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### **Post-Soviet Authoritarian Pathways: Insights from Kyrgyzstan and Belarus**

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This paper explores the similarities and differences between the post-Soviet regimes in the Russian ‘near neighborhood’, focusing specifically on the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Belarus. Conventional wisdom suggests that faced with an imminent revolutionary threat, Russia consistently strives to fulfill its ‘preventive counter-revolution’ agenda in its neighborhood and beyond. While the 2005 and 2010 revolutions in Kyrgyzstan seemed to defy the Russian ‘counter-revolution’ policy, the country has not escaped the orbit of the Russian influence. The 2020 revolution reinforced the worst fears about Kyrgyzstan’s inherently unstable political landscape. Clearly, successful, mass-based opposition to a ruling elite tends to serve as an example to discontented elements in other countries. The question as to whether Alexander Lukashenko’s authoritarian regime in Belarus is resilient

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enough to shield itself from the diffusion effects of the 2020 revolution in Kyrgyzstan, provokes an inquiry into the essential similarities and differences between the two regimes.

The two countries share much in common in terms of their close alliance with Russia, vividly manifested in their membership in the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO. Moreover, in both countries the post-soviet transition has been marred by a series of authoritarian malpractices, ranging from centralization and personalization of power to extensive crackdown on civil liberties and political freedoms.

Against this backdrop, the comparative analysis of the two regimes reveals essential differences between the patterns of post-Soviet authoritarianism.

In terms of *elections*, it is necessary to note, that vote buying and the misuse of administrative resources during the elections have been a common occurrence in Kyrgyzstan. Not surprisingly, the 2020 parliamentary elections were rife with fraud and led to a political upheaval. Notably, in 2021, Kyrgyzstan's status declined from "partly free" to "not free" given that the aftermath of the flawed parliamentary elections entailed significant political violence and intimidation (Freedom in the World, 2021). According to Freedom House report (2021), after two revolutions that ousted the authoritarian presidents, governing coalitions have proven unstable, while corruption remained rampant. The Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan consolidated power over several years, using the justice system to suppress political opponents and civil society critics. Moreover, the unrest surrounding the annulled 2020 parliamentary elections led to significant political upheaval (ibid).

There has been a long-standing tendency for elections in Belarus to be marred by considerable irregularities. The 2020 elections were no exception. Rather, expert reports have found “massive and systemic” human rights violations in Belarus before and in the aftermath of the August 9, 2020 presidential election. The OSCE report presents a long list of human rights violations related to presidential elections in Belarus: *“Intimidation and persecution of political activists, candidates, journalists, media actors, lawyers, labor activists and human rights defenders, as well as the detention of prospective candidates; election fraud; restriction on access to information, including internet shutdowns; excessive use of force against peaceful protesters; arbitrary and unlawful arrests or detentions; beatings; sexual and gender violence; abductions and enforced disappearances; torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and widespread impunity for all of the above”* (OSCE, 2020, p. 3).

As a matter of fact, both Kyrgyz and Belarusian societies’ have long suffered from lack of free and fair elections. Although elections are regularly held and for the most part are free of massive fraud, the incumbent authorities invariably use the administrative resources, thus creating an unlevel playing field between government and opposition. The electoral history of both countries suggests that elections in post-Soviet authoritarian regimes are pre-determined ‘contests’ under the ruling elites’ full control, rather than major struggles between opposition and the regime.

Not surprisingly, the political development in both countries has been characterized by centralization of power and *lack of robust political*

**opposition.** Since the ascension of President Alexander Lukashenko in 1994, the opposition has been repressed after most parliamentary and presidential elections without any substantial co-optation. As a result, the opposition has been weak and fragmented, with the ruling authorities exerting monopolistic control over civic activities. Moreover, it has not been uncommon for opposition activists to get harassed, threatened and arrested (Kolarzik and Terzyan, 2020).

As for Kyrgyzstan, the opposition is divided and in many cases dependent on the regime, its members making implicit deals over parliamentary representation or other advantages (Crisis Group, 2004). Essentially, one of the main driving forces behind the Kyrgyz revolutions was the clan politics that divided north and south in the struggle for power. Overall, the clan hierarchy has been an unmistakable characteristic of Central Asian political systems for centuries. Kyrgyzstan is no exception. The country's elite groups have long cleaved along North-South clan, with greater Russian influence in the North and stronger Uzbek presence in the South. Akayev belonged to the northern power base, meaning that the South had a particular interest in having him overthrown. Besides, the President had "northern" rivals (Hale, 2006, p. 315).

The social discontent also stemmed from presidential family's full-scale involvement in critical political and economic decision making across the country. According to widely - held beliefs, Akayev's wife was strongly involved in personnel policies with her powerful influence over the distribution of resources. Moreover, the president's eldest daughter supervised the presidential party "Alga Kyrgyzstan" (Temirkulov, 2010, p. 591). Not surprisingly, the political regime of Kyrgyzstan is often regarded as neo-patrimonial (Laurelle, 2012). That said, it is not uncommon for

political relations to be based on private interests, personal connections, favors, promises, and privileges. This leads to blurred lines between personal and universal gains. This phenomenon is prevalent in authoritarian regimes, where the incumbents rely on a formal bureaucracy and patronage networks to sustain their power (Marat, 2012).

In effect, the nation-building has not been institutionalized and is subject to individual decisions and performance rather than to institutional strength. Meanwhile, institutionalization is critical to translating individuals' visions into policies sustained by appropriate structures, rules, and procedures. This comes down to transforming the accidental arrangements, prudential norms and contingent solutions into relationships that are normatively accepted and regularly practiced. Clearly, it is in this context that the advancement of a vibrant civil society and competitive party politics with well-institutionalized political parties and civil society organizations acquire critical relevance.

Meanwhile, the opportunities to express political grievances freely through free elections, democratic parliament and *open media* have been limited in the two countries since the collapse of the USSR. Controlling the mass media and civil society has been crucial for Europe's 'last dictator' Alexander Lukashenko's rule, with him exercising unrestricted control over mainstream media. The 2008 media law secures a state monopoly over information about political, social, and economic affairs (Freedom House, 2019, 2020). While the government controls media narrative on narrative on politically sensitive issues and suppresses critical reporting, most independent journalists operate under the assumption that they are under

surveillance by the Committee for State Security. In December 2018, amendments to the media law took effect, requiring that all online media outlets keep records of and disclose to the authorities the names of people who submit comments (HRW, 2019).

While the Kyrgyz media enjoys more freedom, the government's low tolerance for criticism remains of concern. It has not been uncommon for journalists and bloggers covering major events, including ongoing corruption cases, the COVID-19 response, and the October 2020 elections, to face intimidation, detention, physical attack, and interference as they conducted their work. Moreover, the media landscape remains divided along ethnic lines while the government's crackdown on ethnic hatred has focused on minority writers despite the prevalence of racist and anti-Semitic articles in Kyrgyz-language media (Freedom House, 2021).

Notably, in 2014, then President Almazbek Atambayev signed a so-called "False Accusation Law," that makes intentional defamation a criminal offense punishable by up to three years in prison (Kalybekova, 2014).

The international monitors regarded it as a pretext to "suppress legitimate news stories, as well as intimidate or punish journalists reporting on matters of public interest" (Freedom House, 2021).

As for the state of *civil society* in the two countries, it is noteworthy that civil society organizations have been characterized by their organizational weakness, and marginality in terms of their social base, financial assets and influence over policy making. The freedom of association is extremely limited in Belarus, where the registration of groups is remains entirely arbitrary, while the foreign funding to NGOs is treated as interference in domestic affairs (Freedom House: Belarus, 2019).

Only a few human rights groups continue to operate, putting their supporters and activists at the risk harassment by the government. Alarmingly, in 2018, the Criminal Code of Belarus introduced the prospect of large fines for unregistered or liquidated organizations, aimed at curbing their activism (Freedom House, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the anti-government protests following the 2020 presidential elections show that the Belarusian opposition and civil society have the potential to challenge the status quo meticulously preserved by Lukashenko. To suppress civic activism, the Belarusian authorities resorted to arresting the activists involved in 2020 prodemocracy movement by the thousands, while many more were forced to flee the country (Freedom House: Belarus, 2021).

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to treat the successful actions by protesters or even civil society representatives per se as a shift in a robust or “emerging” civil society. The question remains as to if protests are organized by well-established and institutionalized organizations, or do groups emerge spontaneously out of the protests themselves?

Despite their organizational weakness and limited actorness, the Kyrgyz civil society organizations enjoy considerable freedom and face less harassment by the government.

In contrast to its regional neighbors, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan stands out through its relatively vocal civil society that played a critical role in deposing President Akayev during the Tulip revolution. Meanwhile, much of that activism was concentrated in urban areas and civil society organizations were largely dependent on donor

funding. The initial liberal orientation of President Akayev made Kyrgyzstan the main Central Asian target of the Western support aimed at promoting a Western-style civil society advancement across the country (Pierobon, 2018, p. 114). Recent years have seen a variety of civil society engagement, beyond donor-funded NGOs. Voluntary civic groups have formed around the issues of environmental protection, while the civic activism has been on the rise. Nevertheless, “such activities have often been sporadic, short-term and incapable of sustained engagement on salient public issues where longer-term activities would be necessary” (BTI, 2020).

The US Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the World Bank, the European Commission (EC), and the United Nations with the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) were among the most active donors (Terzyan, 2021, p. 8). The government has not been actively involved in the implementation of development programs due to the ruling elites’ reluctance to implement policies that could adversely affect their personal and political interests (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 144).

Overall, further development of civil society organizations’ institutional capacities and networks is essential for boosting their actorness and becoming agents of democracy.

Admittedly, rampant corruption prevalent in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan has long condemned the two countries to a vicious circle of underdevelopment, poor governance, and inability to implement reforms. Belarus is the 66 least corrupt nation out of 180 countries, according to the 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International (Trading Economics, 2020). Corruption is present at all government levels in Belarus; customs, public procurement, and construction are particularly

vulnerable sectors (Belarus Corruption Report, 2020).

The EU has been supporting anti-corruption efforts in Belarus through Good governance and fight against corruption in Belarus (PGG-Belarus). The latter is part of the overall CoE/EU Partnership for Good Governance (PGG) Programme “Fight against corruption and fostering good governance/ Fight against money-laundering” assistance facility to the Eastern Partnership countries. It is one of the National Components primarily focused on strengthening efforts aimed at preventing and fighting corruption (COE, 2020). Despite the EU’s efforts, Lukashenko’s authoritarian rule seems detrimental to defeating corruption. Meanwhile rampant corruption and weak rule of law would considerably undermine the overall progress Belarus has made with other reforms.

Similarly, Kyrgyzstan faces major challenges of widespread corruption in all sectors of the economy and at all levels of the state apparatus, including entrenched corruption, political instability, infiltration of state institutions by criminal groups, and economic problems. According to Transparency International, Kyrgyzstan is among the 50 most corrupt countries in the world. In the 2020 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, Kyrgyzstan was ranked 124th out of 180 in 2020 (Transparency International, 2020).

Overall, corruption Index in Kyrgyzstan averaged 24.16 Points from 1999 until 2020, reaching an all time high of 31 Points in 2020 and a record low of 18 Points in 2008 (Trading Economics, 2020).

A question remains of whether and to what extent the 2020 revolution in Kyrgyzstan and its leadership’s ambitious agenda will translate into

reality, thus leading to significant accomplishments in terms of defeating rampant corruption.

One of the intriguing questions whether and to what extent the *minority rights* are protected. Essentially, Russia's close allies have largely met the requirements of its 'conservative alliance' by largely discriminating against sexual minority groups. This has much to do with the Kremlin's emphasis on the necessity of defending traditional values as opposed to those of liberal democracy. Against this backdrop, the West has been portrayed as a purely LGBT-promoting community that endangers national identities and traditional values in the post-Soviet countries and beyond (MAXCAP Policy Briefs, 2015). Meanwhile, to prevent all these from happening, Putin has positioned Russia as a counter-hegemonic force opposed to the West's "crackdown" on conservative values and even world's last bastion of traditional values, characterized by its rejection of revolutions, homosexuality, and feminism (Orlova, 2018).

Even a quick glance at the international human right watchdogs' reports show severe violations of LGBT rights both in Kyrgyzstan and Belarus. While there is huge societal discrimination against minority groups in these countries, the government agencies have not done much to alleviate the situation (Freedom House: Kyrgyzstan, 2021; Freedom House: Belarus, 2019).

Moreover, other minorities, including the ethnic ones in Belarus (particularly ethnic Roma) and Kyrgyzstan are poorly protected and they face wide and varied forms of discrimination (Viasna, 2017).

Ethnic minorities in—particularly Uzbeks, who make up nearly half of the population of the city of Osh—continue to face discrimination on economic, security, and other matters (Freedom House, 2021).

The ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, that broke out in 1990 and 2010 respectively, in the Uzbek-populated southern part killed hundreds and displaced thousands (USAID report, 2013). In Kyrgyzstan it acquired a lasting effect and led to further marginalization of the religious groups. The 2016 survey by the NGO Search for Common Ground suggests that the collective acts of repression have led to “an increased fear of arbitrary arrests, especially among members of non-Kyrgyz ethnicities. . . [and] a high level of distrust in law enforcement and government authorities...” (Search for Common Ground report, 2016).

The Kyrgyz government has tended to use discursive justifications to reduce the cost of repression and frame the state response as an “inclusive process that was sensitive to the grievances of the affected populations and the general public” (Marat, 2016, p. 531).

In effect, it is not uncommon for Uzbeks to be targeted for harassment, arrest, and mistreatment by law enforcement agencies based on dubious terrorism or extremism charges (Freedom House, 2021).

Last, but not least, it the Russian influence has been prominent in both countries.

Kyrgyzstan traditionally has been the most Russia-friendly Central Asian country, with Russia consistently striving to tighten its grip on the country. Essentially, the Russian pressure was critical to shutting down the United States’ transit center at Manas in 2014 at the request of the Kyrgyz government. In effect, Kyrgyzstan has been left with only two major power partners—China and Russia, with limited Western influence (Dubnov, 2018).

As for Belarus, while Alexander Lukashenko has exploited competition between the EU and Russia to extract subsidies and sustain his regime, there has been no considerable stride in having Belarus join the European family of democracies. Rather, Russia's relationship with Belarus is closer than that of any other former USSR country. This reflects the country's structural dependence on Russia in the economic, energy, geopolitical, as well as socio-cultural spheres.

Under the Lukashenko's regime, Belarus has become linked with Russia through a multitude of bilateral treaties and agreements covering virtually all areas of inter-state action. As a result, Russia's relationship with Belarus is closer than that of any other former USSR country. Ambrosio (2006), notes that the situation in Belarus is such that the external factors that have proved to promote democratization have been weakened or undermined by its relationship with Russia in general, and by the proposed Russia-Belarus union in particular (Ambrosio, 2006).

Russian leaders, including Putin, have consistently legitimized Lukashenko's rule both diplomatically and politically, not least through defending Belarus's unfair and unfree elections. In the economic realm, Russia-Belarus trade and Russian subsidies shield Belarus from any possible trade sanctions from Western Europe, thus sustaining the regime's unreformed economic system (Ambrosio, 2006). Notably, the Belarusian opposition has not raised the issue of redefining relations with Russia, while stressing the necessity of further strengthening the bilateral ties.

Meanwhile, it is highly unlikely to build democracy when faced with Russian authoritarian influence. Notably, the Russian policy towards its 'near neighborhood' has been broadly associated with 'authoritarian

resistance’, ‘authoritarian diffusion’ and ‘democracy prevention’ (Von Soest, 2015; Finkel and Brudny, 2012).

Some observers go even further, by contending that the chances of democratization across a vast swath of Eurasia seem slimmer now, than ever before in the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s crackdown on liberal-democratic forces at home and abroad (Diuk, 2014, p. 83). Indeed, the total fiasco of post-Velvet Revolution government both in terms of domestic and foreign policies, among others, along with the failed Kyrgyz revolutions further reveal the difficulties of a democratic state-building in the orbit of the Russian influence. Whether or not the 2020 revolution in Kyrgyzstan and a possible domestic change in Belarus will be more successful is yet to be seen. Clearly, much depends on the incumbents’ ability to overcome external authoritarian diffusion and to move beyond the post-Soviet authoritarian legacy.

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