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Introduction

The liberal international order, based on the promotion of human rights and democracy, has been undergoing severe contestation. Authoritarian discourses and practices are becoming increasingly more widespread and more visible in different parts of the globe, and autocratic leaders are now acting in concert to ensure and entrench their own survival in power by countering democratisation and suppress potential opposition. This has led some scholars to speak of a nascent 'league of authoritarian gentlemen' (Cooley 2013) with their own specific norms and principles, often shared in solidarity along regional lines, for 'traditional authoritarians […] do not leave rents in the fabric of global international society, but become sites of resistance to increasing the range and the depth of shared values' (Buzan and Schouenborg 2019, 176).

Given its focus on international society and its underpinning institutions and norms, the English School of International Relations (ES) seems to be in a privileged position to investigate these recent illiberal trends in the international order. Yet, so far this has not been the case. In fact, I argue that a promising area of research that the ES has still to explore is that of 'illiberal solidarism', with solidarism defined as a set of discourses and practices aimed to go beyond coexistence to reach cooperation and convergence in given areas of international relations, as well as creating 'consensual beliefs across international and world society' (Buzan 2014, 114). This is an important point of departure from the current ES canon, for solidarism is often defined as 'the progressive, *mainly liberal*, wing of the English School' (Buzan 2014, 113, emphasis added). In fact, while references to the fact that 'solidarism does not have to be necessarily nice' are indeed present in the literature (Buzan 2004; 2010, 216; 2014), the solidarist wing of the ES seems still keen on exploring the potential diffusion of liberal norms and institutions in international society (Ralph 2007; Ralph and Gallagher 2014; Ahrens and Diez 2015) with specific attention to individuals and their rights, thus perpetuating the cosmopolitan, Kantian narrative of ES figures such as Vincent (1988), Dunne and Wheeler (2004) and Wheeler (2000).

To address this lacuna, this paper focuses on Central Asia as a regional international society formed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan that, plausibly, features authoritarianism among its institutions, with authoritarianism understood here as a *shared principle of legitimate government*, thus echoing Schouenborg's research on a fascist international society during WW2 on the basis that 'fascism [and, in this case, authoritarianism] can also be understood as a set of ideas heralding a new principle of international legitimacy' (2012a, 139). The argument is that the Central Asian élites have been using specific discourses and practices linked to the concepts of *avtoritet* (authority) and *stabilnost'* (stability) not only to resist democracy from outside and to reinforce their survival in power, but also to institutionalize a regional set of counter-discourses and counter-practices against democracy promotion – what I call, following Zürn, (2018) *counter-institutionalization*.

Theoretically, the paper incorporates insights from the 'authoritarian diffusion' literature and the norms diffusion literature within an ES framework of analysis to provide an initial account of the institutionalization of authoritarian state-centric solidarity in the region, thus arguing for a compresence of logics of consequence and appropriateness in authoritarian foreign behaviour. Methodologically, the paper draws on archival work and élite interviews (all pseudonymised) with Central Asian officials, experts, and analysts conducted between 2013 and 2019 during fieldwork in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and uses the mechanisms of 'mimicry/emulation'

and 'praise/blame' to explore how the Central Asian élites have institutionalized authoritarianism in the region.

The argument proceeds as follows: the first section introduces the reader to the ES and what it means by institutions, to how authoritarianism is defined, and to the notion of illiberal solidarism. The second section focuses on the synergies between the ES and the literatures on 'authoritarian diffusion' and norm diffusion, illustrates the two mechanisms of socialization considered in the paper (mimicry/emulation and praise/blame), and discusses the methodology and the research design of the paper. The third section empirically illustrates how the two aforementioned mechanisms have facilitated the institutionalization of authoritarianism in the region. The conclusions recapitulate the argument, discuss the contributions that this work may offer, and indicate possible avenues for further research.

The ES, institutions, authoritarianism, and illiberal solidarism

According to the ES, states can manage order and achieve coexistence and a minimal degree of cooperation by following specific institutions, norms, and rules in what is considered an 'international society,' notwithstanding the anarchical character of international politics (Bull 1977; Buzan 2004; Dunne 1998). The concept of institution in IR is a contested one. It may be thought of as what in IR theory are known as 'regimes', i.e. designed organisational agencies aimed at sustaining, promoting and facilitating cooperation among states in specific areas of international politics. Another meaning of institution, however, less organisational/procedural and more sociological/constitutive, is what informs the concept of international society. What is meant here is a set of practices, habits, rules of conduct, close to what John Searle calls 'institutional facts', i.e. 'facts created "when a social function and status are allocated to something, but which do not reflect its intrinsic physical properties", such as marriage, or money, or funerals' (Buzan 2004, 166).

Therefore, the ES refers to institutions not as 'regimes', but rather as to those deep-seated, durable but not necessarily eternal codified discourses, norms and practices all leading to expectations that 'channel and direct the behaviour of states (or, in general, actors), giving a sense of order and predictability to their actions' (Costa Buranelli 2019, 241; Buzan 2004; Friedner-Parrat 2017). They 'define the socio-structural *context* where actors operate, and who the *legitimate actors* are within that context, too' (Costa Buranelli 2019, 241). These practices, it is important to note, contain also a *deontic* dimension, i.e. intersubjective shared normative beliefs guiding and informing them, thus differentiating them from mere patterns of behaviour.

In other words, the ES understanding of institutions is more sociological and almost anthropological, and different from a more 'specific', 'formal', 'instrumental' understanding of them as international organisations, in a way more akin to regime theory and neoliberal institutionalism. While first-generation ES thinkers theorised the balance of power, war, diplomacy, international law and great power management as institutions (Bull 1977), nowadays the 'institutional bundle' of international society seems to include also sovereignty, the market economy, environmental stewardship and possibly democracy (Buzan 2004; Holsti 2004).

Having defined what an ES approach to IR looks like, and what institutions are in ES jargon, I now introduce the case to consider authoritarianism as a potential institution of some regional societies. This move builds on Acharya's assumption that different regional contexts may develop and substantiate different institutions and practices in the light of historical developments, socio-local specificities, traditions, or simply different political objectives (Acharya 2004; 2011). First, though, we

need to define the term, for 'authoritarianism' can have different facets and different institutional specifics. In order to capture the several manifestations that authoritarianism can have in world politics, for the purpose of this paper I define authoritarianism in broad terms as a *hierarchical form of political order, which emphasises strong rule, stability, and the importance of leadership personality while not abiding by the 'procedural minimum' definition of democracy, such as free and fair elections, universal suffrage, and effective guarantees of civil and political freedoms* (Tansey 2016, 18; Linz 2000). I opt for such a general definition of authoritarianism to focus more on its antithesis to democracy and liberal politics, which is what is of interest here, rather than on its disaggregated components, such as types of ruling actors and institutions, or levels of competitiveness (Morse 2012).

Now, the question is: How can be authoritarianism, which is a *domestic* trait of states, be considered as an institution of *international* society? This question can be approached from two angles. The first one is to consider that, as said, institutions are both *relational* and *constitutive*. In other words, they both regulate interactions between the actors and constitute them. In this case, authoritarianism defines the appropriateness of social behaviours and the identity of the actors deemed to be the legitimate ones in a given social context (in this case, a regional international society). The second one, consequential, is that institutions define *standards*, which if violated signal that there is a 'rule of conduct', and hence a societal logic at play.

To further support the argument in favour of considering a political ideology as an institution of a regional international society, one may argue that this move is in line with recent contributions to the ES. For example Laust Schouenborg, whose work on fascism has already been noted, has made the convincing case to include the welfare state into the institutional bundle of the Scandinavian international society (2012b), while Buzan and Zhang have argued in favour of the developmental state as a foundational institution of the East Asian international society (2015). Even more, Buzan (2004; 2014, 160) has suggested that democracy is an institution of global international society, although one that is strongly contested. In sum, a political ideology in a state (as authoritarianism is) becomes an institution when it *transcends* its domestic borders and becomes *a principle of legitimacy* for the organisation of political life of a larger social group based on consensual beliefs. Such 'transcendence' of domestic borders and regional embracing leading to political convergence and consensual beliefs is evidence of what the ES, as stated in the introduction, refers to as solidarism. But, as mentioned, solidarism has often been equated to liberalism, while authoritarianism is most certainly an *illiberal* form of political order. So how to conceptualize *illiberal solidarism*?

The idea of illiberal solidarism drives us necessarily to discuss, if briefly, the ideas of pluralism and solidarism in ES theory, which one can define as 'normative framing principles for a debate […] about the limits and possibilities of international society' (Buzan 2014, 84). Pluralism refers to the idea that states agree on a minimal set of rules of coexistence or at least rule-bound competition through a set of institutions such as sovereignty, balance of power, trade, war, diplomacy, and international law. These institutions, tasked to protect and operate the abovementioned rules of coexistence (such as non-interference, non-intervention, and regulated violence) ultimately allow for a social environment in which coexistence and pragmatic, minimal cooperation are viable options for states while maintaining and respecting their own diversity – cultural, strategic, political, economic, and so forth. Solidarism, conversely, is the idea that coexistence can develop into norm-driven cooperation and deeper social interaction to advance common projects and causes, often resulting in the harmonisation or convergence of political communities around specific values (Halliday 1992). These projects and causes can be led by state leaders and governments (state-centric solidarism) or by people and human beings more in general (people-centred solidarism, with elements of world

society). Institutions such as environmentalism, market economy, international humanitarian law and democracy are clear examples of solidarist institutions.

While initial scholarship on the debate considered the two normative frameworks as opposed (most notably on the issue of human rights, e.g. Wheeler and Dunne 1996; for a critique, see Bellamy 2005), ES theory has evolved into accepting the position, first enunciated by Buzan (2004) and echoed by de Almeida (2006, 68), Bain (2007) and more recently by Weinert (2011), that pluralism and solidarism are better seen as forming a spectrum, or a range, of different normative institutional configurations of a given international society. Seeing pluralism and solidarism as forming a spectrum allows for accounting for areas of an international society in which a logic of pluralism exists, and others in which solidarism is present, thus reflecting the idea that solidarist dynamics and tendencies rest on a pluralist substratum in a complex interplay. Considering pluralism and solidarism as not mutually exclusive but able to coexist allows one to account for solidarist actions to preserve pluralism in a given international society. Cooperation and convergence may well take place to ensure the survival and the upholding of pluralist values of coexistence, rule-bound competition, and minimal cooperative interaction (Booth 1994). In other words, convergence is sometimes needed to ensure coexistence.

In this sense, I slightly depart from Buzan, who argues that pluralism can serve as a framework for 'the management of collective problems of common fate that concern the "existence" part of coexistence' (2014, 89). Instead, I see this as an example of how, at the level of state élites, solidarist logics of actions and pluralist normative commitments can coexist and mutually serve each other. This is, I argue, the case presented in this paper – if authoritarianism is considered as a constitutive institution of the Central Asian international society and as such fundamental to preserve the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and non-intervention (all ultimate pluralist values), a logic of convergence around illiberal solidarism is seen as a way to implement collective purposeful cooperative action to preserve the erosion of that regional international society and its associated minimal but fundamental values – in Bull's terminology, its 'constitutional normative principles' (1977).

As hinted above, this form of illiberal solidarism is an example of what Buzan calls 'state-centric solidarism'. That is to say, a logic of cooperation and (normative) convergence led and promoted by states (more accurately by their representatives) to cultivate and enhance shared values that may or, crucially, *may not*, be in favour of peoples and humankind necessarily, at least in a liberal sense, contrary to what a great part of the solidarist literature has maintained so far (Dunne 2001; Wheeler 2000; Knudsen 2019; for a constructivist critique, see Wolff and Zimmermann 2016). If one agrees with the idea that solidarism pertains to thicker cooperation and some convergence around shared values, consensual beliefs, and fundamental principles, then one has also to acknowledge that solidarism does not say necessarily much about the *normative content* of such values and principles – the solidarist logics of cooperation and convergence 'do not have to be liberal' (Buzan and Schouenborg 2019, 207). Hence the idea that solidarism can be illiberal, based on the acknowledgment that authoritarianism can constitute the moral purpose of some states and their identity (Buzan and Schouenborg 2019, 64-67).

Diffusion, socialization, and mechanisms: synergies between the ES, the 'authoritarian diffusion', and the norm diffusion literatures

It was said in the introduction that authoritarianism in Central Asia can be studied as an example of regional counter-institutionalisation to undermine efforts to institutionalise democracy world-widely and as a resistance to the more political component (as opposed to economic) of the liberal international order. At the same time, in the previous section it was argued that 'authoritarianism' can be an institution in a regional international society and that it can present some solidarist traits, meaning that there is a *convergence* over such principle and that a process of *diffusion* and *socialization* with a strong deontic component is in act. But how to account for this? This section intends to answer this question by providing an ES account for authoritarian institutionalization and illiberal solidarism drawing on two different, yet complementary, literatures: that on authoritarian diffusion and that on norm diffusion. It is argued that the synergies between these literatures well illustrate and support the ES logics of institutionalization and solidarization discussed in the previous section, especially in terms of epistemology and methodology.

The literature of authoritarian diffusion (Tansey 2016; Darwich 2017; Tolstrup 2015; Ambrosio 2010; Ziegler 2016; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016) is a useful starting point, for it largely focuses on the concept of 'diffusion' to account for the spread of autocratic practices in specific regions. Ambrosio and Tolstrup have recently defined authoritarian diffusion as 'the process by which the institutions, organizations, policies, strategies, rhetorical frames, norms, etc., which establish, protect, or strengthen authoritarian rule, are reproduced from one authoritarian system to another' (2019, 2744). Consequently, to say that authoritarianism diffuses means to take into account the social nature of states and their representatives, their capacity to think, and thus the interaction between agency and structure. At the same time, though, extensive literature on authoritarian political systems demonstrates that authoritarian leaders' primary concerns are about their own domestic survival. In other words, understanding foreign policy requires considering the influence of domestic politics on decision-making pertaining to foreign affairs. This means that within this literature authoritarian diffusion has been framed mostly in terms of logic of consequences rather than logic of appropriateness, thus somehow downplaying the normative, deontic aspect of diffusion which is arguably what defines an ES approach (for a summary, see Von Soest 2015; Odinius and Kuntz 2015; Weyland 2017; for an exception, see e.g. Yom 2014).

To uncover the potential normative aspects of authoritarian international behaviour, therefore, the literature of authoritarian diffusion can be put in dialogue not just with the ES literature mentioned above, but also with the broader literature on norm diffusion (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Rosert 2019; Zimmermann 2016; Winston 2018; Stimmer 2019), especially since they are seen as sharing several methodological assumptions.

A broader focus on norm diffusion allows to retain the focus on the normative while also identifying specific mechanisms of and conditions for diffusion, such as geographical and social context (Florini 1996), common culture (Elkins and Simmons 2005), cognitive and value priors (Acharya 2004), persuasion (Deitelhoff 2009), mimicry, emulation, learning, and back-patting (Johnston 2001; 2005), great powers' prestige (Fordham and Asal 2007), coercive socialization (Linde 2016), institutionalization (Greenhill 2010) among others to account for deontic socialization. What is argued here is that the ES can benefit from more granular analysis of processes of institutionalization by exploiting the synergies of the literatures reviewed above, and by putting together their main contributions: authoritarianism *diffuses*, it can diffuse *normatively*, and it does so through specific *mechanisms*. For the purpose of this paper, to investigate solidarist authoritarian institutionalization, I focus on two specific mechanisms of socialization, derived inductively from the diachronic analysis of regional dynamics and from the material collected for this research and considered to be the most prominent and consequential – *mimicry/emulation* and *praise/blame*.

Mimicry has been defined as a 'mechanism whereby a novice initially copies the behavioural norms—including discursive practices—of the group to navigate through an uncertain environment' (Johnston 2005, 1021; Florini 1996). For the Central Asian case, the element of the 'uncertain environment' is of crucial importance given that these states entered international society after the collapse of the Soviet Union as, in fact, novices. Differently from strategic emulation, mimicry 'does not mean searching for and copying exemplars, or the most successful actor in the group. It is rather a satisficing first step designed to be able to participate in the group by following its most basic rules through initial identification' (Johnston 2005, 1021). As one can mimic both discourses and practices, it is appropriate to say that mimicking 'provides a novice with the modal procedures, models, norms, languages, and perhaps preferences that, immediately on entry, seem necessary to survive, based on the supposition that everyone else seems to be surviving' (Johnston 2005, 1021). When, however, the model to follow is a prestigious and authoritative actor such as extra-regional great power, e.g. Russia, mimicry morphs into *emulation*, which involves an additional degree of 'status' or 'prestige' (Fordham and Asal 2007).

The second mechanism is 'praise' (sometimes called back-patting, see Johnston 2001) and it refers to mutual legitimization and endorsement/reward between actors who adhere to a specific normative script thus encouraging further socialisation within a wider, fundamental socio-strategic dimension. One may argue that, strictly speaking, 'praise' does not 'diffuse' anything per se – it simply validates. Yet, given that an institution defines both the socio-structural context in which actors operate *and* the legitimate actors themselves, then it is clear that 'praise' (and its contrary, 'blame') plays a key role in reinforcing this second aspect of the process of institutionalization and strengthening the underlying socialization between actors (for if I am praised for doing something, I am encouraged to pursue that specific conduct further), thus reinforcing logics of appropriateness and encouraging specific normative behaviours to foster a sense of belonging.

Aware of some recent criticisms made to qualitative scholarship on authoritarian diffusion and socialization especially with respect to addressing the observable implications of mechanisms at play (Ambrosio and Tolstrup 2019), I also specify the plausibility probes to rigorously show, on the basis of the material at my disposal, that the institutionalization of authoritarianism in the region does not rest on spurious convergence, but on the concrete operation of the aforementioned socialization mechanisms. Four 'proofs' will thus be offered: *direct references to other experiences in the region*; *evidence of meetings where the discourses and practices under consideration are dealt with*; *considerations about the standing of regional peers*; and *specific judgments on the (un)desirability, (il)legitimacy, and goodness (badness) of specific practices*. The latter is crucial if authoritarianism is to be accounted for as an institution, for as discussed in the first section of the paper institutions have a fundamental normative, deontic component. Importantly, these four probes are separated for analytical purposes, but in fact may well operate simultaneously.

As the empirical section will show, mimicry/emulation is visible in the fact that the Central Asian leaders, by looking at each other's experiences, prolonged their rule via constitutional referenda, have bestowed on themselves honorific titles to entrench their absolute power, have increased pressure on domestic society when conflict occurred in a neighbouring country, and have seen in Russia a legitimate source of some repressive domestic laws. Praise/blame will be evident in how the Central Asian leaders have mutually congratulated each other after manipulated elections, supported each other after repressing violent protests, and praised each other for maintaining stability in the region through strong rule. As with mimicry/emulation, extra-regional actors such as Russia and China (Tolstrup 2015; Ambrosio 2010) are important in enacting also the mechanism of praise and thus legitimising authoritarianism.

Having discussed the mechanisms of institutionalisation of authoritarianism, I now explicate my methodology. Drawing on recent methodological contributions to scholarship on international society and its institutions (Navari 2009; Wilson 2012; Friedner-Parrat 2017; Falkner and Buzan 2019; O'Hagan 2020), in this paper I adopt an interpretive methodology based on a constructivist epistemology. More specifically, the method used in this paper is discourse analysis and, specifically, a *reconstructive* one (Wiener 2009). That is to say, an analysis which 'offers interpretative tools with which meanings that are constituted prior to a discursive intervention can be uncovered. As a reflexive process, reconstructive analysis allows bringing intangible aspects of discourse to the fore' (Weiner 2009, 186). The purpose of using this method is that of capturing frames, expressions, normative judgements and narratives that signal appreciation, legitimisation, approval, and embracement of a norm (Price 2006), for 'discourse analysis offers a specific perspective on social phenomena which begins *with the assumption of discourse as a social practice*' (Wiener 2009, 186; see also Epstein 2008; Hansen 2006; Milliken 1999; Carta 2019). One may think of these 'syntagmas' as keywords, or key-expressions, derived inductively from the material at one's disposal, what Wiener calls 'the main text *corpus*' (2009, 188)*.* The selection of these syntagmas is done 'on the basis of semantic references to specific fundamental norms', and thus 'the cross-linkage between keywords and norms allows for a comparative distinction of individually held associative connotations' (Wiener 2009, 188; Martin de Almagro 2018). In this paper, the text corpus consists of diplomatic memos and cables found in the Archive of the First President of Kazakhstan located in Almaty, Kazakhstan, as well as news sources and official declarations and speeches found online through Lexis Nexis, and some 60 semi-structured élite interviews with current and former diplomats, state officials, experts and analysists in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The choice of this sample is a conscious one, for if authoritarianism is deemed to be an institution of the Central Asian regional international society, then it means that its legitimacy as a principle with its associated practices is to be found in the narratives and actions of those who create and sustain this international society to show 'the centrality of the political agency of regional actors to understanding the production and shaping of normative order' (Buzan and Zhang 2014, 226). Crucially, while not all interviews are referred to in this paper for reasons of space, most of them have been useful in gaining background and context-related knowledge on the topic and to substantiate/confirm some of the theoretical arguments presented here. The fieldwork during which this material was gathered spanned the period 2013-2019. When conducting semi-structured interviews, questions about 'strong rule' and 'authoritarianism' were sometimes directly asked. In other situations, discourses associated to authoritarianism and its normative status in the region were discernible from other narratives, e.g. about sovereignty or diplomacy.

With respect to the role of the élites I interviewed, there are two caveats to make here. The first one is that, due to political and security sensitivities on the side of my interviewees, sometimes the code 'expert' is used *in lieu* of a more official title. The category of 'expert' is thus sometimes used to protect a high-raking individual and their professional, sometimes possibly even physical, security. For those who are familiar with the difficulties of finding access and doing fieldwork in the region (Glasius et al. 2018) this should not come as a surprise. The second caveat is that when a respondent is indeed an expert or an analyst, in most cases the respondent works for one of the think-tanks in the region. In Central Asia, most think-tanks are very much close to the government and the presidential apparatus. In addition, several of the experts I interviewed had worked or still work very closely with state bodies, so have additional insight and knowledge. Therefore, they might have been only 'experts', but with a background and experience in high politics, and still very much involved in it. In sum, while governments representatives do represent a political community, that very political community includes more voices, showing that 'the interviewed elite samples involve a group of highly flexible, well informed, and boundary crossing citizens who are able to both influence and access public discourse' (Wiener 2009, 191; on Central Asia, see Mullojanov 2019).

Yet, one should remember that 'social practices and institutions are *partly* constituted by ways of talking about them' (O'Hagan 2020, 3, emphasis added). Actions and practices, defined as 'socially recognized forms of activity, done the basis of what members learn from others, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly' (Barnes in Neumann 2002, 631) also contribute to processes of institutionalization, thus becoming a 'regular aspect of the social' (Neumann 2002, 636). This means that, while often intertwined, it is important to analytically distinguish between discourses (which pertain to the validity of a norm) and practices (which pertain to the facticity and the compliance of a norm) to verify the presence and the 'robustness' of norms and institutions (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2019).

Hence, the research design also involves the analysis of those moves made by the relevant actors in the Central Asian international society that conform and are consequential to a logic of validation of authoritarianism and justification for strong rule. By doing so, both the 'principle' (discursive component) and the 'associated practices' (practical components) of social institutions in ES terms can be accounted for (Knudsen 2019). This conforms to the idea that 'language is not simply a medium for disseminating or registering information but a critical vehicle for the construction of meaning, for generating identities, creating subjects and objects and *proscribing practices* related to these' (O'Hagan 2020, 3, emphasis added), focussing on 'how and why things appear the way they do and how certain actions become possible' (Dunn and Neumann 2016, 4). As we shall see later in the paper, one of the mechanisms for diffusion of norms and institutionalisation of authoritarianism, that of praise, rests exactly on the inextricable link between discourses of approval and practices that elicit such approval, interacting in a logic of *co-constitution of possibility and permissibility of action*. Another mechanism, that of blame, relies on discourses of authoritarianism based on 'order' and 'stability' which constitute 'proper' actors and identities by juxtaposing them to images of instability and weakness (Hansen, 2006, 17; Milliken, 1999, 229; Koch 2018).

The above has argued that a focus on illiberal solidarism from an ES perspective invites researchers to look at the authoritarian diffusion literature, which in turn can be complemented by that on norm diffusion. Thanks to the synergy between these literatures, the ES becomes equipped to explore, in a more fine-grained and theoretically-sound way, the possibility of a gradual rise and legitimation of the institution of authoritarianism, based on logics of consequence *as well as* logics of appropriateness.[1] Such account rests on an analysis of discourses of legitimation and practices of validation of the core principle of 'strong rule', as well as on the operation of two socialisation mechanisms: mimicry/emulation and praise/blame. The next section shows empirically how authoritarianism has been institutionalized in Central Asia since 1991, thus allowing researchers to speak of 'authoritarian solidarity' in the region.

The institutionalization of authoritarianism in Central Asia

When the Central Asian republics obtained independence in 1991, there was the hope, if not the expectation, that they would get rid of their Soviet authoritarian mode of governance to embrace the principles and the spirit of the newly ushered-in era of democracy. Given the liberal hype of the post-Cold War period, Central Asia was believed to voluntarily embrace democracy *teleologically* (Cooley 2019). Things, however, turned out to be different. As Sally Cummings put adamantly, 'this notion has turned out to be at best premature, at worst misguided' (2002, 2). After becoming independent, all five Central Asian rulers, who shared the same communist background, opted for presidential forms

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[1] This is in line with Buzan's argument (2004, 107-109) that institutionalisation, while resting primarily on 'belief', often features elements of 'coercion' and 'calculation'.

of government (Lewis 2011). And all of them, however in different degrees, presented distinct authoritarian traits: limited or almost non-existent opposition, very few civil and political rights, an emphasis on the provision of economic and social goods and preference for order and stability than for political liberty and freedom. Already two years after independence, 'ruling elites managed to defeat or partly incorporate the political opposition: main oppositional leaders were arrested, sent into exile or joined the governments' (Mullojanov 2019, 135). Within a decade (1991-2001), all Central Asian states were to be found between 5.5 and 7 Freedom House scores combining political rights and civil liberties, which is exactly the situation nowadays.[2] The subsequent examples show how mimicry/emulation and praise/blame have enacted the institutionalization of authoritarianism, which has its roots in the immediate first year of independence in a carefully arranged transition from Soviet rule to independence that rested on the legitimation of continuity of strong rule, *avtoritet* and *stabilnost* as opposed to democratic, nationalistic and people-based alternatives.

Mimicry/emulation

In the years immediately after independence, due to the difficulties of political and economic transitions and because of instabilities at the southern borders of the region, Central Asian presidents decided to give their presidential mandate a boost.[3] This can be seen as a first example of mimicry. In January 1994, Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan extended his presidency via a referendum, which gave a positive response by 99.9 % of the votes. In the neighbouring republics of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, in 1995, referendums were held as well to extend the length of the presidential mandate (26 March in Uzbekistan and 29 April in Kazakhstan). The few months between the referendums in the Central Asian republic is already a hint of mutual mimicry and acceptability of this practice in a regional context were Soviet political and bureaucratic identities, patronage networks and security concerns requiring immediate and non-contrasted actions were paramount. Indeed, in the words of a Western diplomat based at that time in Almaty confirming the presence of a commonality of minds of Central Asian leaders in structuring the region along precise political lines, '[a]ll these referendums in central Asia are definitely the result of a dialogue between the presidents'.[4]

Although Kyrgyzstan had been described as a beacon of democracy in Central Asia (Anderson 1997), President Akaev followed suit in what was becoming a legitimate regional practice. Thinking of extending his power up to 2001, Akaev, after governing for one year by decree and shutting the Parliament, adopted the practice of referendum following his regional peers, but without success. In spring 1995, immediately after the Kazakh and Uzbek referenda and following talks started already in autumn 1994,[5] a governmental group in Bishkek collected one million signatures, 52% of Kyrgyzstan's voting population in support of holding the referendum. The group said the country 'need[ed] unification around one leader, which might be inhibited by an election campaign', despite harsh criticism from a wide part of the population.[6] To push this through, Akaev himself published a letter in the newspaper Slovo Kyrgyzstana ('Word of Kyrgyzstan') on June 15, 1994 in which, reflecting on

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[2] In Freedom House terms, 1 means 'most free' while 7 'most unfree'. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/map.

[3] Interview with Central Asian former official, 6 March 2019.

[4] Agence France Presse, 29 April 1995. This was confirmed in a number of interviews with experts and former officials in the region.

[5] That Akaev wanted to increase the power of the executive already in 1994 is evident in a series of cables sent from the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Bishkek to Almaty (75-N/1/869, Cables 59 and 61).

[6] Associated Press Worldstream, 21 August 1995.

the experiences of Turkmenistan, ongoing developments in neighbouring in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and the civil war in Tajikistan, he stated that there were 'no alternatives to strong rule'.[7]

The decision to hold a referendum to entrench power and to prolong it was clearly dictated by the regional context: 1994-1995 were the years in which the construction of a Central Asian regional project was underway, the Central Asia Union (CAU).[8] Better political relations with more powerful and authoritarian neighbours depended also, according to Akaev, on a common and shared political regime that would ensure stability and security to the region.[9] Within the CAU, the harmony between Central Asian states and the stability of the region was deemed to rest on strong rule.[10] Indeed, the press-secretary of the president stated that the reason to hold the referendum was 'in keeping with the practice of neighbours' (Huskey 1997, 275, fn. 91), thus openly confirming the operation of mimicry as a mechanism for socialization. While the holding of the referendum was not successful because of the Parliament's rejection, Akaev held another referendum, shortly after a CAU meeting in Shimkent meeting (17 April 1995) and this time successful, on extending his powers.[11] Quite interestingly, some segments of Kyrgyz society expressed concerns over a 'Kazakh-style referendum' in Kyrgyzstan in the weeks before it.[12]

In 1999, acting directly on the Constitutional provisions, also president Rahmonov of Tajikistan expanded the length of the presidential mandate from five to seven years. This happened after Tajikistan joined the CAU in 1998. By the end of the decade, therefore, a true Central Asian 'club' of personal authoritarian regimes was established (Cummings 2002, 11). The modular establishment of strong rule through coordination and dialogue in the region was seen as based on 'the leaders' wisdom and good judgement' in order to 'preserve stability.'[13] The words, the support, the justifications used by Central Asian presidents created a regional institution, that of authoritarianism, that was more and more increasingly shared by all members of the society. The initial institutionalisation of authoritarianism in the region was made possible by the compresence of other factors: all presidents, and indeed elites spoke a common political language (Russian), were similarly trained in the Soviet-era ideological framework, and knew ech other personally as Communist Party officials, with the exception of Akaev who nonetheless was elected as a deputy in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in 1989. The legitimacy of the institution was therefore based 'on a strong Soviet inheritance made of linkages including bureaucracy, education, tradition and personalised rule' (Matveeva 2010, 18). This convergence around a centralised form of government and the diffusion of strong rule provided the ground for a nascent sense of Central Asian identity, premised of a consensual neo-soviet ideology legitimising authoritarian rule for the sake of regional order and stability (Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan 2017). By the end of the 1990s, a global survey of local officials revealed that those in Central Asia harboured by far the most undemocratic attitudes (Kubicek 1998, 30). As John Heathershaw has argued,

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[7] Slovo Kyrgyzstana, 'Sylnoi vlasti al'ternativy net' 15 June 1994, 1-2. Archival material shows that already in 1993, the Kazakhstani leadership was quite worried about the 'weak' party structure and 'frustrated' with the 'confused' foreign policy of Kyrgyzstan, hoping that Akaev would substantiate strong rule in the following months/years. 75-N/1/363, pages 13-28.

[8] The CAU was a multilateral organization created by the Central Asian republics after independence.

[9] Interviews with analysts and former officials in Kyrgyzstan, March 2019.

[10] Slovo Kyrgyzstana, 'U trech, odna tsel' 18 April 1995.

[11] 49-N/1/4, page 17.

[12] Slovo Kyrgyzstana, 28 March 1995, 'Nadeyus', chto v blizhajshee vremya, kazakhstanskovo pretsedenta u nas ne budet'.

[13] Interview with Kazakh diplomat, location undisclosed, 2019. Interview with Tajik expert, April 2019. Interview with Kyrgyz diplomat, February 2019.

Central Asian international politics are indeed fluid and regionalism is weak
[…] but a Central Asian regional identity very much exists among political
elites and is based on a neo-soviet ideology which is more or less practised
and reproduced across the region (2007: 19).

A second example is the mimicry of practices silencing news about situations of conflict in neighbouring countries and increasing pressure on domestic grassroots groups across the region, although with the increased role of social media this may be changing. As an example, both in the 2005 and 2010 riots in Kyrgyzstan that brought down the incumbent presidents (Akaev in 2005 and Bakiyev in 2010), media in neighbouring countries were silent or simply referred to them for one minute or two and juxtaposing them to the solidity of internal rule. This juxtaposition was often framed in terms of praise/blame, another mechanism of regional institutionalisation of authoritarianism that will be analysed further below. While this it is difficult to demonstrate that this was done 'in coordination', countries were 'certainly looking at what neighbours were doing to preserve an arch of stability in the region'.[14] As a former official from the region argued, 'it is very common practice that Central Asian political elites securitise security issues or some problems of neighbours. We are at the level of securitisation, but not of violating non-interference. This is because all Central Asian leaders are afraid of loss of stability. I remember Karimov and Nazarbayev together speaking of "Tajikization" in order to maintain domestic stability: "This is democratization; do you want that?"[15]

A third example of mimicry is evident in how illiberal laws are not only copy-pasted among regional states but are very much imported from Russia. As explained above, though, in this case it would be more appropriate to speak of *emulation*, given the status of Russia as a great power and the prestige that it possesses in the region. As an example, recent research has shown that 79 percent of the laws of Kyrgyzstan and 56 percent of the laws of Tajikistan on terrorism and extremism have been copied from Russian ones.[16] This has been explained with reference to Russia's standing as 'security guarantor' in the region and as leader in numerous drills held under the CIS and CSTO umbrellas (Omelicheva 2009).

Furthermore, Russia recently used a ruling of ECJ demanding tech-giants to guarantee the right to be forgotten to enhance control and censorship of the internet by, for example, limiting the ability of watchdog groups to hold officials accountable for their actions. Exactly two days later, a very similar agenda was adopted in Kazakhstan, where the legislator Tursunbek Omurzakov argued that the same legislation would be in place as 'there is a fine line between personal and public interests'.[17] Moreover, there is emulation in countering LGBT rights. After last year's first LGBT march on Women's Day in Bishkek, the national security agency deputy chairman, Orozbek Opumbaev, argued that it was 'necessary' to approve a law 'similar to what was adopted in Russia' that would control the funding of NGOs – a nod to the 'foreign agents' law that was approved in Russia in 2012.[18] Interestingly, another MP, Ziyadin Zhamaldinov, argued that by not prohibiting the march 'Kyrgyzstan had disgraced itself'

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[14] 'Tajikistan: Is Dushanbe Pursuing An Uzbek Political Model?', Radio Free Europe, April 19, 2007. Interview with Tajik expert, Dushanbe, 6 April 2019.

[15] Interview with former official from the region, location undisclosed, May 2015.

[16]https://24.kg/english/117068_79__of_Kyrgyz_laws_on_terrorism_and_extremism_copied_from_Russian_ones/

[17] https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/06/02/russia-kazakhstan-using-eu-ruling-to-press-for-more-web-censorship-a47044

[18] https://www.rferl.org/a/rainbow-rage-kyrgyz-rail-against-lgbt-after-central-asia-s-first-gay-pride-march/29825158.html

in front of neighbouring countries.[19] As the next sub-section shows, mentioning 'disgrace' aptly shows the operation of another mechanism of institutionalisation of authoritarianism in Central Asia, that of praise/blame.

The above are only few examples of a wider trend that shows how 'Central Asian political leaderships have proactively imported or adopted repressive methods to crackdown on dissent. Over the years, several countries of the region have adopted restrictive measures and practices inspired by Russia.'[20] In an interview with an international lawyer from the region, I was told that 'in terms of internal legislation, they look at Russia, but they also look at each other, they look at their behaviour, they mimic each other, they compare each other, if not explicitly. They try to be at the same level. You can find the same law in all the countries with very little time difference.'[21] The role of Russia is also visible in serving as a normative model for hierarchical party politics and party structures, although the states of Central Asia are more looking at each other in terms of examples to adopt, facilitated by formal and informal interactions within multilateral formats such as the Interparliamentary Assembly of the CIS (Roberts 2015).[22]

A final, contemporary example of mimicry can be seen nowadays in how state leaders mimic the practice of bestowing on themselves (or not preventing other political actors from bestowing on them) honorific titles aimed at almost 'sacralising' their rule, tying their persona to the fate of the nation itself and thus constitutionalizing their authoritarian figure. For example, in Tajikistan president Rahmon got lifelong immunity and became 'Leader of the Nation' (Peshvo-i Millat) in December 2015, following the example of 'Elbasi' ('Father of the Nation') in Kazakhstan and 'Turkmenbashi' and 'Arkadag' ('Protector') in Turkmenistan, in the aftermath of talks with his regional peers over 'stability' and 'security' in the region and, specifically, in Tajikistan.[23] The speaker of Tajik parliament's lower house, Shukurjon Zuhurov, defended the choice of bestowing such title by specifically and openly referring to the example of Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan among other leaders who guaranteed 'stability and peace' in their states.[24] It is not by chance that the bill awarding the title of Peshvo-i Millat to Rahmon also stipulates the creation of a museum, library and archive of the leader of nation – exactly like in the Kazakh case.

Praise/Blame

With respect to how the concept of institution was defined in the first section of the paper, i.e. as having a regulative and a constitutive component, one may say that the mechanism of praise/blame emphasizes very much the constitutive aspect of institutions. Praises (blames) reward (sanction) behaviours thus creating, reinforcing, and validating identities by ascribing roles and creating

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[19] https://www.rferl.org/a/rainbow-rage-kyrgyz-rail-against-lgbt-after-central-asia-s-first-gay-pride-march/29825158.html.

[20] https://eucentralasia.eu/2017/10/civil-society-cornered-in-central-asia/

[21] Interview with international lawyer from the region, April 2015.

[22] Interview with expert in Kazakhstan, 2015.

[23] See, e.g., http://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-rahmon-lifelong-immunity/27419474.html; http://www.president.tj/en/node/9877; http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/tajikistan-votes-to-allow-authoritarian-president-emomali-rahmon-to-rule-forever-a7048011.html. Interviews with Tajik experts, April 2019.

[24] Tajik parliament approves bill giving president "leader of nation" status, BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, December 9, 2015. Interviews with Tajik experts, April 2019. Given the status of Kazakhstan in the region in terms of economic and political success, as well as the seniority of Nazarbayev in the Central Asian diplomatic context, it is unclear whether this is pure mimicry or intra-regional emulation.

legitimate insides and illegitimate outsides – what Natalie Koch has aptly called 'moral geographies' (2018: 25).

A first example of how praise works as a mechanism for authoritarian institutionalisation is to go back and look at praises immediately after the abovementioned constitutional referenda in the 1990s. No criticism, no reprimands came to those leaders who enacted the referenda. They all congratulated each other. At the Shimkent meeting on 17 April 1995, Karimov and Akaev both expressed appreciation for Nazarbayev's idea of extending his powers via a referendum.[25] The same congratulations were offered reciprocally on the beginning of the Days of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan on 20 May 1995, where both Nazarbayev and Karimov emphasised the 'importance of both referendums for the stability of the region'.[26] Indeed, Karimov congratulated Nazarbayev on his victory in the referendum publicly:

> The results of the referendum demonstrated once more not just trust in President Nazarbayev, not only trust in his policy and the policy of the government. […] The most important thing is that the people of Kazakhstan have shown unity, because in these complicated circumstances only unity, stability and mutual understanding can make those great hopes and thoughts come true, those great wishes which Kazakh people want to make come true today.[27]

Analogous praises were offered to President Niyazov of Turkmenistan in the late 1990s, whom was congratulated on his life presidency by other Central Asian leaders,[28] as well as the incumbent Berdimuhammedov, who in 2017 won elections with a hardly contested 97.69 percent of votes which, in the words of Nazarbayev, showed 'trust and support on the part of Turkmenistan's citizens for the conducted policy to improve people's living standards and strengthening the country's international authority'.[29] More recently, on 22 May 2016, Rahmon resorted again to a constitutional referendum (approved with 96.6% of positive votes) to eliminate term limits to the presidency and to ban potential political opponents. Nazarbayev was the first one to congratulate him on the victory wishing that the changes would bring 'development and prosperity to Tajikistan', followed by Karimov.[30] Crucially, the maintenance of the status-quo and the consolidation of power at any election cycle in Central Asia has been seen as beneficial not only for the respective states, but for 'the region' tout-court, a narrative sustained also by regional organizations' election-monitoring missions, such as the CIS and the SCO. This shows that in Central Asia the institutionalisation of authoritarianism finds fertile ground in the fact that 'it is personal relations that matter. All these presidents know each other from the

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[25] 49-N/1/4, page 17.

[26] 49-N/1/4, pages 51-59.

[27] Kazakh Radio first programme, Alma-Ata, 20 May 1995.

[28] Turkmen, Kazakh heads confer by phone on expanding cooperation BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit January 26, 2000.

[29] Telegram of congratulations to Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov on his election as the President of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan Government News, 13 February 2017, https://www.kt.kz/eng/politics/telegram_of_congratulations_to_gurbanguly_berdimuhamedow_on_his_elect ion_as_the_president_of_turkmenistan_1153634664.html.

[30] Nazarbayev congratulates Rahmon on holding referendum in Tajikistan, Central Asia General Newswire, May 27, 2016; President Islam Karimov met with Emomali Rahmon, Uzbekistan National News Agency (UzA), June 23, 2016.

past, they understand each other, they can even make favours to each other...After the elections, for example, no matter how rigged they are, it is really important who congratulates you first, and if you are late [by] a couple of days it can be taken as some kind of offence, it's a present, like at [a] wedding or at a funeral.'[31]

Another example of praise can be seen after the events in Andijan in northeast Uzbekistan on May 12-13, 2005, when a multitude of people died during an anti-government protest. Human rights groups said that about 700 civilians were killed in the crackdown enforced by the Uzbek security forces and police, while the official narrative of the Uzbek government was that the uprising had been orchestrated by Islamic extremists with ties to international terrorist groups. Nazarbayev's was quick in reassuring Karimov that his actions were legitimate, as 'for Kazakhstan, the threat emanates not from Andizhan but from extremists, radicals and terrorists who penetrate [Uzbekistan] from other countries', and that suppression of these radical forces was in the interest of the region.[32] Furthermore, a few days after the repression, both Tajikistan's Rahmon and Kyrgyzstan's Bakiyev echoed support for Karimov, praised his actions, and confirmed the line that the protest was linked to some non-identified 'Islamic militants'. For them, the actions of Karimov prevented Central Asia from becoming 'worse than the Balkans'.[33] Less than a year later, in the course of an official visit to Uzbekistan, Nazarbayev voiced again his praise for the Uzbek leader's reaction, saying to Karimov: 'In Andijan, you protected [*sic*] the peace of 26 million Uzbekistanis', and that given that 'special services said extremists were planning to destabilize both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan... A different outcome would have destabilized the region today', thus legitimising and praising the violent crackdown enacted to quell the uprising.[34]

Praise came also from the two neighbouring great powers, Russia and China, thus adding prestige to Karimov's strong rule. Immediately after the violent repression, Karimov flew to Beijing where he was honoured with a twenty-one-gun ceremonial salute at Tiananmen Square. Subsequently, he reached an oil deal with Chinese president Hu Jintao worth $600 million. Speaking of Andijan, Hu praised Karimov for 'he honor[ed] Uzbekistan's efforts to protect its national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity'.[35] The subsequent meeting of Heads of States of the SCO reiterated and legitimised resorting to all means to preserve regional order and stability to counter terrorism, extremism, and separatism (SCO 2005). All the above examples speak well to the logic behind praise as a mechanism fostering solidarism and socialization, for 'competency or proficiency need not mean a mechanical ability to do some task, but can mean a high ability to represent some normative ideal' (Johnston 2001, 500).

With respect to blame, Kyrgyzstan seems to be the primary target, being it the most unstable country in the region. In a famous episode in February 1999, Karimov declared in a radio broadcast that former Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev was 'pathetic', because he could do nothing in the face of threats from Islamist extremists 'but smile'. In the Kyrgyz press, that was translated as 'grin stupidly'.[36] When Akaev was subsequently ousted in March 2005, as was discussed above, Kyrgyzstan was very

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[31] Interview with a Central Asian diplomat, 29 November 2013.

[32] Nazarbayev: Uzbekistan does not pose threat to Kazakhstan RIA Novosti June 30, 2005.

[33] Tajik leader warns spread of violence in Central Asia would be worse than in Balkans, Associated Press, International, May 18, 2005.

[34] It is also important to remember that in those years (2003-2005) already three revolutions took place in Eurasia, leading to regime-change: Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2005) and Kyrgyzstan (2005). The institutionalization of authoritarianism in Central Asia has been a reaction to the perceived threat of the diffusion of democracy in what is an overall authoritarian ecology (Cooley 2019).

[35] Buckley, Chris, "China 'Honors' Uzbek Crackdown," The International Herald Tribune, May 27, 2005.

[36] https://www.ft.com/content/da29eb88-74df-11e6-bf48-b372cdb1043a.

much portrayed as a country failing to conform to the dictates of strong rule, *avtoritet*, and *stabilnost'*. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, first in concert with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Tajik President Emomali Rahmonov when considering sending CSTO troops to quell the protests and then alone in a special address to the Kyrgyz people emphasized how much Kazakhstan owed its success to 'political stability'.[37] The Tajik foreign ministry warned that the lack of political control and weak authority in the country could revive 'the horrors of a civil conflict in the whole Central Asian region',[38] while Islam Karimov argued that the government was 'deaf' to the gathering 'protest potential', displayed 'weakness or absence of authority', and all this led 'external forces' to 'use these conditions to reach their objectives' (quoted in Koch 2018, 20).

This is also visible later on after the 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan, when Kurmanbek Bakiyev was ousted. The demise of the authoritarian and neopatrimonial regime of Bakiyev in 2010 and the instauration of a parliamentary form of rule, despite claims to non-interference and legitimacy accorded to the new government, was felt as a deviation from the regional rule. Kyrgyzstan, already often described in terms of *bardak* ('chaos' in Russian, see Koch 2018), was framed as a 'bad example' in the region, constantly struggling to keep order and stability within its borders. Nazarbayev himself stated that he was deeply regretting to see that '[Kazakhstan's] brotherly country is *permanently* falling in such abyss' (Koch 2018, 23, emphasis added). Two official Uzbek sources referred to authoritarianism as 'the rule' in the region, and blessed Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan ('we were lucky to have such leaders') for having strong personalities to resolve conflicts as opposed to the unstable neighbour: 'Strong leaders preserve order. Compare Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to Kyrgyzstan!'[39] This resonated in Kyrgyzstan, for a Kyrgyz official, Kamchibek Tashiev, appealed to Nazarbayev to restore peace in Kyrgyzstan by virtue of his strong rule: 'Nursultan Abishevich [Nazarbayev's patronymic – using it is a form of deferential respect] 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 stabilization of the situation in our country' (quoted in Koch 2018, 23).

Yet, the depiction of Kyrgyzstan as an 'outsider' of the Central Asian society of states, as the 'deviant', was all the more evident in 'brotherly' Kazakhstan. As a local expert, involved in regional politics in 2010 as an official put it,

> the neutrality of Kazakhstan was like "this chaotic Kyrgyzstan is a threat", this image was very much there, and we did not like it because…it's ok if it reflects the reality, but actually they were showing [the] population of Kazakhstan, "you don't want this in Kazakhstan". It was in the interest of the authorities to show the very, very negative images of Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan said we were a threat, so this is why they closed the borders. We were expecting support, but we got the blame.[40]

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[37] Kazakh foreign minister urges settling Kyrgyz crisis within law, BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, March 24, 2005.
[38] Tajikistan calls for talks, reason in Kyrgyz crisis, Agence France Presse, March 23, 2005.
[39] Interview with two officials in Uzbekistan, location undisclosed, 13 December 2013.
[40] Interview with Expert in Kyrgyzstan, 27 November 2013.

Through the mechanism of blame, authoritarianism and strong rule g0t institutionalized in the sense of acquiring legitimacy and appropriateness as opposed to conflict, disorder and instability associated to 'democratic' Kyrgyzstan. By spatializing 'too much democracy' in Kyrgyzstan and linking it to prior upheavals in 2005 and the civil war in Tajikistan in the previous decade, blame served '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' (Koch 2018, 25). Recent revelations on Nazarbayev pushing for the restoration of an openly authoritarian form of government in Kyrgyzstan after the 2010 events in Osh (CA-News 2015) are an additional proof of the fact that 'the rule in the region is internal stability and regional stability'.

All the above illustrates very well how, from 'Tajikization' in the 1990s, the region has moved to 'Kyrgyzization' in the 2000s to indicate deviation from strong rule, and therefore something to blame/stigmatize. Authoritarianism has therefore developed as a 'constitutionalising practice', as a hegemonic discourse in the region, a behavioural benchmark. Authoritarianism is thus seen as 'the architecture' of the region, 'supported by the informal rules of respect, hierarchy, and seniority that are to be found in the genetics of the whole Central Asian context,' akin to a 'special code' in a 'club.'[41] In ES terms, these words clearly refer to a perceived sense of *order* in Central Asia, based on pluralist values and authoritarian solidarity.

Finally, the institutionalized nature of authoritarianism in Central Asia is visible in the most recent, contemporary events. Immediately after the death of Karimov in September 2016, Akaev referred to the late Uzbek president as 'a master of the authorities, speaking the language of chess, just the grandmaster', praising the tight and effective rule of the late Uzbek president comparing it to a 'Swiss clock.' Taking Ukraine as a term of comparison, Akaev also argued that due to 'populism' perpetrated by some politicians, the standard of living there has shrunk not just in comparison with Russia, but also with the Central Asian republics. The merit of this, according to him, belonged to Karimov and Nazarbayev who got rid of 'populist elements' in the very early days. Facing prospects of a democratic succession to Nazarbayev, Akaev tellingly replied 'God forbid!'[42]

Conclusions

This paper argued for the presence of elements of an illiberal form of regime-centric solidarism in Central Asia through the prism of institutionalization of authoritarian rule, which has been ongoing since 1991, and the socialization mechanisms of 'mimicry/emulation' and 'praise/blame'. Indeed, while democratic principles are spreading *globally*, Central Asia has to some extent resisted this development *as a region*.

The illustration of how mimicry/emulation and praise/blame have contributed to institutionalizing authoritarianism in Central Asia shows that concepts such as *avtoritet* and *stabilnost'* are not just political slogans and strategic assets to ensure regime survival conforming to a logic of consequences, but also normative categories that inform and regulate social relations among regimes in the region *institutionalizing* practices and *integrating* them in what is a Central Asian *order*. They have the status of values underpinning a community of states and leaders interested in preserving

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[41] Interview with Expert in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 23 February 2019; the reference to a 'club' was found in other interviews with analysts and officials in the region, emphasising 'togetherness' and 'sense of community' every time leaders meet.
[42] http://proishestviya.com/raznoe/30381-islam-karimov-byl-grossmeysterom-vlasti-byvshiy-prezident-kyrgyzstana.html

their power while maintaining peaceful coexistence and relatively low conflict to pursue exactly the task of regime enhancement. Crucially, the institutionalisation of authoritarianism in Central Asia has managed to happen despite the underlying mistrust between the Central Asian leaders in certain historical moments. Islam Karimov had bitter relations with Turkmenistan's Niyazov until the early 2000s, was on bad terms with Tajikistan's Rahmon until he died in 2016 and was allegedly in competition with Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev for regional hegemony and prestige. Nonetheless, the leaders of the region conformed to Watson's logic of raison de systéme (1992, 14), and perceived regional stability based on authoritarianism and strong rule more vital than personal antipathies.

By focusing on Central Asia as a most-likely case and by combining the literatures on ES solidarism, authoritarian diffusion and norm diffusion the paper sought to make three contributions. First, to enhance the ES engagement with exploring forms of illiberal solidarism, as well as with using specific social mechanisms for the diffusion of normative discourses and practices to provide more fine-grained and rigorous accounts of institutionalization. This has led to suggesting that authoritarianism can potentially be a fundamental institution of specific regional orders that proscribes behaviours and constitutes identities. Second, to enrich the literature on authoritarian diffusion, predominantly based on the idea of self-interest and survival, by showing that authoritarianism can also have an additional normative, deontic dimension, thus suggesting that logics of appropriateness and consequence may well coexist. Third, provide initial theorization and reflections on what a normative reading of authoritarianism means for international relations *tout court*, especially in an era of 'deliberalisation' of global order. This, specifically, speaks to some concerns recently expressed by prominent constructivists, who believe that 'norm research is described as fundamentally flawed because it creates narratives about norm emergence, diffusion, and change from Western or Eurocentric vantage points' (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2019, 14) and who have invited researchers to focus on the spread of illiberal norms (Bloomsfield 2016, 332-333).

The arguments made in the paper are by no means exhaustive. For example, further research is needed to understand whether mechanisms of diffusion other than those mentioned here are in play in the institutionalization of authoritarianism in Central Asia, as well as to uncover additional evidence for authoritarian solidarism. Admittedly, especially when 'mimicry' operates, concerns about domestic survival may be more relevant than norms and identity, and thus more analytical work is required to further discern the two. Moreover, one may explore whether ageing as well as new leaders in Central Asia intend to sustain this institution or to let it fade. Generational change should also be taken into great consideration – what will happen, when Central Asian leaders will not share education, memories, and a value system inherited from the Soviet experience? Furthermore, scholars working in comparative politics may explore the possible transnational institutionalization of strong rule in other regions through the operation of which mechanisms and under what conditions, while constructivists and ES theorists may trace initial processes of counter-institutionalization of authoritarianism globally.

In an era marked by the 'politics of reaction' (MacKay and LaRoche 2018, 240) both in the West as in other parts of the world, to understand how principles of political order other than liberal ones arise, consolidate, and become institutionalised in international society is a duty in academic, political and perhaps even moral terms.

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