooperation,"

<http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/20220107/199a78c8f414760b22610a597c80762/c.html>



on democratic matters, forcing it to respond, albeit only in words not in actions. Redefining the notion of democracy, in the CCP's view, is the only way out. The paper thus states that *“Democracy is a common value of humanity and an ideal that has always been cherished by the CCP and the Chinese people, focusing on ‘people’s democracy with the will of the state.’ According to the CCP, this is a model of socialist democracy that covers all aspects of the democratic process and all sectors of society. It is a true democracy that works”* (CSC, 2021, White Paper, Preamble).

Whereas previous, similar White Papers (see article by Holbig in this edition) focused exclusively on progress and development, this one focuses on the mode of democratic governance and outlines how strong centralistic but consultative leadership is the most effective form of governance under the CCP's terms. Building consensus with and among citizens and other stakeholders is not anticipated in the paper and fair, free, and competitive elections are not mentioned at all. Instead, the paper defines how decision-making processes and leadership succession occur without elections or a competitive multi-party system. By its own definition, Chinese “democracy” is top-down steering of public affairs and hence the opposite of a liberal and competitive democratic regime steered by civil society and consensus building.

Since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, he has centralised power around the presidency and himself, with the BRI as the centre-point and legendary vision for his lifetime rulership (Zhou, 2012). Nevertheless, the power shift in Beijing started out promisingly, exhibiting signs of modest liberal change around 2012. This marked a short period of illusive liberation, as the government soon became even more autocratic. It eventually closed the country to foreign influence, reaching its peak during the 2020–2022 pandemic, fuelling the rivalries between China and Western liberal democratic standards.

During the light “spring of democracy” in the aftermath of the Beijing Olympic games in 2008 and Xi's nomination in 2012, citizens became organised, launched local campaigns and grassroots movements, and even competed for seats in various local congresses. Public, local or virtual, debates about the pros and cons of democracy and human rights emerged everywhere on China's popular webspace Weibo but were soon censored by the state's Internet Police even more harshly than before (Liu & Chen, 2012).

These activities and attempts to democratise disappeared soon after 2012 as Xi Jinping came into power claiming that only a strict, top-down mode of governance could bring stability, order, and prosperity to the country. Ever since, human rights defenders, lawyers, climate activists, bloggers, and academics have been systematically imprisoned and censored more strongly than before, and members of ethnic and Muslim minorities have been suffering from systematic persecution and even extinction. The toxic mix of propaganda, manipulation, nationalism, and suppression has turned China today into one of the world's leading autocracies, with a dismal record of human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity and genocide (V-Dem, 2022).

Since coming to power, Xi has aimed to strengthen his own autocratic regime as well as those elsewhere. In a major speech to the nation in 2017, he outlined how the overall “deficit in governance” in democratic countries shows that the classical



world order based on sovereign independent and democratic countries cannot deal with global challenges such as climate change or global markets. Moreover, he argued that liberal democracy and civil society are not the answers to rectify any deficits in governance, but a strong centralistic nation-state is. He calls this centralistic state an “organic whole” between government and citizens and thus a regime that can work towards mutual benefits and win-win-situations for all and among different nations (Wang, X. 2019, pp. 58–59).

How an “organic whole” government operates was illustrated in the shocking 2018 report on the systematic and widespread discrimination and elimination of the ethnic Muslim Uighur population in Xinjiang province in Eastern China. The fact that the region borders Central Asian countries and hosts the entry port of the BRI “Iron Railroad” project towards the EU is of significance. To terrorise and eliminate the minorities in the region who might become an obstacle to the BRI's success via uprisings against the regime has been part of the CCPs centralistic nation building from the beginning. The fact that the CCP is a strictly monoethnic Han Chinese regime that cannot tolerate self-determination of ethnic and religious minorities has long been underestimated.

Ever since the 2018 report and media coverage have shown how China has broken its international commitments and human rights agreements not only to the UN Genocide Convention of 1948, to which the country is a signatory, but to other human rights treaties as well, the regime has strengthened its autocratisation (Amnesty International, 2022).

The fact that Western China's Xinjiang province is the crossroads and main entry point for Chinese products to Europe, and hence the BRI's gate to the West, plays a vital role in understanding the curse and blessings of BRI in Eurasia. The “port to Europe” at Khorgos, at the border between Kazakhstan and China, is the starting point for Chinese products running through Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine into Europe. Hence, governance of Xinjiang province and the Eurasian corridor will also determine the success of BRI and thus the future fate of the government in Beijing.

The Khorgos-Gateway also allows for high-level corruption, trafficking of all goods, and organised crime. It is at this very crossing point that the BRI has become a “curse and blessing” for political regimes and people, which has not gone unnoticed by other key economic players within the EU and the G7.

However, despite these facts, it took the EU until 2020 to establish a resilience plan vis-à-vis the BRI. Three days before the White Paper was released in December 2021, the EU launched the Global Gateway Initiative (GGI). The GGI is defined as a global development, investment, and democratisation programme. It is the direct countermeasure to BRI investments, but with the important difference that the GGI also promotes democratic institution building and civil society.

The GGI was the EU's long-awaited response to the BRI, announced in July 2021 when 27 European foreign ministers agreed to set in motion a new global connectivity strategy to rival China's approach to Europe; followed by a unified proposal by the G7. The G7, in which neither China nor Russia are members, announced a joint “Build Back Better World” communique and alternative infrastructure initiative

driven by the major Western democracies vis-à-vis the BRI. Together with the GGI as a “geostrategic and global approach to connectivity,” the Better World programme is in a race against time with the BRI. The 300 billion Euro GGI is announcing infrastructural and development programmes around the world, but also focusing on “[...] *smart investments in quality infrastructure, respecting the highest social and environmental standards, in line with the EU’s democratic values and international norms and standards*” (EU GGI, 2021). The EU initiatives and responses to China’s White Paper on Democracy can be interpreted as a strike against the dramatic autocratisation of regimes across Eurasia and within the EU, for example Hungary, wherever China is investing. These countermeasures aim to combine development, human rights, and democracy more strongly than in previous agreements with governments along the “Eurasian Continental Bridge Economic Corridor.” Whether this is realistic remains to be seen.

But these development have been well-noted across the world, when On the eve of International Human Rights Day on 10 December 2021, the Summit for Democracy in Washington DC was launched, initiated by the US President as a strike against Russia’s and China’s rapid autocratisation, At the same time, the EU Commission launched parallel to the GGI, the Global Europe Human Rights and Democracy Programme. It is worth 1.5 billion Euros and is planned to operate until 2027, investing in democratic institution building in Eurasia in particular—even before the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. For decades, the EU has been the most prominent supporter and donor in promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms and democratic institution building worldwide, but it has had to step up its volume in the light of the BRI’s approach inside Europe and with EU member states over the recent years. The EU programmes focus on the universality of human rights as enshrined in the UN treaties and the SDGs aiming to build grassroots movements wherever the EU is investing or granting funds along the GGI (European Commission, 2021).

In contrast to the European and US efforts to strengthen democratic institutions in their own countries, no such democracy promotion is found either within the BRI connectivity strategy or in the CCPs White Paper, despites CCPs written commitment to democracy. There, it states instead that, “*In China, human rights are fully respected and protected. Living a life of contentment is the ultimate human right. [...] The people have gained a stronger sense of fulfilment, happiness, and security. Their rights to subsistence, development, and health are fully protected, and their economic, political, cultural, social, environmental, and other rights keep expanding*” (CSC, 2021, White paper, IV. Extensive Rights of People, Democracy that Works).

The CCPs approach seems cynical in the light of the plethora of reports on the atrocities and disappearances, and even genocide, happening inside China. Instead, the quote illustrates the repetitive effort of the regime to legitimise itself through fake democratic and human rights claims. This brings to mind the failed attempt to turn France into a democracy in the eighteenth century which allowed the usurper, Napoleon Bonaparte, to launch a successful coup d’état in 1799 against the fragile democratic regime in Paris. Bonaparte then issued a series of plebiscites and support

rallies, fuelling nationalistic, and xenophobic sentiments that enabled him to represent himself as the embodiment of popular sovereignty under the national will. Bonaparte subsequently consolidated his totalitarian regime by perfecting the centralised bureaucracy that allowed him to be the genuine representative of popular sovereignty. (Richter, 1982). In this way, Bonaparte, who was of no royal blood line, created a new regime type beyond legitimacy, an illegitimate regime based on fear and suppression. This is similar to what can be—not only—seen in China today, as the CCP redefines democracy in its own terms absent the will of the people, with the objective of falsely legitimising and illegitimate regime.

### 26.3 Europe's Response to the BRI

EU accession and applicant countries such as Serbia, Northern Macedonia, Ukraine, and Georgia, as well as EU member states such as Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, Poland, and even Italy, a G7 nation, have benefited from BRI investments since bilateral agreements with China were signed in 2015. The China-Ukrainian-Hungarian-Serbian Railway was the first of many Iron Belt projects under the BRI. This railroad, which crosses Ukraine, carries up to 80% of land container transport from China to Europe and highlights the devastating impact that the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war has on the BRI (Wang, J. 2019, p. 242).

Hence, it was only a matter of time that the EU would react to the BRI as a competitor, not only economically but also politically with China's influence in Europe undermining democratic norms. In 2020, the EU started to establish an initial modest resilience plan against the rise of illegitimate regimes and the rapid autocratisation processes elsewhere in the world. Modest, because the EU focused primarily on its own territory and potential accession countries, such as Ukraine, Serbia, and others. The new head of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, highlighted that the EU had to more strongly defend its principles and values, above all democracy and human rights, under a new EU Democracy Action Plan. This became a new programme with the title "Making EU democracies stronger" in 2021. Together with the GGI and the other initiatives, this programme highlights that "[...] *free media and civil society must be able to participate in an open debate, free from malign interference. Therefore, the EU is taking action to make our democracies in the EU more resilient*" (EU Commission Action Plan 2020).

The EU has, since 1999, invested in Strategic Partnerships and Cooperation Agreements along the BRI, but with less focus on democracy prior to 2020. With the global energy crisis most likely to intensify in the next decade, and Russia's decline as a geopolitical leader in Eurasia after the war in Ukraine, the Central Asia's gas and oil fields and hydropower energy supplies will be of interest to any external investor. The EU Interim Agreement on Trade and Trade-Related Matters, for example, has already brought forth a close investment partnership in Eurasia as part of the GGI with a focus on the importance of the rule of law and human rights.

While the EU Commission has often not gone beyond lip-service in favour of human rights and democratisation prior to 2021, the EU Parliament is now taking on more of a role as a human rights reminder. The parliament has responded to severe breaches of democratic principle and human rights standards related to the BRI in Central Asia and elsewhere. After the Kazakh government crackdown on protesters in 2022, protests which were related to heavy anti-Chinese sentiment and BRI investment in the region, the EU parliament raised concerns and called for upholding the rule of law in the country. Kazakhstan's roles include a geopolitical corridor, port to Europe, breadbasket, and energy supplier for China. It is host to the main container and train terminal in Dostyk ("friendship") in Khorgos at the Chinese-Kazakh border which handles rail freight traffic of over 500 thousand containers per year from China to Europe. Fewer containers go in the other direction from Europe to China. Kazakhstan is a key partner for China's BRI and the first country in which President Xi announced the BRI during his state visit in 2013. Hence, the country is vital to the EU's plans to foster democracy and human rights vis-à-vis the BRI, something which it had already highlighted in the 2019 EU-Central Asia Strategy paper.

The political violence in 2022 was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of anti-governmental uprisings and anti-Chinese sentiments in the region. With the economy and energy crisis coming to a peak in 2021 as a result of the pandemic, which has also increased corruption and autocratic leadership, protests took place against Chinese companies, their work ethics, and blackmail practices on the one hand, and the apathy and silence of their governments vis-à-vis Chinese investors on the other. This is what erupted into mass protests in the Kazakh metropole and economic centre of the country, Almaty, in January 2022. The week-long protests left more than 400 people dead and thousands of people in prison. Chinese President Xi stressed that China firmly opposed protests that attempted to harm the "Chinese-Kazakh friendship" after protesters pointed to China as the root cause for the conflict in the first place, a root which revealed the long-simmering anger over corruption, nepotism, rising inequality, and economic hardship in the country (Toktomushev, 2022).

The EU parliament condemned the political violence and repressive measures taken against the protesters, highlighting that it "*[...] stands together with the people of Kazakhstan, who should fully enjoy the right to organize a peaceful rally in protest against the lack of reforms in Kazakhstan and in defence of a prosperous future for the country; strongly condemns the dramatic and continually deteriorating situation of human rights in Kazakhstan, including of freedom of expression and labour and social rights [...]*" (European Parliament, 2022). The response showed that, despite China's heavy investment in the region, and its reliance on building solid relationships with the governments of post-soviet countries such as in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, and Ukraine, it did not mitigate the belligerent public sentiments and get the much-desired legitimate support for their prosperity and efficiency based "working democracy" from the citizens in the region (Adnan, 2020). China's President Xi, fearing the loss of significant influence over this vital geopolitical ally in Central Asia and over China's gateway to Europe, announced the renewal of Chinese ties with the region and his plan to visit Kazakhstan again in 2022.

## 26.4 The Glocal Response to the BRI

The New Cold War between democratic and autocratic political regimes is on and, sadly enough, one of its first hot war outbreaks happened in a BRI stronghold country, Ukraine, after the aggressive invasion by Russia in 2022. This invasion was led by Russian President Putin, who like Xi, views democracy as a domestic and global threat. This turns this war into a proxy war between autocratic and democratic systems. Moreover, this war is the first glocal one, in which global democratic norms are defended by local, private, multi-stakeholder, and non-state actors alike (Mihir, 2021). The Ukrainian forces are receiving mass support from private donors from across the globe, from millionaires to celebrities and civil society who have donate money and supplies. On the ground, there are also private rescue teams and warfare donors and an international battalion composed of fighters from around the globe. International and private aid and human rights organisations have individualised the war by holding solely one aggressor, namely Russian President Vladimir Putin, responsible for the war and not the Russian people as such. This is quite rare in the history of wars, although the British governments had attempted to do earlier calling Napoleons invasions in Europe, the “Napoleonic Wars” in the Nineteenth century, and during World War I, calling it an “industrial war” in which all sides are victims of senseless killings. But after the war this narrative vanished and changed into an aggressor war by the German Empire at that time, holding the whole nation accountable for it.

But this Ukrainian war has become more of a glocal warfare because private actors and civil society is greatly involved. Local and private initiatives justify their involvement by invoking global democratic norms, highlighting the need to help in a war against a state aggressor (Mihir, 2022).

In the same vein, the local and private response to the globalised economy has turned much of the local response to the BRI into a glocal one. The fact that many local communities, civil societies, labour unions, mayors, and businesses have withstood the autocratic way the BRI is governed on an inter-state level undermines the concept of territorial nation-states and state sovereignty in a way we have not seen before. The Chinese government fears global democracy as a threat because it erodes their state from the inside, even while the survival of a state depends on adaptation to global and local challenges. The CCP, in this case, is responding to the threat of global democracy through its White Paper, hoping that real democratic upheaval in China will not occur.

Yet at the same time, during the Democracy Summit in December 2021, the list of invitees of national, international, local, and private actors and leaders, underlining multi-stakeholder initiatives, was more than symbolic. It emphasises the claim that the future of democratic regimes is based on glocal governance, and so the International Day of Human Rights on December 10 was chosen as the meeting date. This was a response by the US President and the EU to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's statement earlier that year in January 2021 that, “*Some see China as the so-called biggest threat and their China policy based on this misperception is wrong. What has*

*happened proves that the US attempt to suppress China and start a new Cold War has not just seriously harmed the interests of the two peoples, but also caused severe disruptions to the world [...]*<sup>3</sup> The Summit participants highlighted that the backsliding of democracies is ongoing as democratic regimes have begun illiberalizing, failing, becoming populist, nationalising, unconsolidating, and becoming otherwise dysfunctional, particularly across Eurasia in the light of the BRI.

After a talk with President Xi in March that year, the US president announced a counter initiative to the BRI with a focus on strengthening democratic procedures, as a joint answer “[...] *pulling from the democratic states, helping those communities around the world that in fact need help,*” (Reuters, 2021). Eventually, the EU launched the GGI and the US the New Global Deal (NGD) to bring democratic welfare states back in. It is not a coincidence that war in Ukraine broke out shortly after the Western allies announced economic and state building measures against autocratic regimes, such as Russia and China, in December 2021.

Although one cannot ignore the fact that some countries in Eurasia have been economically successful in the short run despite not following democratic and human rights principles—these include states such as Serbia, Belarus, Russia, Turkey, and some Central Asian countries—ten years after the BRI launched, these same countries show significant economic decline and regime instability. Their regimes lack legitimacy and need to invest endless resources and energy into keeping their non-legitimate autocratic regimes up and running. This is true even when they are launching a brutal war against neighbouring states and no matter how wealthy their leadership or how well distributed the wealth is in society.

Meanwhile, the CCP does what it always does, namely to legitimise its non-legitimate regime democratic wordings. In the White Paper, one can read about the response of the CCP to a competitive, liberal, and collaborative democratic model, namely that “China’s electoral system is adapted to the country’s national conditions, dependent on the stage of socio-economic development.” Since there are no competitive and free political parties or presidential elections in China, the electorate and participatory rights are only among the members within the Communist Party, and they follow a strictly hierarchical order of nomination instead of election.

Hence, the Chinese statement in favour of elections only refers to a partisan group of party members and delegates to the National People’s Congress that meets once a year in Beijing. Nevertheless, the CCP insists that “*all citizens who have reached the age of 18, except those persons deprived of political rights following the law, have the right to vote and stand for election*” (CCP 2021, White Paper, Democracy, III. Concrete and Pragmatic Practice, 1. Democratic Elections).

Even when democratic practices take place in countries where BRI investments are strong, such a glocal and multi-stakeholder approach can never fully replace a specific regime type, but it can complement dysfunctional regimes, no matter how authoritarian or democratic they may be. Glocal governance initiatives adhere to

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<sup>3</sup> Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi talks about China-U.S. relations with CGTN. 2 January 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3245444e7754464776c6d636a4e6e62684a4856/index.html>

universal principles and global standards, such as freedom of assembly, fair elections, and freedom of the media and enact these locally. For example, when global supply chain rules are applied, anti-corruption measures sanction de facto corrupt and autocratic practices. European countries and institutions have, since the 1990s, experimented with these types of local ownership, citizen dialogues, public–private partnerships, and multi-stakeholder initiatives to enhance democratic performance and resilience alongside its funding and investment policies (Mihir, 2022). Despite the fact that there is much room for improvement in the implementation of these measures, there has been a start in the correct direction via the proliferation of the multi-stakeholder approach within and outside the EU. Globalisation has also produced various kinds of inter-municipal, metropolitan, and asymmetric governance arrangements, and thereby has increased the occurrence of differentiated government in the EU. Governments have changed roles from that of direct service providers to that of enablers, advisors, and facilitators, which requires new capacities at the central level (Charlie Jeffery and John Peterson, 2020, p. 763). Ultimately, this paradigm shift in governance has increased ownership over production and well-being and hence satisfaction among people on the community level. The people receive a regular and transparent response from local authorities and, in reverse, are willing to compromise and negotiate standard rules for all.

Morlino et al. (2020) observed the localisation of democratic practices within the EU and assert that state governments are no longer critical holders of sovereign power, something which can also be seen in other BRI-related countries. Instead, the authors argue that, if state authorities are no longer capable of balancing people's desire for freedom and equality in general as well as in terms of economic investments and development, the idea of the multi-class state will begin to take hold, reflecting a wish for autonomy and the organisation of forces arising from civil society, as seen in Kazakhstan and Ukraine in 2022. Democratic power in the traditional sense of representative democracy declines, but the desire for technical-scientific expertise rises. This means that the democratic deficit and backsliding must be compensated for in other ways, namely through procedural multi-level, stakeholder participation.

In 2004, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)—of which China is not officially a member—had already been alert to the changing paradigms and connectivity between economic growth and local ownership (and hence democracy), establishing Principles of Corporate Governance and providing guidelines for the evaluation of practical policy impacts through a multi-stakeholder approach. Private or corporate actors enjoy political legitimacy if they provide public services to communities without an effective government. They focus on the links between globally agreed upon standards, values, and mechanisms around CSOs, and national governments and businesses.

China's way of governing the BRI, however, is far from any multi-stakeholder approach or public–private partnership. Instead, China counts on top-down state-controlled implementation mechanisms absent consensus building with local stakeholders, and there is little evidence that this will change. Huang et al. (2016) argue that, despite China's modernisation and internationalisation, the education and economic sector has remained unchanged, and has thus made China neither



global nor local, but has instead strengthened their centralistic approach to governance. Because of the strict top-down governmental approach, the mindset of the people has not changed despite the influx of international standards, norms, and even products, movies, or cultural practices. Global trade, let alone BRI initiatives, has not made the Chinese system more adaptive or competitive because the education system and the governance regime remain autocratic. Instead, the BRI revenues have made the rich richer while making the poor poorer, resulting in corruption, injustice, and a lack of local participation in China (Huang et al., 2016).

At the same time, the Chinese government has shown a serious lack of control over the public sector despite its heavy investments in G5 technology, smart cities, and cyber-surveillance, using more and more political violence and suppression to compensate for governmental failure in this area (Mihr, 2017). This lack of control over domestic affairs also affects its control over BRI investments, which can lead to uncontrolled outbreaks and often violent protests. Chinese companies and domestic governments encounter opposition along the BRI, as in Kazakhstan and, since 2018, in Myanmar, Belarus, and Pakistan (Nalbandov, 2014). Instead of turning Eurasia into a new “Sinostan” through the BRI as Xi anticipated in 2013 and 2017, the badly governed BRI has become a boomerang for the CCP which has led people to turn against their own governments inside and outside China. Even though most of these protests have been shut down by armed forces and have led to stronger autocratisation of rulership via the implementation of draconic measures to pacify the population, such events will, soon or later, destabilise a country from the bottom up (Pantucci & Petersen, 2022).

As stated earlier, glocal movements and initiatives are not an alternative to democracy but often work hand in hand with democratic movements, and hence not in direct competition with any specific political regime type per se. The glocalisation of regimes is emerging to the extent to which governments fail to exercise their obligations towards their citizens. Glocal governance is grassroot and community driven and strengthens weak democratic institutions because it legitimises its governors.

The 2012 UNDP report on “Good Governance and Development in the World” already emphasised that the methodological concepts for assessing governance policies are too short-sighted to understand economic growth or societal development. Against that backdrop, some authors have argued that the BRI was never meant to trigger global growth and development outside China—let alone a specific regime type—but has always been a purely domestic policy tool to prevent unemployment and economic decline and thus to avoid social uprisal and instability within China (Jiang, 2021).

Thus, the BRI may trigger bottom-up uprisal, protests, and democratic initiatives inside and outside China, as has occurred in Xinjiang province and in the neighbouring states of Kazakhstan and Myanmar where people have been claiming more democratic options in their fight against local corruption, mismanagement, and bad governance practices that arise from BRI-related investments and businesses. Though Xi’s initiative for development may never have anticipated it, interestingly enough, glocalisation of private initiatives and governance picked up speed with the start of the BRI.



## 26.5 The BRI's Impact on Governance

A year after the BRI was launched, in 2014, President Xi undertook a state visit to Europe. While addressing the EU, he highlighted that all that mattered was the outcome of the BRI, not the way it was governed, stating “The fruit may look the same, but the taste is quite different.”<sup>4</sup> The same ideas can be found in the 2021 White Paper in which Xi does not discredit the innovations, technology, or even Western lifestyle, but objects to any liberal, consensus building democratic way in which these achievements are governed. That a free society and technical innovation are closely intertwined is not what autocrats tend to believe.

China's ability to copy Western lifestyles in all aspects of architecture, technology, and culture is breath-taking, particular with respect to its disregard for the fact that further progress and development of this lifestyle is only achievable in a free, fair, and inclusive society. Even redefining human rights as “extensive rights,” as was done in the most recent White Paper, will not defer from the problem of poor governance. The White Paper states, “*China has completed the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects. The entire country has shaken off absolute poverty and embarked on common prosperity. [...] Their rights to subsistence, development and health are fully protected, and their economic, political, cultural, social, environmental, and other rights keep expanding*” (CCP, 2021, White Paper, IV. Democracy That works, 1. Extensive Rights.).

From the start, China has taken the “New Cold War” more seriously than democratic regimes in Europe or North America, whether for reasons of Western hypocrisy or simply because Western governments underestimated the threat that a democratic lifestyle and fundamental freedoms can pose to autocratic leaders. For autocratic leaders, all that matters is stability so as to ensure the survival of their own rulership, no matter the cost. This survival mode can never be up for election, free choice, or deliberation. Any governance model that could successfully compete with a one-party or strongman leadership style is a potential threat—regardless of the “taste of the fruit.”

As stated earlier, the regime in Beijing is a fragile and often toxic mixture of Han-Nationalism paired with contradictory ideological foundations in Socialism and Capitalism and a de facto one-party rulership under a life-long head of the party. President Xi is following this exclusive doctrine of “national capitalist driven communism” and the superiority of the Han Chinese as the “organic whole.”

With the country's closure during the pandemic years from 2020 to 2022 and the Russian War in Ukraine in 2022, President Xi has felt internal and external pressure in terms of the need to legitimise his regime, and retaliation and hostile moves against neighbour states in Asia and the West, and above all towards the United States, have intensified. At the same time, a top-down Cancel Culture rally has gained speed within the country, replacing anything foreign and Western with “Chinese characteristics.”

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<sup>4</sup> Irish Times, 2 April 2014, Brussels, “Democracy not for China,” says Xi Jinping. “Political systems of other countries would not suit Chinese,” <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/asia-pacific/democracy-not-for-china-says-xi-jinping-1.1747853> (August 2021).

One way of doing this is by using the artificial intelligence-driven Social Scoring System and surveillance technology to dismantle so-called unicorn companies such as Huawei and Alibaba. Many of these are global players who represent a Western capitalistic mentality and more diverse and participatory forms for governance both inside and outside China.

BRI's success has instead increased anti-Western sentiments in China. Anything Western, even leisure culture, ought to be reinterpreted as Chinese. Any sympathy for glocalisation, democracy, or human rights must be replaced by Han-patriotism in the form of a pseudo-religious mix between ideology and personal identity for which many people are willing to sacrifice their lives. For some, China has become a "fearful giant" with a powerful BRI toolbox providing instruments which can influence modes of governance elsewhere in the world, but many of these measures seem to become a boomerang for China. If the government can no longer keep people satisfied through economic growth, the way BRI is governed could potentially boomerang to China because it is becoming disconnected to its main markets in Europe and the US. Unrest and turmoil inside and outside its borders are already starting to grow.

The CCPs slogan "Development for China and the World" (sic),<sup>5</sup> leaves no room for interpretation, meaning that China comes first before the rest of the world. This slogan justifies the privileges that the Han Chinese enjoy over others and lead to over 80% support rate for the government—even by critical standards. It is unclear, however, how long this can be sustained in times of rapid decline of domestic economy and rise of civil unrest. Furthermore, the CCP aims to reclaim control over the economy at the same time as cleansing the country of any political opponents, including former CEOs of global businesses, many of whom have taken lead roles under the BRI.

China's technical modernisation, its openness towards technology, mobility of its people, and Western style architecture, belies the autocratic style of government. Instead, the strict state control is the engine for the permanent technological advancements which keep people happy. "Smart refrigerators," e-cars, the newest versions of smart phones, and rapid transport of fresh vegetables from the vast steppes of Inner Mongolia to all corners of the country provide the illusion of a progressive state and ever-caring government. The latest governmental economic intervention "Made in China 2025," aimed at increasing the domestic Chinese proportion of core materials to 70% by 2025, however, illustrates that the BRI has not achieved the goals that Xi anticipated in 2013.

President Xi has repetitive emphasised his nation's urge to overcome the indignation and humiliation suffered at the hands of the West in the late nineteenth century, and one way of doing so is via the massive modernisation of the country (Fenby, 2017). This indignation is deeply ingrained in the people's mind and kept vividly alive through propaganda and education. It should thus not be underestimated as a key driving force in the support for the autocratic regime. The more state propaganda fuels this perception of the past, the more people will be alienated from the concept

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<sup>5</sup> "China Public Diplomacy Association Established in Beijing," 31 December 2012, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceie/eng/NewsPress/t1003792.htm>

of a pluralist and liberal Western democracy. Even though history may repeat itself and propaganda sooner or later must meet reality, it has thus far been successful at keeping the country stable.

The concern that China will draw on BRI resources and “befriend” country’s governments in Eurasia to resolve domestic turmoil is not far-fetched. China already holds a military base in Tajikistan to monitor the corridor and conflicts between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and de facto owns and controls territorial enclaves, declared as “special economic zones” in Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Belarus, and elsewhere.

Many countries across Eurasia depend heavily on BRI investments, but this is especially true of its close’s neighbours in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. China has actively been involved in security measures in Afghanistan both during and after the withdrawal of NATO allies 2021; and engages in regular casualty-causing military border conflicts with India in the Kashmir region. At the same time, China has become the fifth-largest arms exporter in the world overall, with particular export focus into conflict regions in Asia and Central Europe (Seekins, 2021). The genocide against Muslim minorities and the coup d’état in Myanmar in 2018 and 2020 was partly influenced by China and linked directly to the BRI (US Institute for Peace, 2018).

## 26.6 Conclusion

China’s BRI is neither a curse nor blessing for democracies, and Europe’s response illustrates only one aspect of the global reactions to the way China’s investments trigger local and social unrest in countries in which investments are made. For some countries, BRI investments have led to a modest economic growth and a stronger middle class, which has led to a growth in civil society calling for democratic reforms. In others, local unrests have led to more strongly repressive and autocratic regimes. Nevertheless, there is no direct causal link between the BRI and democratic movements on the one side or stronger autocratisation on the other. What can be highlighted instead, is a line of intriguing correlations between BRI investments and autocratic governing styles, social unrest, and political violence.

For China itself, the BRI is becoming a boomerang. Instead of consolidating its own political regime and strengthening social stability, the CCP must now use more political force, surveillance, and resources than ever before to keep the country stable, even issuing a White Paper on democracy to fooling the world and to keep the Chinese people calm. The beneficial returns from the BRI, namely “to first stabilize China, then the World” are far from real. Now that trillions of dollars have been invested across the world however, the Chinese government cannot easily withdraw from these investments.

While many BRI partner governments, such as Kazakhstan and Belarus, have outmanoeuvred the influx of democratic liberal ideas from the West, and have become more authoritarian or autocratic, others, who have been open and responsive to a

more vigorous and educated middle class, thanks to the BRI, often find themselves in internal turmoil, and even wars over democratic norms, as is the case for Ukraine.

Again, it is difficult to directly link the BRI to political regime change, but intriguingly enough, the higher the amount of BRI investment in a country, the higher the likeliness of social unrest and political violence. Countries such as Kazakhstan, Belarus, Ukraine, and many across Central Asia and Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Myanmar, have benefited from the modest development and wealth that the BRI brought, but at the same time face serious political turmoil, violence, and even (domestic) war.

Despite China's strict non-interference policy in the public affairs of other countries, its influence has changed the infrastructure landscape of BRI partner countries and connected them to the world through its exports, for example, via the 5th generation of mobile networks and Internet, 5G technology.

The CCP insists on its position that “*External interference and democratic transformation bring nothing but endless trouble. China never seeks to export the Chinese model of democracy, nor does it allow any external force to change it under any circumstances. It firmly supports the independent choice by every country of its own path to democracy and opposes any interference in others' internal affairs on the pretext of 'bringing democracy'*” (CSC, 2021, White Paper, V. A New Model for Democracy, 2 Following the Most Suitable Path to Democracy). Nevertheless, China's government can no longer deny that political turmoil in recipient countries of their investments is not always under their control.

Circumstances are likely to change following Russia's war in the Ukraine and the resultant shift of hegemonic powers on the Eurasian continent, with China taking the lead in the East over the “BRI countries”—despite its many shortcomings—and the EU acting as the lead governing power in the West through a yet to be tested GGI.

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**Part III**  
**Future Research and Debates**

# Chapter 27

## **Balkanization Instead of Eurasianism: Fragmented Technological Governance Across the OSCE Domain and Its Implications**



**Tobias Burgers**

### **27.1 Introduction**

Digital technologies have fundamentally changed and transformed our lives, and cyberspace has assumed dominance in society. Indeed, as Nassehi (2019) illustrates, while not all of society's interactions occur in the digital realm or through digital technologies, we have become a society that predominantly can be understood by and through digital means. The importance of and reliance on digital technology will only further increase with the integration of technologies such as AI, big data, deep learning, autonomous machines, and the internet of things (IoT). These technologies, at times described as “general-purpose technologies,” are finding ways to change and even overhaul our societies (UNESCAP, 2020). It is these changes that will determine how technologies will be placed and valued in any given societal context. While we may think of these technologies as neutral, they will have a substantial impact, evoking changes depending on how and for what objectives they are being used. Considering these changes up to the present time and those currently emerging, fundamental questions must be raised about how nations and societies will control and direct these technologies. What previously were considered questions and concerns of technical and technological management, best left to technical experts, have evolved into questions of societal importance, requiring urgent governance of technologies by lawmakers, politicians, and bureaucracies (Goodman & Lin, 2007). Among these questions are those addressing the purpose of the concerned technologies and whom they should benefit.

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## 27.2 Technological Governance in Eurasia

For a considerable time, the rise of digital technologies and the global proliferation of the internet were popularly considered a force for the good, one which would promote and foster democracy (Best & Wade, 2009; Gotlieb, 2002) by disseminating information and increasing its quality and availability (Hindman, 2008). This would enable it to support human rights and good governance (Selian, 2002). Such a utilitarian view of technology saw prominence in the first decade of this century with the mass social uprisings of the Arab Spring, the Twitter revolution in Iran, and the Rose and Orange revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia. It seemed that cyberspace and digital technologies—in particular social media—functioned in all of them as catalysts for democratic change and human rights progress (Wolfsfeld, 2013). These desirable values went hand in hand with a tech governance model that emphasized that the internet and digital technologies should be minimally controlled by individual nation states. Some proponents of this model even argued that the internet and digital technologies were in fact difficult, if not impossible, to administer and govern. Famed is the quote by the then US President, Bill Clinton, who commented on early Chinese efforts to regulate and control the internet and digital technologies, saying, “Now there’s no question China has been trying to crack down on the Internet. Good luck! That’s sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall” (New York Times, 2000). This vision of technology was combined with a tech governance model, advocated by the USA and supported by the EU, that sought to keep state interference to a minimum, with minimal governmental oversight and responsibility for managing and governing cyberspace and digital technologies in the hands of tech companies. However, over the last two decades, other visions of how technology should be used, regulated, and governed in view of definite objectives have arisen. Chief among the proponents of such a vision is China, which has been developing an alternative governance model since the start of this century, known as the “Networked Authoritarianism” model (Burgers & Robinson, 2016; MacKinnon, 2011). This model is extensive in its aims and in the reach of governance efforts and has been remarkably successful. China has been able to control its national internet through the Great Firewall and has been highly effective in surveilling its cyberspace, imposing rules on information allowed onto the Chinese internet, and setting out under which conditions selected companies—national and international—can participate in Chinese cyberspace activity (Ibid, 2011, 2016). These policies demonstrate that it is possible to nail Jell-O to the wall (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2016). Through legal and regulatory frameworks, the Chinese government strictly regulates and controls tech companies while advocating—nationally and internationally—for cyber sovereignty. The frameworks determine data management practices and content that can be hosted in authorized frameworks with government access to and control over data. Meanwhile, and more recently, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has also set (micro) rules and regulations aimed at internet celebrities and influencers, illustrating the broad and in-depth reach of Chinese tech governance efforts. Their success illustrates two things. First, it is perfectly feasible to control, regulate, and govern digital

technologies and cyberspace. Second, cyberspace and digital technologies are well suited to the attempts of authoritarian regimes to surveil and control their societies. Inspired by China, its northern neighbour Russia has sought to follow suit, albeit less successfully. Its tech model overlaps with the Sino model in its aims to rein in tech companies, ensure official access to and control over data, and establish cyber sovereignty. However, the Russian governance efforts have been less extensive and detailed.

### **27.3 External Technological Players in the Region**

While China has perfected its Networked Authoritarianism model, the European Union (EU), witnessing the growing power of tech companies and the harmful effects of data-driven economies and societies, has sought to put the brakes on “big tech,” and regulate and govern cyberspace and digital technologies (Bremmer, 2021). These efforts have led to the emergence of a distinctive European tech governance model which emulates that of China in its strong regulatory efforts and the reach of its governance model. This is reflected in policies such as the European Commission’s digital policy roadmap “Shaping Europe’s Digital Future,” the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the Digital Services Act (DSA). Part of these policies is the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) under the concept of “trustworthy AI” (Fefer, 2021). In this regard, the EU has sought to curb the excesses of digital technology, while maintaining the vision that digital technology can remain a force for the better, the promotion of democracy, the fostering human rights, and the supporting of equality. Finally, there seems to be a noticeable shift even in the United States, with the growing perception that its *laissez-faire* model needs a regulatory overhaul. The recent Facebook revelations and the growing power of big tech, among other concerns, are spurring a national movement to develop a new tech governance model that would seek to restrain the sprawling power of the tech companies themselves (Bremmer, 2021). Some success has been achieved, most notably with the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA). Yet, on a federal level, strong(er) regulations are still a work in progress, with an uncertain outlook on what an updated American model of tech governance might look like.

### **27.4 (Tech) Competition or “Balkanization” Ahead?**

We have seen how, across two decades, the early unipolar and utilitarian vision of tech governance has transformed into a mosaic of different tech governance models. While there is some overlap between these models, including—surprisingly—between the Chinese and the EU models, they are essentially different. This diversification of tech governance models along separate paths has led to the emergence of what Malcomson

(2015) refers to as the “splinternet” or, as it is alternatively known, the “Balkanization” of cyberspace and tech governance (O’hara & Hall, 2018). Diversification has provided other nations, which are increasingly seeking to integrate new digital technologies into their societies, with a number of policy options regarding the purpose and the means with which to achieve it. This development has unsurprisingly created competition between the various models. In the current era of increasing geopolitical competition between the United States and China, and increasingly also between the EU and China, as well as the United States and Russia, the tech domain has also become subject to intense competition.

## 27.5 The Role of the OSCE in Global Tech Competition

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) currently finds itself amidst competing international approaches to cyberspace oversight. As an intergovernmental organization that “assists host countries in putting their OSCE commitments into practice,” it plays a role of considerable importance (OSCE, 2021a). Furthermore, through its field operations, it supports national authorities in developing new policies (Ibid, 2021a). This gives the OSCE the ability to influence policies and thereby punch above its weight in the technological governance debate. It could, in theory, function as an actor that, through the promotion of specific tech governance models, might enhance unipolarity and limit the possible balkanization of cyberspace. However, for this to occur, emerging tech nations need to be receptive to OSCE tech policies. Also, we need to determine if any other actors that provide alternative models, such as China, would have the ability to steer the development of technological governance.

Being receptive to OSCE tech policies starts with understanding what they offer. Here, we must differentiate between policies and programmes that focus on digital security governance (ICT, cybersecurity, cyber conflict, and critical infrastructure protection) and policies that provide a framework for governing digital technologies suited to particular objectives (OSCE, 2021b). The former policies focus on preventing actual cyber conflict and crime. These can be bolstered through projects such as cyber awareness month, a training programme of national cyber police forces and courses on cyber security confidence-building measures (OSCE, 2021b; 2021c, 2021d). With regard to providing frameworks for governing digital technologies for particular outcomes, it is apparent that the OSCE views digital technologies as (potential) enablers for good governance. The organization regards digital technology as a force that can contribute to shaping better and fairer media, improve accessibility to information, support freedom of expression, and constitute a tool that combats corruption, labour issues, sex trafficking, and so on. In addition, the OSCE believes that technology can enhance democratic functions and foster sustainable development (OSCE, 2021e, 2021f, 2021g, 2021h, 2021i). In particular, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) within the OSCE promotes the idea of digital technologies in just this sense (2021); “Governments,

civil society and religious or belief communities can engage in the digital sphere to foster mutual respect, understanding, and inclusion. Increased digitalization can go a long way towards addressing systemic inequalities and barriers [...] At the same time, civil society can tap into the potential of the digital space to streamline and synergize its efforts, which increasingly depend on new technologies when faced with limited resources, increased workload and decreased capacity, especially during the pandemic” (ODIHR, 2021). The OSCE seeks to bring these beliefs into practice through ODIHR co-sponsored meetings such as the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting (SHDM) III, which is focused entirely on digital technologies. In the words of OSCE Director-General Elinor Hammarskjöld, “Digital technologies have great potential to promote and enhance the enjoyment of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law” (OSCE, 2021i).

Clearly, the OSCE, and in particular the ODIHR, advocate for and aim to advance a tech governance model that is situated between the American and European models: A model that understands digital technologies as tools that can foster good governance, promote, and enhance democracy, and foster human rights and freedoms, rather than one which regards them as tools for surveillance and digital control. Furthermore, through its activities, the OSCE seeks to advance data protection policies in its member states. Thus, the OSCE’s digital governance policies and ideas align with the organization’s overall goals of supporting and promoting democratic development, human rights, the rule of law, and good governance.

## 27.6 Digital Policies and Politics in the Central Asian Nations

Examining the literature for ongoing tech projects, developments, and early tech governance efforts in three Central Asian nations—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—we find indicators of emerging tech governance (UNESCAP, 2020). Projects such as “Digital Kyrgyzstan 2019–2023” illustrate this point very well. Tajikistan has likewise presented such initiatives (World Bank, 2016). Much of this initial vision of how digital technologies should be utilized focuses on economic development. It is felt that they should streamline and improve the financial sector and supply chain management, allow for the development of e-commerce, and finally enhance agricultural output (Jenish, 2019; UNESCAP, 2020). Beyond this, there is some limited evidence that the three nations additionally saw digital technologies also as tools for improving governance. As the then President of Kyrgyzstan, Jeenbekov, noted “The digitization of society is a requirement of today. This will open up new opportunities for our citizens. The human factor in the provision of public services will be excluded, which will contribute to the eradication of corrupt elements” (Jeenbekov, in Alkanova, 2019). Other literature shows how regional governments initially saw digital technologies as tools for enhancing governmental services and improving democratic local governance, particularly in Kyrgyzstan (Brimkulov &

Baryktabasov, 2014; Dzhusupova, 2015). This indicates, at least in theory, that the three nations appeared to be supportive of the original OSCE vision. Nevertheless, observing the current situation, it seems those lofty goals and ideas have not been turned into reality. Spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, a wide-ranging group of authors notes how the three nations have used digital technologies for surveillance and control purposes and as tools to suppress free speech, human rights, and democratic liberties instead. As Shastry notes, “Too many governments in the region are focusing on control and surveillance instead of citizens’ rights.” This indicates that, despite best earlier intentions, the three nations are increasingly rejecting the OSCE tech governance model and are moving towards a tech governance model akin to the Chinese model.

Furthermore, strong support from Chinese official and private actors increases the likelihood of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan advancing along the Sino model of technological governance. Through the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Digital Silk Road (DSR), Chinese state and non-state actors can provide these Central Asian nations with below-market priced digital tools and technologies such as big data and deep learning programmes, hardware for mobile infrastructure, digital command centres for police forces, facial recognition software, digital monitoring systems, and other video surveillance systems (Burgers, 2022). What only enhances the interest of the region in Chinese technology projects, such as the “Safe Cities” and “Sharp Eyes” projects, is that these governmental programmes utilize digital technologies for surveillance purposes (Marat & Sutton, 2021). This suggests that Chinese hardware and tech governance policies will assume an ever-widening presence, and may even become the standard among those three nations.

## **27.7 Balkanization Instead of Eurasianism: Implication and What the OSCE Can Do**

Whereas initial technology policies indicated some desire to follow a liberal model of technological governance, with limited regulation and the use of technology as a force for good, the current observation is that, because of the growing degree of Chinese technological surveillance resources and programmes, the Central Asian states are pivoting away from their initial preference for the liberal model towards the Chinese technological governance model. This development, which is likely to receive Russian support, seems to ensure that Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan will most likely embrace tech governance models in line with those of China and Russia. This will lead to a further fragmentation and increased cyberbalkanization of the digital sphere in the region. This brings up the question of what the OSCE, as an active participant in these countries, can effectively do to advance its own model of technological governance, i.e. a model that seeks to utilize digital technologies as tools with which to positively impact the economic sector, assist political freedom, enhance good governance, and ensure that digital technologies are embraced as a

force for the social good. It is a question which remains unanswered, and a topic which requires much further research and discussion.

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# Chapter 28

## Exploring Heritage Diplomacy: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) an the Western Balkans



Erman Akilli

### 28.1 Introduction

The Western Balkans (WB) became a destabilized region in the wake of the Yugoslav Wars (1991—2001) which were aroused by ethnic conflicts. Despite the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s support and presence in the area and active role in promoting dialogue and tolerance during these years, peace and democracy have, arguably, not been established to the extent the OSCE had aimed for in 1995. During the wars in the WB, historical buildings were targeted because they represented the opposing sides' cultures, ethnicities, or religious views. Even after the conflicts had finished, threats to cultural heritage remained. In response, the Council of Europe (CE) and the European Commission supported cultural heritage programmes and policies to repair and restore artefacts and monuments in the WB region, including inscription into the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list (Bold & Pickard, 2018). In order to explain the heritage of the WB, it is not possible to neglect Ottoman history, as the region formed part of that empire for 600 years. Thus, the WB state identity construction is influenced by the Ottoman legacy; even today, WB national identity theorists continue to view this identity-based "other-ness" as a defining characteristic (McDonald, 2012). Former Secretary-General of the Council of Europe Thorbjørn Jagland sums the identity of the entire region as being based in cultural heritage and democracy. During his speech at the Ljubljana Conference, Mr. Jagland explained the notion as follows: "*Heritage is simply part of our cultural DNA, ... and democracy is our identity*" (Jagland, 2009). Apart from Mr. Jagland's approach towards heritage, on the other side of the World, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an important and successful example of bringing harmonious relations to the Northeast Asia region through Heritage Diplomacy (HD). As seen in the BRI case, heritage as diplomacy can be used to establish bridges between peoples,

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inspire peace, promote cultural variety, and catalyse economic development which can help local communities directly. In this paper, I examine the concept of HD and its potential usage in the WB based upon an analysis of the BRI's success in promoting regional cooperation. To do so, I examine the BRI, its historical roots, structure, and geographical extensions.

## 28.2 Intertwining Approaches in Diplomacy: Heritage and Culture

As a form of Soft Power (Nye, 1990), the concept of heritage, which acts as a bridge between the past and the present, essentially expresses the cultural accumulation of a country. HD, which is the manifestation of the concept of heritage in foreign policy, is defined as a series of processes in which shared cultural ties and historical past among nations are transformed into exchanges, collaborations, and cooperative governance forms. Heritage, which has emerged as a form of foreign policy management today, is shaped primarily based on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list. The concept of HD, which is the manifestation of the idea of (cultural) heritage in foreign policy, was introduced into International Relations literature by Tim Winter with his article titled "HD" published in 2015 (Winter, 2015). In his article, Winter defined it, as stated above, as a set of processes by which shared cultural ties and a historical past among nations are transformed into exchanges, collaborations, and forms of cooperative governance (Winter, 2015). As Winter implies, the significant aspect of HD is assistance provided to other countries in the form of renovation/cultural heritage protection and heritage management assistance, technology transfer, capacity building, or institutional support (Winter, 2015). According to Winter, this type of (foreign) aid brings the people of the donor and recipient countries closer together (Winter, 2016). On the other hand, Winter also emphasizes that HD should be read as, empirically and conceptually different from cultural diplomacy. For Winter, despite definitional sharpness, cultural diplomacy typically revolves around the projection or expression of a particular art form as a *soft power* mechanism (Winter, 2015); movies, celebrities, sports, or fashion are among the often-cited examples of cultural exports that help countries gain influence beyond their national borders (Cull, 2009). Cultural diplomacy can be defined as the process of actions based on the interactive exchange of ideas, values, traditions, culture, and identity. This (cultural) interaction can develop relations between states alongside socio-cultural cooperation (Akilli, 2019). From the Roman Republic's strategy of inviting the sons of foreign "friendly kings" to be educated in Rome to Sufi mystics spreading a simple and tolerant message across borders during the early Ottoman period, early cultural diplomacy was a persistent element in all of the principal civilizations (Donelli, 2019).

Unlike classic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy assumes that political interaction will be easier between culturally closer parties (Akilli, 2016) and that cultural diplomacy is related to the government of that country (Sancar, 2012); thus, it is a crucial

tool of the state for promoting a positive image abroad to facilitate all diplomatic affairs (Chartrand, 1992, 134). In other words, it should be easier for states to impose the legitimacy of their foreign policy decisions on a country that they can influence with their cultural values (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010). According to another definition, cultural diplomacy is a strategy to develop mutual understanding between states through human communication and exchange (Purtaş, 2013b, 2017). Cultural diplomacy is a catalyst for social change and transformation and a means of mutual interaction between societies (Fisher, 2009). According to Kazou Ogoura, modern cultural diplomacy aims “to improve a nation’s image and prestige through such aspects of culture as fine and performing arts, language education, and intellectual traditions” (Ogoura, 2009).

According to Winter, HD is more comprehensive than cultural diplomacy. It involves only the export or projection of a particular artistic form; it also focuses on exchanging bi- and multi-directional cultural flows (Winter, 2015). For Winter, HD goes beyond the use of culture as a tool for diplomatic relations; HD acts as a transboundary and politicized field of governance as it connects various sectors such as renovation/architectural preservation, social development, and post-disaster reconstruction (Winter, 2015). Nonetheless, Winter states that “heritage as diplomacy” is much politically more substantial than heritage in diplomacy (Winter, 2015). In this context, a state’s HD towards its hinterland is “inherited as diplomacy,” while HD under other conditions can be expressed as “heritage within diplomacy.” Winter also draws attention to the material/economic dimension of HD. As a concrete example of this situation, he states that heritage is part of state development aid packages to other states and international aid institutions operating on heritage (Winter, 2015). As discussed below, China’s BRI shines through this perspective.

### **28.3 China’s BRI: “A Nearby Neighbor is Better than a Distant Relative”**

Part and parcel of the cultural heritage in the Caucasus and WB are the ancient trading routes. Starting from China’s Han dynasty era and continuing for centuries (130 BCE – 1453 CE), the “Silk Road” formed a trade route connecting continents and trade centres. As the Silk Road connected continents, countries, and trade networks; Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a new “Silk Road” plan as China’s Central Asia strategy during his visit to Kazakhstan in 2013—a plan which would reach out to different routes and continent and, most importantly, would advance China’s interest through cooperation (Banjimin & Faulkner, 2017). During his speech at Nazarbayev University, President Xi stated, “A nearby neighbour is better than a distant relative,” articulating the vision behind the BRI. He also proposed that China and the Central Asian countries build an “economic belt along the Silk Road,” a trans-Eurasian project spanning from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea. In order to accomplish this, China has invested a three trillion US dollars, most of which has been spent on infrastructure

development. Moreover, the BRI/One Belt One Road (OBOR) project encompasses the Eurasian and Asia–Pacific economies as well as the European economic zone by creating/extending economic networks. This project thus connects approximately 65 countries and a population of 4.4 billion, or 63% of the global population, and 21,000 billion dollars of the global economic product (Mardell & Eder, 2018). The objectives of the BRI are: (1) Building an integrated grand market that will utilize both local and global markets, (2) Enhancing mutual collaboration on every level of cooperation, (3) Technology transfer, renovating/creating infrastructure for economic networks; and (4) Creating a safe environment by promoting trust and understanding between member states.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, the BRI was a grand strategy presented by China (Aoyama, 2016; Rolland, 2017) towards Central Asia; this leads to several questions regarding the stated objectives of the initiative (Chatzky, 2020; Chin, 2018; Singh, 2019). Apart from the ongoing debate over the BRI's core objectives, primarily as to whether it seeks economic benefits or pursues geopolitical and military goals (Ishnazarov, 2020), the uniqueness of the BRI lies in its promotion of cooperation between states for those objectives. As the Chinese president proposed the BRI in order to improve connectivity and collaboration between the member states on a transcontinental level, this advantageous strategic plan also effects foreign policy. As Winter implies, the most critical aspect of HD is to assist other countries with renovation/cultural heritage protection and heritage management assistance, technology transfer, capacity building, or institutional support (Winter, 2015), which are significant elements of China's BRI. Looking at the principles of the BRI, multifaceted cooperation stands out. As with HD, lasting collaboration is vital for the BRI to achieve its goals. Another focus is that the mutual trust environment established between states will contribute to the evaluation of strategic and sensitive issues between countries and will pave the way for conflict resolution. After World War II, such HD was instrumental in China's positive development of relations with the states in its geographical region. This has continued as it is not possible for the BRI to be successful until disputes between member states are resolved. This is why it presents a meaningful formula for use among the WB countries.

## 28.4 HD in the WB

The conflict that tore the WB region apart in the 1990s had a long and complicated history. Yugoslavia arose from a post-World War I political arrangement intended to reward the victorious countries' Serbian allies, while its very creation contained the seeds of its demise. Yugoslavia was situated on several destabilizing geopolitical faults. These were drawn along religious, ethnic, intellectual, and political lines. The death of Marshall Tito in 1980 set in motion a chain of events that eventually led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia (Derek, 2012). As mentioned above, China's BRI gains its effectiveness through its heritage background and stimulates that very background with cooperation and implementation of diplomacy towards partner states.

The BRI is an important and successful example of harmonious regional relations. For instance, post-World War II diplomatic tension in the Northeast Asia region (between China, Japan, and Korea) has been delicate since 1945. Today, however, with the transformation through the BRI, international cooperation between countries across Asia has gained momentum. As part of the BRI, Balkan states can use the same formula as China to overcome diplomatic tensions between one another. To overcome such frozen conflicts or/and hardships (for instance the aftermaths of Yugoslavian war, Bosnian war, and Kosovar war; ethnic problems, etc.), such cooperation presents a great opportunity. Some may say that the BRI shines on economic cooperation (Callahan, 2016), but as mentioned above, the BRI's true uniqueness is bringing harmony and continuous collaboration between partners of the initiative. The idea of *reviving* the Silk Roads through the BRI creates new institutional and political relationships around cultural heritage. These processes will contribute significantly to the remapping of Eurasian and Indian Ocean historical narratives (Winter, 2018). The Balkan region is essentially based on shared culture and history for the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list.

## 28.5 Conclusion

This study aimed to explain HD as a tool, which can be used in conflict resolution for frozen hardships. In the wake of the 1990s, former Yugoslavia became the stage for conflict and dispute regarding the events that caused almost ten years of war in the region. As the Yugoslav Wars tore the WB region apart, events during and after World War II did the same for the Northeast Asia region, but today, through HD practiced under the BRI, China has promoted regional cooperation, stability, and constructive diplomatic relations. Thus, the WB can use the same formula. HD is a tool for promoting and facilitating continuous cooperation and harmony between states under the principles of the initiative. As mentioned above, the cultural heritage artefacts in the WB were negatively affected due to the nature of the Yugoslav Wars and their aftermath. The Ljubljana Conference/Process initiated cultural heritage programmes and policies to repair and restore artefacts and monuments in the WB region which are included in UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list. Rehabilitating the WB region on the basis of heritage can be considered to be the very first step in HD practice. As mentioned above, the concept of heritage as diplomacy can be used to establish bridges between peoples, inspire peace, promote cultural variety, and catalyse economic development which can help local communities directly.

Bringing back the concept of the "Silk Road" from the past centuries highlights the importance of crowning people-to-people connections, something which has been vital for BRI. Cultural heritage and HD are crucial to explaining the nexus between people, routes, networks, hubs, and corridors. BRI partner states can reclaim this Silk Road heritage as a concept of shared heritage and cultural bonds and which can be used to strengthen the ways of cooperation (Winter, 2018). World Heritage nominations for "Silk Road" properties form part of enhancing elements in which

countries can participate to renovate or rebuild historical and cultural monuments. Maritime archaeology across the region, for example, has become a vital point in which China has provided funding for salvage operations in the Indian Ocean which show historical cultural connections China and other countries (Winter, 2018).

In other words, China's grand strategy, the BRI, which crowns openness, connectivity, cooperation, and harmony, could eventually transform the OSCE region and the whole world. Notably, while EU membership is seen as a carrot for overcoming conflicts, under the BRI, as mentioned above, disputes had to be solved so that projects that will bloom over the continuous cooperation, harmony, economic growth, and infrastructure development—elements which lacked support from European actors in the region—could be carried out.

For WB to engage in reconciliation practices efficiently, international partners need to be acquainted with the cultural context of the region (Lederach, 1997), something which can be aided through HD usage. HD, something which shines in the BRI, can also act as a catalyst for the Balkan region. Intertwined with cultural diplomacy, HD can be used to enhance cooperation and political dialogue between WB states that share common heritage and culture.

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