

Disorder over the border: spinning the spectre of instability through time and space in Central Asia

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Abstract. Across Eurasia, authoritarian leaders have sought to justify their ‘strong-hand’ approach to government by framing instability as a security threat and the strong state as a guarantor of political stability. Such ‘regimes of certainty’ promote a modernist valorization of order, the flip side of which is a demonization of political disorder instability, or mere uncertainty. Examining the spatial and temporal imaginaries underpinning such narratives about in/stability in Central Asia, this paper compares official discourse in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where state-controlled media and official publications have stigmatized political instability in Kyrgyzstan as indicative of the dangers of political liberalization and a weak state. Ostensibly about the ‘other’, these narratives are also about scripting the ‘self’. I argue that official interpretations of ‘disorder over the border’ in Kyrgyzstan are underpinned by a set of spatial and temporal imaginaries that do not merely reflect regional moral geographies, but actively construct them.

Keywords: authoritarianism, political geography, critical security studies, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan

Introduction

While it is clear that actors in democratic countries have long produced the spectre of authoritarianism, scholars have given less attention to how actors in authoritarian governments produce the spectre of democracy.¹ Yet as scholars of Central Asia are well aware, anti-democracy rhetoric has been pervasive across the post-Soviet space since at least the early 2000s. The resulting

¹ A full discussion is outside this scope of this paper, but regional scholars have shown that the concept of ‘democracy’ cannot be taken for granted in post-Soviet Eurasia, as it has been continually reworked and redefined by local leaders and ordinary citizens (Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner-Weiss 2010; Omelicheva 2013; Ortmann 2008; Wilson 2005). Here, I approach democracy not as having an essence or proper configuration, but simply as a globalized discursive referent that indexes certain liberal political practices, which are typically said to involve free elections, media and protection of certain civil liberties.

moral geographies have powerfully shaped the contours of politics in the region, as leaders and ordinary citizens alike seek to make sense of the promises and pitfalls of pursuing democratic reforms undertaken by their regional neighbours, such as Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Ukraine. More often than democracy advocates may like to admit, their reaction is not favourable. Instead, local politicians, media outlets and ordinary citizens frequently view Eurasia's democratizing states as sites of instability that may even threaten the stability of their own polities. When used as a political discourse by nondemocratic regimes, this joint imaginary of in/stability is mapped not only onto space, but also onto time, as leaders and citizens reference *past* times of turmoil in conflating democracy with instability and state weakness. Examining how spatial and temporal imaginaries work together, this paper compares discourses about 'disorder over the border' in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where state-controlled media and official publications have a long history of stigmatizing political protests and liberal configurations elsewhere in the world. This is especially visible in their treatment of politics in Kyrgyzstan, which I use to illustrate how political liberalism is imagined and engaged in official and popular discourses in both countries.

Given its recent history and spatial proximity, Kyrgyzstan holds a special place in those countries' dominant discourses as an 'exemplar' of the dangers of an excessively liberal system. Rather than being held up as a positive role model, as the Western media often does, Kyrgyzstan's post-Soviet trajectory has widely been perceived with both suspicion and distress. This became abundantly clear to me as I looked over the results of a large survey I had conducted in Kazakhstan in Fall 2010.² The survey, and other aspects of the larger study of which it was one component, was designed to evaluate citizens' spatial imaginaries with respect to a wide range of territories. I was not concerned with revealing the citizenry's 'opinions' per se, but rather aimed to evaluate how differently positioned individuals categorize regions of political/politicized space (cities, sub-state regions, foreign states) and fit them into a certain moral geography defined by positive and negative feelings. Multiple survey questions were designed explicitly to assess perceptions of other countries, including those shown in **Figures 1-2**. For these questions, research participants were given a lengthy list of countries (as well as the option to write in any not on the list) and asked to rank the four countries they *most* and *least* admire.

² This was a nationally representative doorstep survey conducted by CESSI-Kazakhstan, with a final sample size of 1233 respondents in all regions in Kazakhstan. For more details and limitations, see Koch (2013a).

Fig. 1. Kazakhstan national survey: most admired countries (n=1094). Source: Author.

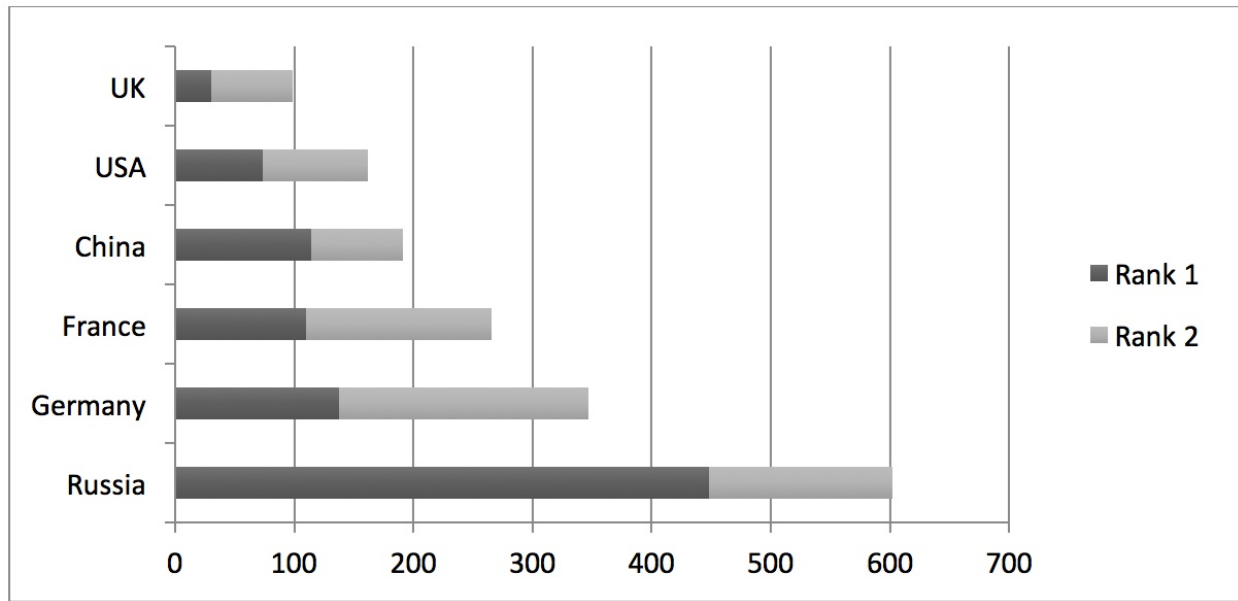
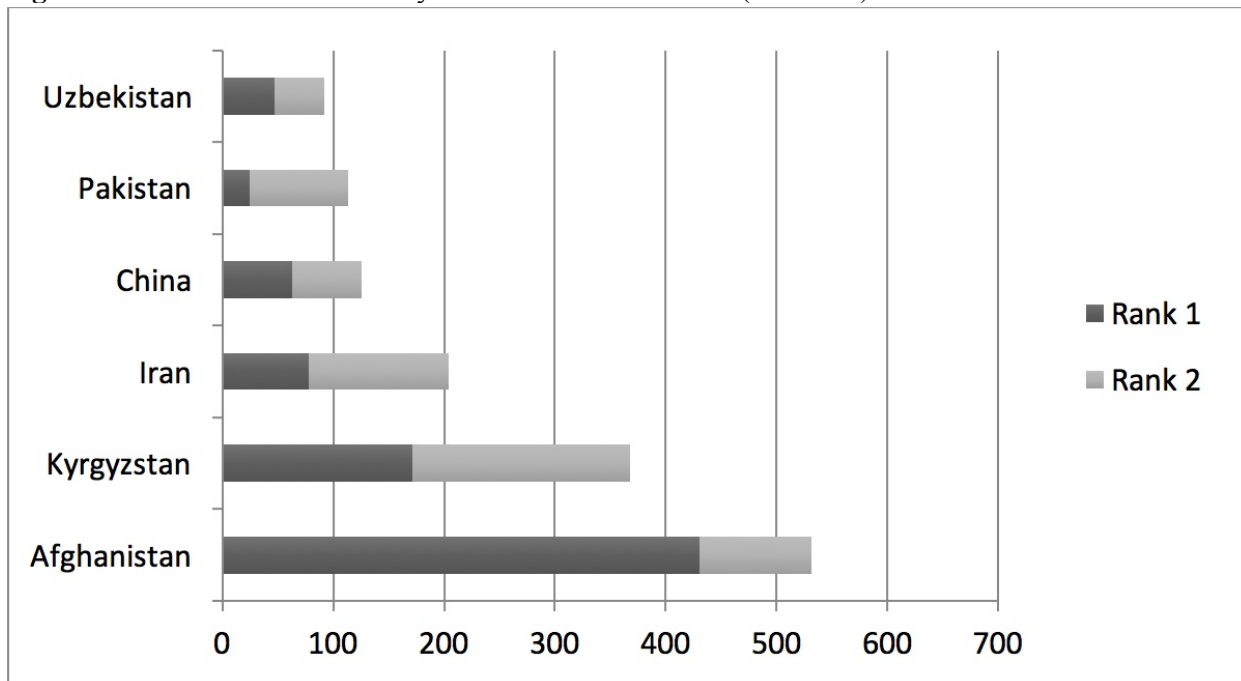


Fig. 2. Kazakhstan national survey: least admired countries (n = 1003). Source: Author.



These results show, predictably, that Kazakhstanis held a high degree of respect for Western countries, with Germany, France, the United States and the UK ranking in the top six. As one might see in various other parts of the world, the list of *least* admired countries prominently includes Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, Kyrgyzstan’s rank toward the top of this list stands out as a regional exception. Coming only a couple of months after the summer 2010 violence in Kyrgyzstan,

the survey indicated a starkly negative attitude among ordinary Kazakhs. I did not collect survey data prior to this event, but judging from my extended research in the country, the results seem both to reflect a widespread mood resulting from extensive press coverage of the 2010 turmoil, combined with a longer-term stigma attached to Kyrgyzstan's liberal experiments prevalent in Kazakhstan. Taking a closer look at how officials and state-sanctioned media have interpreted key events in Kyrgyzstan's recent past, this paper pairs an analysis of the official discourse in Kazakhstan with that of Uzbekistan. I am especially interested in how the threat of 'disorder over the border' is spun not just through spatial references to Kyrgyzstan but also with reference to the period of '*bardak*', or 'chaos', associated with the 1990s.

By tracing narratives in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan about Kyrgyzstan's comparative instability, this paper shows how they build on pre-existing spatial and temporal imaginaries (ways of imagining space and time) to foster an association between political liberalization and social turmoil. Geographic imaginaries are fundamental to security discourses and, in this case, how, when, where and why instability becomes a problem. Political geographers aiming to map such security landscapes have largely employed the analytical tools of critical geopolitics, which is an approach to international politics that 'recognizes that how people know, categorize and make sense of the world is an interpretive cultural practice' and, accordingly, treats geopolitics as a discourse embedded in 'the cultural context that gives it meaning' (Ó Tuathail 2006, 7). Critical geopolitics methodologically emphasizes textual analysis, which I apply to examine official interpretations of two key events in Kyrgyzstan's recent history: the pro-democracy 'Tulip Revolution' in March 2005 and the series of protests and political violence in 2010.³ Drawing texts from official state outlets and newspapers, the final dataset consisted of approximately 100 presidential speeches and news reports from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan *about* Kyrgyzstan from 2005 to 2010.⁴ Since space does not permit detailed citation of each text, I have endeavoured to quote the most representative excerpts here.

³ Space constraints do not permit a full discussion here of these events, but for more on the Tulip Revolution, see especially the special issue edited by Sally Cummings in this journal (Cummings 2008). On the 2010 events, see especially see Bond and Koch (2010) and Megoran (2013).

⁴ For Kazakhstan, these were collected from archives of the Akorda Presidential website and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as news articles published on BNews.kz, Kazinform and Tengrinews. For Uzbekistan, archives included the Presidential Press Service, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and news articles from UzDaily and UzReport. Keyword searches were used to locate all references to Kyrgyzstan, which were then filtered for their relevance to the broader research question of how that country's political environment has been represented in the two countries and, lastly, coded and analysed thematically.

Spinning the spectre of instability

Fear is typically conceptualized in the literature on authoritarian rule and other violent settings as a product of the threat of physical or mental harm. However, building on the classic work of Yi-Fu Tuan in *Landscapes of Fear* (1979), geographers have shown that fear is experienced and manufactured at a wide range of scales and shapes political subjectivities differently based on one's positionality (e.g. Pain and Smith 2008; Shirlow and Pain 2003). Geographers are thus interested in how fear is spatialized and how it comes to be internalized, such that it shapes an individual's practices (consciously or otherwise). From this perspective, fear is not an *a priori* object of analysis, but the correlative of *discourses of danger*. As a relative or subjective experience, then, fear can also be mapped onto different places, spaces and scales: from a room in one's house to a neighbourhood in a city to an entire country. Adopting the explicitly spatial focus of geography, this paper examines how official discourses in two of Central Asia's more authoritarian states – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – invoke and spatialize a fear of *instability*. On the one hand, these narratives valorize *stability* as a supreme political good, said to be the unique offering of a strong and centralized state. On the other hand, they also advance a negatively framed suspicion of uncertainty, said to come with political liberalization.

The political backlash among Eurasia's more authoritarian regimes in response to the 'colour revolutions' vividly illustrates how joint narratives of in/stability work in tandem and how the spectre of instability is spun across the region.⁵ In examining the anti-colour revolution rhetoric in Belarus, Vitali Silitski (Silitski 2010) emphasizes the fact that official rhetoric does not occur in a vacuum, but rather on 'well-nurtured ground'. He shows that pro-authoritarianism arguments are far more persuasive 'when they strengthen and amplify already existing collective memories, myths, fears and prejudices' (277). The implication here is that locals are receptive to the arguments for preserving autocratic political configurations in the face of large-scale protest movements because of pre-existing identity narratives. He suggests that these narratives specifically target 'public consciousness and collective memory to spread stereotypes and myths about the domestic opposition, the West, former communist countries that shifted to the democratic track and democracy in general – but especially democratic promotion' (276). Similarly, in analysing interpretations of Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution in Russia, Stefanie Ortmann (Ortmann 2008) has argued that 'Russian identity narratives both determined the way the Tulip Revolution was framed in official discourse and at the same time were profoundly affected by the colour revolutions' (363). She shows official Russian responses to

⁵ There is insufficient space here to detail this vast literature, but see especially Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner-Weiss (2010), Dimitrov (2013), Lewis (2008), Ó Beacháin and Polese (2010), Silitski (2010) and Way (2008).

Kyrgyzstan's 2005 revolution bolstered hegemonic nationalist ideas that define Russians as politically and culturally separate from an immoral, instability-promoting 'West'. These studies suggest that local interpretations of 'instability' are rooted just as much in tropes about the nationalist 'self' as they are about the events abroad and foreign 'others'.

As with any identity discourse, official narratives that valorize stability and stigmatize instability are subject to contestation. So while democracy is routinely conflated with disorder and instability across the post-Soviet space, this is not uniformly the case and many individuals look favourably on democratic initiatives. Recognizing the plural interpretations of democracy, globally and among their citizens, Eurasia's autocratic leaders have thus sought to homogenize interpretive frames of pro-democracy movements as negative. By rhetorically coding them as a security threat that endangers the integrity of the state and social order, authoritarian elites work to inculcate fear in their citizens through raising the spectre of instability. The extent to which they are successful is a difficult question and one that falls outside the scope of this paper. My interest here rests not with the popular purchase of these narratives, but rather to interrogate the geographic imaginaries upon which they depend. Sometimes referred to as 'mental maps', these diverse and contingent imaginaries define how people imagine space-time, spatial relations and their own place or positionality within the world's political order/ing.

Spatial imaginaries are not 'natural' but must be learned. Modernist understandings of space, which are globally hegemonic today, hinge on the ability to imagine the world as an abstraction, 'the world as a picture' (Agnew 2003; Mitchell 1988). Thinking abstractly about space requires an all-seeing observer who stands outside 'terrestrial space' – the so-called 'bird's-eye view'. But modernist vision reifies time just as much as it does space. In the disembodied perspective it advances, the bird's-eye view simultaneously effaces the earth's temporal rhythms – casting geography as static and eternal. As critical geographers have forcefully illustrated, however, geography is never a static backdrop, but an *active* process of constructing geographic meaning and populating mental maps over time. By examining the practices of mapping space *and* time, we also find that they are intimately interwoven with processes of subject-formation that arise from drawing borders between then and now, here and there, us and them – and all the slippage between and across these categories. Boundary-drawing practices are inherently political, but they are not always securitized (Megoran 2004, 2005). Here again, this applies to both time, space and individual subjects. In analysing the geographic imaginaries that underpin hegemonic scripts about in/stability in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, this paper accordingly sheds light on broader questions about how securitizing discourses are contingently spun through time and space.

Securitizing in/stability and remembering ‘chaos’

Critical security studies fits well with political geography’s spatial tack in that both fields are interested in how threats are imagined, mapped and produced as a political problem and by whom (Booth 2005; Campbell 1992; Dalby 1990; Ingram and Dodds 2009; Ó Tuathail 1996). In applying these insights to Central Asia, scholars have sought to understand the new forms and scales of threat construction in the wake of the Soviet Union’s dissolution (Fumagalli 2007; Heathershaw and Megoran 2011; Kennedy-Pipe 2004; Khalid 2007; Koch 2011; Lewis 2008, 2016; Matveeva 2009; Megoran 2004, 2005; Omelicheva 2013, 2016; Reeves 2005; Stawkowski 2016). As these scholars show, when elites frame political instability as a threat, this has state-forming and legitimacy-building functions. That is, stability can become a *raison d’état* – and *raison d’être* – under regimes that derive their legitimacy from providing a stable social order (usually understood as the absence of warfare or conflict).

In examining securitizing discourses, critical security studies highlights the question of *who* defines security threats, which becomes tremendously important because threat-definition and solution-definition go hand in hand (Kennedy-Pipe 2004; Koch 2011; Reeves 2005). Theoretically, social and political institutions in liberal settings encourage citizens to debate a state’s security priorities. In less liberal settings, by contrast, elites typically seek to monopolize the practice of defining threats. Effectively doing so requires that authoritarian regimes actively build and maintain discursive dominance, which usually involves actively and/or implicitly silencing competing security narratives. Most scholars have examined this effort to dominate the discursive playing field by analysing censorship, coercion and other forms of repressing alternate viewpoints. Yet as Lewis (2016) stresses, repressive measures can be costly; maintaining discursive hegemony demands that official narratives circulate more broadly amongst the citizenry, thereby allowing for ‘political dominance without requiring the frequent use of state violence against political opponents’ (422). Indeed, anti-democratic rhetoric does not merely flow through elite machinations, but is affirmed through a wide range of cultural institutions, social practices and discussions among ordinary citizens.

Popular media outlets are a particularly important conduit for the reproduction of stability-centred security narratives across Eurasia. Recent research in Central Asian studies has emphasized the significant extent to which Russia-based media sources allow Russian opinion-formers to enjoy ‘an enormous advantage over the hearts and minds of people in Central Asia’ (Rollberg and Laruelle 2015, 228; see also Junisbai et al. 2015; Omelicheva 2013; Silitski 2010). Russian television in

particular disseminates across Central Asia key narratives favoured by the autocratically inclined Putin administration. This means that when Russian ‘political technologists’ portrayed the colour revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan as the result of Western intervention and a direct threat to Russia’s territorial integrity and its stability (Ortmann 2008), this interpretation was not only shared by Central Asia’s own news outlets, but also directly broadcast to large swaths of the population via Russian sources. The effect of these narrative circulations is that across the post-Soviet space, actors seeking to *prevent* revolution or political liberalization have found a supportive cultural milieu.

Part of this cultural milieu involves a certain collective memory about the intense political disorder accompanying political transition in the 1990s, which is conjured through reference to the period of ‘chaos’ or ‘*bardak*’. These temporal references to instability and disorder play an important role in how ‘democracy’ is now imagined and narrated as suspect or dangerous across the formerly Soviet states. Yet this is not an autonomous process: official narratives have encouraged this demonization of democracy by treating liberalization initiatives as equivalent to an open invitation to return to this period of instability and social upheaval (Fumagalli 2007; Laszczkowski 2013; Matveeva 2009; Nazpary 2002; Omelicheva 2013; Ortmann 2008; Silitski 2010). A staple of this narrative is that political liberalization should come gradually with time. The pressing challenges of developing new states and economies in the wake of the Soviet collapse, regional leaders have consistently argued, demanded a strong hand to preserve order and push through urgently-needed reforms. Citizens are thus warned that more liberal alternatives to authoritarian control are ‘recipes for an impending crisis’, building on the ‘stark comparisons between the near-collapse situation facing their states in the past and the propitious conditions of the present’ (Omelicheva 2013, 93-94). The comparative aspect of the ‘gradualism’ script is important, as ‘this retrospective projection of chaos is necessary to the forward-oriented narrative’ (Laszczkowski 2013, 157-158). By constantly returning to the negative collective memory of collapse and disorder in the *past*, these narratives condition how people understand and relate to affirmative political values in the *present*.

Decades later, however, local governments have largely failed to liberalize their political systems and their ‘gradualism’ arguments have not only become quieter, but harder to sustain as the years go by. As the region’s population of young people continues to grow, there are fewer and fewer citizens, like Laszczkowski’s (2013) interlocutors who actually experienced the state as a ‘real nuthouse’, ‘total mess’, ‘dead state’ and ‘a laughingstock’ (156). With a now-fading collective memory of 1990s-era *bardak*, the question then arises: why are political references to the period’s pernicious disorder still so common? In short, these historical narratives operate as temporal

metaphors, pushing citizens to remember (or at least imagine) the material losses and hardship that ‘too much’ democracy is said to bring. Metaphors are so powerful because they are simple and generally made in passing, often putting them outside conscious reflection. But by understanding *bardak* as a temporal metaphor points to a vital strand of the authoritarian narrative that inculcates a fear of instability and is crucially spun through both space *and* time. To elaborate on how this works, the following section considers official reading and writing in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan about their common neighbour, Kyrgyzstan, as exemplary.

Narrating in/stability in Kyrgyzstan and at home

Western observers were quick to put Kyrgyzstan on a pedestal as the regional leader in its efforts to introduce democracy and political pluralism after independence. In reality, the country’s democratic initiatives have come in fits and starts, but its leaders astutely perceived the financial and political rewards for cultivating an image as a bastion of democracy surrounded by a sea of authoritarianism. The image of Kyrgyzstan as the ‘Switzerland of Central Asia’ is cliché, but it has helped the country’s leaders foster positive relations with the West. While governmental relations with its more proximate neighbours have not been poor *per se*, the country has generally not fared well in the popular opinion in other formerly Soviet states. In both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, for example, official discourses have stigmatized Kyrgyzstan’s comparative political instability turmoil and disorder, but there are some differences between the two. In Kazakhstan, weak economic development is foregrounded as a root cause, while in Uzbekistan the focus is on foreign intervention and the weak state. Ostensibly about the ‘other’, these narratives are also about scripting the ‘self’ and publicly asserting national values prioritized by autocratically-inclined local leaders: economic development, a strong state and preserving order in the face of regional turmoil. These values have been the crux of domestic legitimacy agendas under Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov. Ostensibly positive or aspirational, they work to securitize stability and, in this sense, are fundamentally underlain by a narrative of fear – not of the repressive state apparatus, but of the loss of the stable certainty of the prevailing order.

Uzbekistan: the strong state guarding against foreign intervention

Prior to Islam Karimov’s passing in 2016, the logic of governmental legitimacy in Uzbekistan was intimately connected to narratives about in/stability. Scholars have primarily analysed this in the context of fear-mongering related to political Islam, extremism and terrorism, in which Karimov’s government worked ‘to set itself up as the guardian of stability and social harmony

against so-called “fundamentalist” movements’ (Peyrouse 2007, 248). The regime used anti-terrorism scripts liberally and they quickly became integral to government concerns about the fledgling state’s territorial ‘integrity’ from the 1990s on. As Megoran (2004, 2005) has clearly demonstrated, a sort of ‘cartographic anxiety’ (Krishna 1994) pervaded Karimov’s rhetoric, which regularly described Uzbekistan as being surrounded by various ‘enemies’, ‘evil’, ‘destructive’ and ‘aggressive forces’. In this self-scripting, Uzbekistan is imagined as an ‘island of stability’ in a turbulent region.

These narratives are an excellent example of what geographers refer to as geopolitical identity narratives, as they hinge on a range of binary dualisms dividing ‘us’ from ‘them’ and, in this case, ‘order and disorder, progress and backwardness, stability and chaos, wealth and poverty’, to construct the country’s international border into much more than ‘just a line on a map established by treaty, but a moral border between good and evil’ (Megoran 2004, 740). These dualistic imaginaries are not neutral: they spatialize good and bad. They also proscribe a set of actions, such as preserving internal solidarity and stability to keep ‘enemies’ and ‘evil’ from permeating Uzbekistan’s territory. In this framing, the spectre of instability is thus set up as spatially and normatively external to the nation and its purported values – something which might be cordoned off through a simple spatial fix, rather than the infinitely more complex task of promoting stability through sustainable social and political institutions, practices and modes of citizen engagement. Under Karimov, stability was conceptualized in a state-centric fashion: it was framed as the most important public good that the state could offer.

As some scholars have suggested, the valorization of this governance system has arisen and evolved in Uzbekistan by tapping into widespread cultural tropes about the ‘benevolent despot, or ‘good khan’ (Liu 2012). These tropes only make sense, however, in a place surrounded by chaos, violence and other dangers that might threaten the state and the populace’s very existence. Discursively ‘looking over the border’ at regional neighbours was therefore essential to constructing this image of Karimov as a strong leader amidst weak ones. In addition to the more liberal context of Kyrgyzstan, two of Uzbekistan’s neighbours, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, were marred by violent conflict over the years that Karimov was in power. Merely pointing to this disorder lent credibility to official narratives about the benefits of his disciplinary rule. Likewise, by channelling the attention of citizens to the disorder over the border, Karimov’s government was able to cultivate a widespread mistrust of democratic initiatives and institutions. These interpretations both rehearse and bolster the official claims about political liberalization and reform needing a gradual and state-dominated approach, ‘placing development prior to democracy’ (Omelicheva 2013, 92).

As elsewhere across the region, Karimov consistently emphasized that development and strong state institutions were an essential prerequisite to political liberalization. This is especially apparent in official interpretations of Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution in March 2005. In a speech shortly thereafter, Karimov speculated about why it had occurred (EUUS 2005). Among those listed, he first pointed to a popular discontent and 'hopelessness' that had been 'accumulating for a long time' but that the government was 'deaf' to the gathering 'protest potential'. Kyrgyzstan's leaders had failed to implement 'strong reforms, social policy which would suit people' and allow the population to 'see the light at the end of tunnel as we speak'. He also faulted the country's 'weakness or absence of authority', combined with the fact that 'the government was full of corruption'. But the biggest issue of all, Karimov went on to explain, was that this laid the foundation for 'external forces' to 'use these conditions to reach their objectives'. Taking advantage of the popular discontent and the weak state, these (unnamed) forces were said to be training protest leaders for an extended period of time. He asserted that this dynamic is what connects the colour revolutions in Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Ukraine. As noted above, the narrative about outside forces threatening Uzbekistan's internal integrity has been a long-running trope in the official discourse. Karimov is thus explicit that foreign meddling is a serious problem and reminds his audience: 'I personally had already mentioned several times and once again I think that you will agree with me, I am categorically against the revolutions, I am for evolution' (EUUS 2005).

Karimov's response to Kyrgyzstan's political turmoil and inter-ethnic unrest in summer 2010 followed many of the same lines of argument. In his first public comments about the situation during an 18 June 2010 speech, Karimov described the 'tragic events' as posing 'a serious threat to stability in the Central Asian region' (PSPRU 2010b). He framed the June violence as the consequence of a 'vacuum of legitimate authority' in Kyrgyzstan after the 'April overthrow of the presidential power that had discredited itself'. While Karimov clearly stresses state weakness and foreign intervention as before, another thread arises in his speech because of the clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and the Uzbek diaspora in parts of the country:

Today we have every reason to claim that the Kyrgyz themselves and the numerous Uzbek Diaspora living in the south of that country, fell hostage to a deeply thought-out and well-organized action on the part of third forces. The action was aimed not only at instigating chaos and unruly situation in the country, but also pursued far reaching goals of drawing Uzbekistan into this brutal massacre and in the end turn the interethnic standoff into an interstate confrontation of the two neighbouring nations, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Here and in numerous other media reports, Karimov also underscored the fraternal bonds between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, who ‘for ages lived side by side on that land’, while calling for ‘an independent international inquiry into the pogroms, murders and violence [...] to bring to trial all those who ordered, organized and executed those bloody outrages’. He does not mask his assumptions about what such an inquiry will find, however, returning consistently to the foreign meddling behind the scenes. This message was not lost on pundits and other commentators, whose various reactions to Karimov’s speech were collected in one news article and who diligently reiterated his accusations that ‘Undoubtedly, the conflict has been provoked by a third force’ (PSPRU 2010c). They specifically named ‘terrorists’, ‘religious extremists’, ‘drugs mafia’, as well as ‘great powers’ competing for regional influence. One of the commentators also echoed Karimov’s image of Kyrgyzstan as a quagmire by way of his own metaphor, noting that ‘when the situation is destabilized, turning into a black hole, several parties are simultaneously drawn in with their own interests’.

Karimov’s speech had also lauded Uzbekistan’s government for stretching its resources to accommodate the spillover of refugees: ‘It cost us a profound straining of forces and resources to admit more than one hundred thousand refugees, children, women and the elderly in our territory, give shelter, accommodate and provide them with all the necessary’ (PSPRU 2010b). Yet Karimov emphasized that it was not merely out of humanitarian concern for these individuals, but interest in the greater good that this action was undertaken to prevent ‘the most brutal violence from expanding, managing to preserve calm on the border territories, excluding any surge of emotions, passions and extremism which could have unpredictable effects’. The president was otherwise very explicit about the terrifying nature of the disorder over the border, deliberately conjuring an image of it threatening to ‘surge’ over international borders. One speech paints a vivid image of Kyrgyzstan’s chaos thus:

Unpunished facts of killings, violence, pogroms, arsons and lootings of peaceful citizens, committed by bandit groups in streets and homes of Osh, are stirring up resentment of the international community. Especially, the sense of intolerance and serious alarm are aroused by the fact that all these mass killings, lootings and arsons of homes are carried out with regard to the Uzbek Diaspora, residing in the city of Osh and Osh province. (EUUS 2010)

Karimov goes on to note that this behaviour is uncharacteristic of the otherwise friendly relations between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz and expresses his confidence that ‘the people of Kyrgyzstan who experienced a lot of trials’ will come to their senses and ‘halt the rampage of crime and havoc for stabilizing the situation in the country’.

Similarly, in a message to Roza Otunbayeva congratulating her on her appointment as Kyrgyzstan's Interim President, Karimov expressed his sincere wishes for 'peace and harmony, stability and prosperity to the friendly people of Kyrgyzstan' (PSPRU 2010a). In the message, he reiterated the major themes in his other speeches and repeated his call for 'an impartial and fair investigation of the bloody and inhumane events that took place in Osh and Jalalabad', which he expected would 'display common interests and the indivisibility of Kyrgyz and Uzbek people who have lived side by side in southern Kyrgyzstan for many centuries'. At the same time, Karimov added, he expected it would 'reveal the true face of provocateurs and external forces that are willing to sacrifice thousands of innocent lives in order to achieve their dirty goals'. Ostensibly about the 'other' lurking over the border, narratives about Kyrgyzstan's disorder are clearly about scripting the 'self' and casting Uzbekistan as a place not willing to tolerate such conniving 'provocateurs'. As a form of civic education, such scripts inculcate a spatial imaginary defined by social and political order, guaranteed by the strong state and security apparatus *inside* Uzbekistan and disarray and fear on the *outside*.

Kazakhstan: the strong state providing economic opportunity

In Kazakhstan, official discourses spinning the spectre of disorder over the border focus much less on the alleged outside interference destabilizing Central Asia. Along with his team of advisors, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has carefully crafted his image as a 'visionary' leader, whose perspicacity, 'acumen and love for his country rescued it from the calamities of the transitional situation and placed it on a path of effective socio-economic reforms' (Omelicheva 2013, 84; see also Isaacs 2010; Lewis 2016; Matveeva 2009). Nazarbayev has also claimed legitimacy by ensuring domestic stability, which the government both attributes to and defines as a precondition for economic development and modernization. Anna Matveeva (Matveeva 2009) has argued that this 'security-developmental state which, on the one hand emphasizes external and internal security and, on the other hand, guarantees extensive provision of social welfare' (1101), is a continuation of Soviet models of statehood. While there are many obvious continuities from the Soviet times, numerous recent studies have shown that Kazakhstan's modernity-oriented developmentalism has taken shape in a unique fashion under President Nazarbayev (e.g. Koch 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014; Kudaibergenova 2015; Laruelle 2016; Laszczkowski 2016; Lewis 2016; Omelicheva 2013, 2016; Schatz 2008).

Kazakhstan today is perhaps best understood less as a variation of the Soviet developmental model and more as a variation of the globally pervasive 'developmental state'. Developmental

regimes are those that set economic development as their top priority. They are classically authoritarian because they seek to monopolize the definition of precisely what constitutes ‘progress’, though development is typically defined in terms of growth and global ‘competitiveness’. Short-circuiting political discussions about societal goals and values, while also tending to privilege technocratic solutions to modernization, development discourse is uniquely depoliticizing (Ferguson 1990; Li 2007; Mitchell 2002). Furthermore, scholars have highlighted the slippery slope between a ‘good’ despotism used to improve people, as in the developmentalist framing and a blatantly oppressive despotism that either fails to articulate a noble goal or simply fails to achieve (Dean 1999, 133). From this perspective, the narrative about Nazarbayev’s ‘visionary’ leadership takes on even more significance. Without his ‘noble’ vision of development for the people of Kazakhstan, the authoritarian system over which he presides risks becoming morally suspect. So while it may be true that prioritizing economic development has allowed Nazarbayev to distinguish himself from his counterparts in Central Asia, the country’s material conditions are also substantially different from those of its neighbours.

Endowed with substantial resource reserves, the government has been able to cultivate an image of a ‘magical state’ (Coronil 1997).⁶ Current economic challenges notwithstanding, developmentalism remains at the centre of the Nazarbayev government’s self-scripting and self-validation, which has positioned him as the ‘patriarchal guardian, personified as the provider of stability and prosperity to the population’ (Lewis 2016, 425). Even for citizens who are not impressed by the state’s dazzling developmentalism, the country’s *relative* prosperity (i.e. compared with their regional neighbours and their Soviet past) is itself grounds for political apathy that has ossified into a what I have termed a ‘don’t rock the boat’ ethos (Koch 2013b, A2). To promote such an outlook, however, citizens must actively be instructed about Kazakhstan’s relative prosperity. Much of this learning happens through daily conversations and interactions among individuals, as well as personal travel experiences. But it is also woven into the media coverage and official discourse about Kyrgyzstan, which is held up as an exemplar not just of the woes of ‘too much’ democracy, but of economic underdevelopment.

Unlike those of his counterpart in Uzbekistan, Nazarbayev’s speeches in the aftermath of Kyrgyzstan’s tumultuous spring and summer of 2010 repeatedly expressed his belief that ‘unsolved pressing social and economic challenges pose the main reason of the present situation’ (Akorda

⁶ This is, of course, dependent on the continued flow of resource rents, which is a challenge now squarely facing Kazakhstan’s leaders, and outside the scope of this paper (but see Koch and Valiyev 2016).

2010d). Like Karimov, Nazarbayev painted an extremely vivid picture of the disorder over the border when making his first public remarks on the turmoil:

I view this situation with great regret. It's a pity that our brotherly nation is permanently falling in such abyss. At the same time, the politicians try to assure us that they are caring of their people. Actually, the marauding and looting continue within these two days. The stores are burnt, the banks are closed and business shuts down. When there is instability in the country, there will be nothing. (Akorda 2010e)

But rather than shifting to accusations about foreign intervention, as Karimov would have done, Nazarbayev goes on to explain that leaders in Kyrgyzstan have been making poor political choices. In making this argument, he sets up an explicit contrast to the ostensibly good or proper choices taken at home:

Instead of dealing with politics the authorities must provide the people with jobs and food, first of all. To date, over the half of Kyrgyz population lives in poverty. Unemployment rate is very high. The GDP [gross domestic product] in Kyrgyzstan is USD 800 per capita, while in Kazakhstan this figure makes USD 8, 000. All these years Kazakhstanis live in peace, work and bring up their children. Stability is the key factor of Kazakhstan's [contemporary] life. Despite multi-ethnic structure of population our people respect each other and are tolerant towards each other. This gives us an opportunity to develop and attract investments. All of these demonstrate that stability and peaceful life of people are the major factors of the country's prosperity. (Akorda 2010e)

So confident in his country's successful development, Nazarbayev's speeches and other official communications with his colleagues in Kyrgyzstan repeatedly offer 'to share [Kazakhstan's] experience in holding reforms in economy and policy and other spheres of social life in order to help the brotherly nation' (Akorda 2010c).

The reports and officials themselves also took the situation to laud President Nazarbayev for his enlightened leadership. For example, a press release quotes one Kyrgyz official, K. Tashiev, as emphasizing his special role in preserving regional stability:

Nursultan Abishevich is the Leader of the Nation not only in Kazakhstan. At present he is the leader of all Central-Asian republics. The Kyrgyz people hope for his leadership and authority and that he can help with the further stabilisation of the situation in our country. (Akorda 2010b)

Although official reporting was emphatic about Kazakhstan's generosity in contributing humanitarian aid (e.g. Akorda 2010f, 2011), Nazarbayev himself was careful to emphasize that aid alone 'cannot help raise any country' (Akorda 2010a). Noting that Kyrgyzstan is in fact rich with 'gold, iron, silver, copper and other resources' and has 'huge' tourism potential, he elaborates:

The first question is whether the country is able to raise [its] economy, provide its people with jobs. This is the only condition of the country's stability. Therefore a special program of Kyrgyzstan's economic revival must be developed and Kazakhstan is ready to help in its elaboration. I sincerely wish Kyrgyzstan to have its own strategy of revival and economic growth. (Akorda 2010a)

Nazarbayev thus stresses his eagerness to see the political situation 'normalized' or 'stabilized' in a sustainable fashion that takes a long-range perspective. This is possible, he emphasizes, because it is not for want of resources, but the political prioritization of economic development that Nazarbayev faults for the hardship over the border. These narratives about Kyrgyzstan thus ultimately communicate the merits of his own maxim of 'economy first and then politics' (Omelicheva 2013, 84) and underscore the president's role as a regional visionary exemplifying the merits of deferring political liberalization in favour of pro-growth development agendas.

Conclusion: Central Asia's regimes of certainty

This paper has argued that stability and instability go hand in hand: the image of the state in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as the guarantor of peace, order and stability hinges on the image of the 'outside' world being characterized by conflict, disorder and instability. The negatively framed narratives stigmatizing disorder simultaneously demand positively-defined narratives about the ostensible goods offered by the state, such as stability. Through the hegemonic discourses about in/stability analysed here, it is clear that legitimacy under the governments of Nazarbayev and Karimov has not been geared toward 'democracy or inviolability of a constitutional order, but upon their ability to provide security, growth and welfare' (Matveeva 2009, 1101). Some scholars have referred to this as a contemporary iteration of the 'Brezhnevite social contract' of providing 'stability, international prestige and a modicum of material comfort for the populace in return for political quiescence' (Khalid 2007, 87). That 'modicum' is, of course, relative and when it is in fact meagre, it can appear far more significant when contrasted with something dramatically worse like civil war and bloodshed. So while it may appear to many outside observers that the official portrayal of Central Asia's authoritarian states as bastions of order and stability are problematic, if not fictional, these narratives can be locally persuasive when regional neighbours are portrayed as spaces of chaos, desperation and deprivation. By adopting a geographic lens to see how this spectre of instability is spun through time and space, this paper has emphasized the fact that these legitimacy narratives are not free-floating abstractions, but are actively spatialized and inscribed into geopolitical imaginaries and identity narratives.

Foreign policy narratives in democratic states have long constructed ‘authoritarianism’ as a political ‘other’ and frequently a global security threat. This paper has sought to consider the view from the other side by asking how actors in authoritarian governments produce the spectre instability associated with democracy. To do so, I have reviewed the contributions of scholars in Central Asian studies on in/stability, security and legitimacy-building agendas in the region’s more autocratic states. I have also considered the case of official discourses in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan about the perceived ‘disorder over the border’ in Kyrgyzstan. Not only does the country serve as the spatial reference point for the pitfalls of ‘too much’ democracy, but it is also treated as a vivid reminder of the ‘chaos’ or *bardak* of the 1990s-era social upheaval after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Narratives about Kyrgyzstan thus serve as a touchstone for spinning the spectre of democracy through both time and space, effectively embedding anti-democracy rhetoric and affects in the region’s moral geographies. Hegemonic discourses that promote a fear of instability in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan thus work through a complex layering of moral geographies, written into spatial and temporal imaginaries.

Through dominating the interpretative frames of in/stability and its significance, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan might be understood as ‘regimes of certainty’, insofar as they have worked to securitize stability. Inseparable from the positively articulated set of values around political stability is a narrative of *potential* loss and uncertainty, which is imagined to accompany liberalization. ‘Regimes of certainty’ fetishize stability and the status quo and they operate through a logic similar to that which Michel Foucault shows at work within neoliberal systems. There, the *‘homo aeconomicus’* is technologized as a political subject whose imagined self-interested rationality supports the prevailing political order (Foucault 2008, 225-226). Here, by contrast, a self-interested subject supports an illiberal system or ‘strong-handed’ leader by internalizing a fear of *instability*. From this perspective, in/stability narratives operate as a political technology, whereby citizens are governed and govern themselves through imagining the countless risks of an uncertain system alongside the benefits of peace, security and certainty imagined as the unique offering of the prevailing nondemocratic system.

What makes Central Asia’s ‘regimes of certainty’ so paradoxical, however, is the fact that the fear of instability is largely hypothetical. That is, they hinge on the mere potentiality of negative consequences of political upheaval. By securitizing in/stability in a particular fashion, state discourses under Karimov and Nazarbayev have worked to monopolize the shape of their population’s ability to *imagine* implications of social transformation and political liberalization. But because the claims put forward are not based in current instantiations *in* Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan,

they are primarily extrapolated from events abroad. Though I have examined Kyrgyzstan as a key referent for how the Karimov and Nazarbayev regimes have spun the spectre of ‘disorder over the border’, this process is certainly not limited to that country. However, what makes events in Kyrgyzstan so much more powerful than other parts of the world (such as the Arab Spring protests) is that spatial proximity is often imagined to heighten the risk of ‘contagion’ or ‘spillover’. Likewise, the general population is far more likely to have personal experience in a more proximate neighbouring country that affords them a clearer backdrop to populate their mental maps. Overlain with memories of social disorder in the 1990s, these spatial and temporal imaginaries come together to produce an extremely vivid fear of the potential chaos incited by political liberalization. Albeit only potential, the spectre of instability is thus spun through space and time in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. These geopolitical imaginaries are nonetheless extremely powerful because they guide action – though as critical geopolitics scholars have stressed, they frequently do so quietly and subtly because of the way that geography is taken for granted as a ‘backdrop’ for world affairs, rather than an active construction of it.

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