



**INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS  
MULTIDISCIPLINARY  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL**

**THESES OF Ph.D. DISSERTATION**

**Regime Stability and Exercising Power in post-Soviet Central Asia**

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Budapest, 2015

**Institute for International Studies**

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## 1. *Framing the problem*

My doctoral dissertation intends to do the comparative political analysis of five Post-Soviet Central-Asian countries, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The time frame of the research ranges from the point the five countries gained their independence to our days, covering some 25 years of their history. There are a number of reasons why the five states lend themselves to comparative analysis. They are neighbours in a well-defined geographical region, sharing similar cultural and civilizational backgrounds. Societies in the region carry a specifically Central Asian Turko-Persian civilizational heritage, with the majority being followers of Sunni Islam. As member states of the Soviet Union, very similar socio-economic development models were imposed on them, and when gaining their independence they faced the triple challenge of building the nation, building the state and economic transition. In the same way as the Tsar's Russian Empire and the Soviet Union used force to conquer post-Soviet Central Asia, it is ironic that these countries won their independent nationhood despite their own will. In the words of Gregory Gleason, "[T]he greatest irony of independence in Central Asia [was that it came] as had Soviet-style colonialism several decades before - it was imposed by Moscow." (Gleason 1997, 15).

My research has been guided by the puzzle to what extent the similar conditions and starting criteria have determined the development of the given countries' political systems over the past twenty-five years. Have the Central Asian republics followed similar trajectories or do their political structures and ways of exercising power diverge? Are existing differences and similarities primarily due to factors originating from the region's premodern cultural and civilizational heritage, to the prolonged effects of the political and economic structures fossilized in the Soviet period, or alternatively to the political strategies applied by post-Soviet elites? Following *Pauline Jones Luong*, the question could be rephrased as asking whether historical and institutional determinants or political actors' rational choices and decisions are of primary significance. (Jones Luong 2002, 255-269) In even simpler terms: What is more important: the role of structures or processes? (Cummings 2002a 3)

Finally yet importantly, I will also attempt to answer the hardly separable normative question of how politically "successful" the twenty years of Central Asian republics' independence has been. I assume that the political "performance" of the countries concerned may be evaluated along two dimensions, which in practice are obviously interrelated.

One of the dimensions is the issue of *regime stability* (or instability): Were the “founding fathers” of Central Asian successor states, or rather their leading political elites, able to maintain their continued power and the cohesion of their political communities? To what extent has political power been institutionalized, or conversely, to what extent does it rely on personality-dependent informal networks? Have the regimes in power been forced to use open armed aggression against their population, or how violent were the occasional regime changes? Can we talk of “state failure” in the history of any of the Central Asian successor states? Is there a genuine threat that any of them might become a “failed state” in the near future?

The other dimension worthy of investigation is the character of exercising power: I intend to evaluate it on the grounds of the “traditional democracy or autocracy” paradigm. I will be concentrating on the following questions: In the given countries, what is the role of elections in constituting political power, and what is the actual weight of representation mechanisms in decision making? Is there genuine political competition or pluralism in these political systems? To what extent are political rights manifested in these regimes? Paraphrasing the words of *László Csicsmann* about the Middle East, we may ask whether the Central Asian region has the potential of adapting a western type democracy model. (Csicsmann 2006)

## 2. *Research methods*

The present dissertation intends to follow the more traditional case-centered approach of comparative research. Applying the notional framework of *Przeworski and Teune* (Przeworski – Teune, 1970), it might be said that it is definitely closer to the “comparison of similar countries” type of research than to conceptual homogenization or the concept of “most dissimilar systems.” My research covers relatively few cases, i.e. only five states, which are very similar in several respects: they are neighbours, are part of the same geographical region, share a cultural-civilizational background and also under Soviet times a fairly identical economic and social development model was imposed on them. On this basis, it is hardly surprising that in the post-Soviet era too their political structure continues to demonstrate more similarities than differences. The investigation, in fact, involves a sixth case as well, a hypothetical ideal type that I refer to as the “standard Central Asian model.” I have created it by abstracting the characteristics of the five political systems under scrutiny. The dissertation will refer to the specifics of individual cases as divergences from the “standard Central Asian model.” Besides presenting the obvious parallels, the very aim of the research is to explain the specificities diverging from the general and to place the countries into further subcategories (e.g. stable and unstable regimes) and ultimately, to establish a typology that can be used for further research.

The dissertation follows a research strategy that is essentially deductive in its logic: I am trying to apply established theories for explaining such concrete phenomena as, for example, the Tajik state failure or the Kyrgyz parliamentary experiment, while not attempting to develop a novel theory. Consequently, I did not pose hypotheses to be tested; instead, I tried to formulate the puzzle of my dissertation in the form of “research questions.” According to the case-centered comparative approach, my research applies a basically qualitative, descriptive-analytical method. Although my dissertation outlines certain quantifiable relations (e.g. election participation data, international organizations’ quantitative evaluations in tables with scores, etc.), quantitative and statistical methods per se are not applied. In fact, this would not be possible because of the low number of cases and the multitude of variables. The “low number of cases and multitude of variables” might be a serious methodological limitation of my research. However, my main research goal is not to reveal generally valid links between variables within a certain system, but much rather to compare the *totality* of the political systems concerned and, in this light, to offer contextual explanations of particular features.

*Galton's problem* also posed a major professional dilemma: In Central Asia, which numerous authors see as becoming the new “grand chessboard” of superpowers (Rashid, 1994 207-231; Brzezinski, 1997, 123-176), to what extent can we regard the independent states concerned as relevant units of analysis? The development of Central Asian political systems – partly because they are rentier economies in their nature – are obviously impacted by external actors and the international environment. Nevertheless, I contend that introducing global and regional superpowers’ Central Asia policies and the countries’ own foreign policies would go far beyond the limits of a comparative political dissertation. Thus, in my research I have concentrated on the *internal* conditions of the development of Central Asian political systems, arguing that the existing differences and similarities of the regimes studied can be explained primarily by these internal factors.

Regarding the “black box” problem, I would repeatedly emphasize that I do not intend to create a new theory; I hope that the notional frameworks elaborated by the “classics” of comparative politics will prove helpful in explaining shared and particular features of Central Asian political systems.

### 3. *The main research questions and findings*

1. *Following independence, do Central Asian successor states' development trajectories diverge or converge?* As Sally N. Cummings also notes, today Central Asian political systems demonstrate less variety than in the early 1990s: “post-independence political development in Central Asia has shown a relatively limited number of trajectories...” (Cummings 2002a, 3). I regard it as one of the foundations of my dissertation that although contemporary Central Asian political systems certainly demonstrate major differences, but when looking at the way they exercise power, they have structural similarities on the basis of which it seems justified to talk, in the Weberian sense, about an ideal-typical “standard Central Asian” political model. I contend that the character of this model can be described as follows, partly following the analytical criteria presented by *Mihály Dobrovits* in his 2011 study (Dobrovits 2011, 9):

a. *Unfinished nation-building, interethnic and intraethnic conflicts.*

The Slavic, Baltic or Caucasian peoples of the post-Soviet region had already had some shorter or longer historical experience of nation state status before the creation of the Soviet Union (henceforth: SU); what is more, in some cases they had a well-developed, remarkably ancient national identity and culture. On the other hand, the five Central Asian member states of the SU were established as artificially created entities without historical predecessors, and the related national-ethnic identities are also mainly products of Soviet “ethnic engineering.” Central Asian republics of the SU were created so that, according to the logic of Soviet ethnofederalism, they should ensure a certain level of cultural self-rule for one or more nationalities in them, rather than because they wanted them to ever function as independent political systems (Roy 2001, 50-84). Because of the multiethnic reality of Central Asian societies, the weakness of national identities and the virulence of subnational (tribal and regional) identities, “... *continuation and completion of the nation building process*” has remained Central Asian republics’ “*main internal political agenda*” even after winning their independence. (Dobrovits 2011, 8) As the tragic example of the Tajik civil war (1992-1997) indicates, torn out of



the SU, not every successor state was able to ensure the required cohesion. State failure similar to the Tajik civil war has been successfully avoided by the other republics, but the period following perestroika and independence has been accompanied by stepped up interethnic tensions and outbursts of ethnically motivated unrest.

*b. Excessive presidential power and person-centered politics.*

With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, which switched to parliamentary rule in 2010, in their constitutional setup the states concerned are presidential republics characterized by the dominance of the executive branch. Presidential parties usually regarded as the former state party's successors control the judiciary and the party system. In addition to the constitutional framework, the strong presidential power concentration is enabled by the person-centered character of Central Asian societies' political culture. Thus, as *Professor John T. Ishimaya* points out, Central Asian republics belong to the so-called "neopatrimonial" type of authoritarian regimes. In agreement with *Nikolay Borisov*, it is argued that presidential rule in the Central Asian context is an expression of the personality-centered exercise of power rather than its cause (Borisov 2011).

*c. Low level of institutionalization of politics and the decisive role of interpersonal networks.*

Another uniform feature of Central Asian post-Soviet successor states is the parallel existence of constitutional political institutions and informal networks of interest, i.e. "clan" structures. What is more, the dominance of the latter over the former is characteristic of decision making on the ground. In the countries examined, the distribution of power the constitution guarantees is does usually happen in practice, as informal interest groups control government and the law enforcement organizations of the state. Several authors have drawn attention to the decisive role of clans in the political life of post-Soviet Central Asian countries. (Rashid, 1994, 242-243; Olcott 2005, 234-235; Collins 2006). According to *Adeeb Khalid* (Khalid 2007) and *Idil Tüncer-Kilavuz* (Tuncer-Kilavuz 2009) the

term “clan” may be misleading as it is inevitably associated with pre-modern tribal relations, while what we have are vertical networks of interest formed under the conditions of the Soviet era and working according to the patron-client logic, in the emergence of which family ties and regional binds naturally play a part, but economic and social interests are characteristically more decisive. *Collins* argues that the Central Asian states of our day can be defined as “clan-based political systems, where the regimes’ stability is ensured by regional clans’ pacts (Collins 2006, 338 – 344). Where such pacts have not been made and the balance of clans has tilted, usually the stability of the regime is also shattered, as exemplified by the Tajik civil war and the Kyrgyz revolutions.

d. *“Rentier state” or “semi-rentier state” character, but at least the revenue hunting logic of elites.*

In his 2002 study, *Wojtek Ostrowski* attributes the neopatrimonial character of political systems in Central Asian republics to their “rentier” or “semi-rentier” character. Studying export figures, we may agree with *Ostrowski* that in our days Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan can actually be described as relying on export revenues. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are poor in natural resources to export but are very much in need of external resources, definitely fit into the “semi-rentier state” category (Ostrowski 2011, 286). Unlike Ostrowski, however, I contend that in the light of foreign trade figures, Uzbekistan does not satisfy the criteria of the rentier-state, not even those of the rentier economy, although apparently the Uzbek political elite groups are also driven by the logic of a type of rent hunting. It is probably not unrelated to this that, as I have outlined, the two rentier states, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, have developed relatively stable neopatrimonial, according to some authors even sultanistic, authoritarian regimes, while the other three, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, have kept potentially much more unstable, authoritarian oligarchic “clan-based” systems.

- e. *The still marginal significance of political Islam with the potential of its strengthening.*

Both western (Rashid 2002; Khalid 2007, 140-203; Haghayeghi 1997, 71-101) and Russian authors (Malashenko and Polonskaya 2008; Naumkin, 2005) pay special attention to the given countries' Islamist and militant jihadist organizations, mostly forced into illegality. Their role in Kazakhstan may still be seen as marginal, and we have no knowledge of any Islamist organization, not even illegal ones, in Turkmenistan, the country stifling all forms of political pluralism. At the time of the Tajik civil war, the United Tajik Opposition's supporters certainly had a stronger influence of Islamist radicals; up to our days Tajikistan is the only country in the region with a legal Islamist party, the *Islamic Renaissance Party* (IRP). (Despite this, according to analysts the Islamists' social support has been on the decline since the end of the civil war (Olimova and Olimov 2001; Rashid 2002, 112-113). At present, the main territory where Islamic movements are active is the Fergana Valley, thus the problem affects primarily Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

2. ***What are the criteria to consider when examining the trajectory or “political performance” of the political systems concerned over the past two decades?*** I contend that the countries' “performance” may be examined along two, in practice strongly overlapping dimension. One is *regime stability* (or instability), while the other is the character of exercising power. I base their evaluation on the measurements of *Freedom House Freedom in the World* and *Nations in Transit*, the *Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index*, and the assessment of the *World Bank* concerning “good governance” and “political stability” and the *Fund for Peace Fragile States Index*. Up to the mid-90s it was not a completely unfounded expectation that for the character of exercising power, there would be a more liberal (Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) and a more authoritarian block (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) for Central Asian republics' exercise of power, in a way reviving the former civilizational divide between the Steppe Region and Transoxania. Today however, it seems that major differences are not in the way the countries studied exercise power, but much rather along the liberal-

authoritarian dimension. Kazakhstan seems to be converging towards the “standard authoritarian model” and Kyrgyzstan, which after the 2010 revolution switched to parliamentarianism, diverges more considerably, although in the light of international organizations’ (Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House, World Bank) evaluations it would be too early to talk about a clear democratization in Kyrgyzstan. For the dimension of regime stability, two of the five countries (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) may be categorized as basically stable autocracies, the Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz political systems appear to be potentially more unstable, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are definitely more unstable.

3. *To what extent do structural determinants and political elites’ decisions explain the differences in the dimensions of the character of exercising power and regime stability?* In the cases of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the primary reason for instability is that the Tajik and Kyrgyz rentier economies have far fewer resources at their disposal for maintaining regime stability than the other three states. In these two countries, fighting for scarce resources and the political elites’ structure inherited from the Soviet period have shifted the competing elite groups’ strategy towards the “all or nothing” logic. In the case of Uzbekistan, a country much richer in natural resources, it is the more explicit clan-based politics that undermine autocratic consolidation, but in this case instability should be seen as latent. On the other hand, in the two other states, more substantial natural resources and curbing clan-based politics to some extent have resulted in a higher level of political stability. At the same time, natural resources and inter-clan divisions are far from being exclusive structural determinants. This is well exemplified by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan where an outburst of political violence led to strongly diverging outcomes. In Tajikistan, the conflict escalated into an open civil war, while in the Kyrgyz case a democratic transition was emerging. Thus, in the differences developing in the dimensions of exercising power and regime stability, both structural determinants and factors originating from political actors’ situative decisions have both played a part.

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