

# Theorizing the nature of power in Central Asia.

## Introduction to the special issue

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## **Theorizing the Nature of Power in Central Asia. Introduction to the Special Issue**

Editors: Diana T. Kudaibergenova and Filippo Costa Buranelli

The concept of power is key in social and political theory as it explains the ways in which processes and realities occur and makes possible to theorize about the nature of governance, action, resistance, and control. Studies on power across disciplines are naturally diverse, and the description of all possible definitions of power can take up thousands of print pages which, of course, would require a different type of publication. However, we do believe that in this special issue we contribute, if little, to a more entrenched understanding of it and of the ways to think about it. Our initial discussions about the nature of power in Central Asia and its different forms of theorization took place on a hot afternoon in Bishkek in 2017, on the lane of the American University of Central Asia, after presenting a panel on the subject at the ESCAS Conference. Through our interactions focused on the lack of conceptual, definitional and analytical clarity of the term such discussions sparked the necessity to work on conceptualizing power in the region further to both give the definitional grounds for forthcoming discussions and highlight the state of art on power studies in the region to date. With this goal in mind, we believed power's own 'power' is in its diversity and complexity of all sorts of definitions and analysis it can provide in any given case. This is how this project was born.

In the light of the above, the aim of this special issue is to capture the moment of diverse discussions and conceptualizations of 'power' in Central Asia – stemming from a desire to enrich and to an extent problematize the dominant discussions (mostly featured in the discipline of International Relations, hereafter IR) about power in Central Asia, being best conceptualize as a 'given' set of material and coercive capabilities or as a substitute for 'autocratic rule', down to the new and exciting ethnographic findings of interpretive power processes and embodiments that pertain more to the mundane, every-day sphere. Collectively drawn into this exciting field of inquiry, we ask: *how power and its operation(s) can be described, conceptualized and discussed in the highly diverse region of Central Asia? What methods are appropriate to study it, and what theoretical frameworks can we develop to grasp power's essence and multiple faces in the region?* In asking these questions, we define "Central Asia" as a vast and important region in Eurasia that is represented by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan,

Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. While this definition of Central Asia is in line with much of the literature of the region, we are also acutely aware of the fact that defining a concept, a region, a term is in itself an act of power – one that creates insides and outsides, applicability and incommensurability, belonging and estrangement at the same time. This was, almost paradoxically, the first reflexive step we undertook in conceptualising how ‘power’ operates in the region – empirically, but also semiotically.

As will be explained more in depth below, the contributions in this collection are constructed from the grand perspectives on power as relational and procedural between regions and states, into elites and key players and, finally, down to people themselves. This multi-level, complex structure of analysis that lies at the core of the way in which we, as editors, first conceived of this special issue allows both authors and readers to reflect on the ways power traditionally has been discussed and used in literature on the region and also give way to the diverse new applications, methodologies and conceptualisations of ‘power’ use in more contemporary and newer studies.

In social and political theory, power is defined as the ability of individuals, institutions, groups or any other holders of power to influence their decisions despite any resistance or lack of consent from those on whom these decisions are exercised. In this way power is different from authority, where in authority the same mechanism of influencing the other party with the specific decision works, but the other party does not resist but openly acknowledges and accepts the authority to do so. In other words, power is about control, dominance and possible resistance and opposition whereas authority is about acceptance and compliance. This is very much close to an understanding of power that has been for long dominant in IR, linked to coercion, control, and ability to influence someone’s behaviour. Linked to this, as we know from the state-of-art on Eurasia in general, “power” (*vlast’* in Russian, *bilik* in Kazakh, *kuch* in Uzbek, and *qudrat* in Tajik) is often contemplated with the idea of the regime, the state and the autocrat ruler himself. This leads analysts and researchers to inevitably ask – Where does one start to disentangle not only the concept of authority from power but also state, regime, and the power elites from “power”? Moreover, where does power start and where does it end? Can we only be sure to say that power is in the eye of the beholder or in the hands of those who occupy high offices and indeed, powerful portraits in these same offices? These questions, the astute reader will notice, all pertain to the peril of conceptual and

analytical conflation between power as an attribute, power as a resource, power as a form of governance, power as a structure, and power as an agent in itself. Much of the IR literature on Central Asia, while prominently discussing power dynamics in the region, often misses the differences between these different ways of thinking of power.

No wonder, then, that power becomes such a prominent concept in the studies of Central Asian societies and states as the exploration of its nature offers an all-encompassing approach to the understanding of the 'rules of the game' in the social, political, regional and geopolitical paradigms. And it is exactly because of this that the intellectual roots of the contributions featured in this special issue are in the ontology and epistemology of power as often discussed in Central Asia. Ontologically, power has often been discussed as a possession, as a material capability mostly from the perspective of great power politics. The expression 'great power' itself conflates power with military capabilities putting together the standing of a given country in the international system with its arsenal and economic assets, often 'proxyfied' with indicators and rankings. Epistemologically, this has been reflected in a quantification and visibility of power, as something 'out there' that can be found, identified, and tested in a typical positivist, or rationalist understanding of the concept. However, the contributions in this special issue all propose, in their own different and indeed unique ways, a different ontology and, consequently, a different epistemology. The authors in this collection all conceptualise power as a 'social relation', and thus as a processual ontology as opposed to a fixed, materialist one. Epistemologically rooted in interpretivism, all articles consequently stress the importance of agency and context, siding with Chris Reus-Smit (2004) in maintaining that power needs to be conceived as relational, not possessive; primarily ideational, not material; and intersubjective and social, not subjective and non-social.

In sum, the aim of the articles featured in this Special Issue is to reflect on the theoretical, methodological and analytical complexity when considering power in international relations, politics and social relations of Central Asian societies. This is because we believe that there is a substantial gap in the field of Central Asian studies when it comes to an updated theoretical discussion on power. In the light of the recent changes and transformations in the political climate of Central Asian states and societies, of the abovementioned considerations, this collection of papers proposes a

more conceptual and especially interdisciplinary dialogue on the persisting idea of 'power. As a matter of fact, the papers hereby presented approach power from various different angles, ranging from the discussions of power in IR theory to logics of bureaucratic and socio-political understandings of power to then move to the everyday, 'mundane' encounters with political power under these regimes.

We start the discussion with three important contributions coming from an IR theory perspective. In the opening article of this special issue, Filippo Costa Buranelli makes the case to consider 'power' in Central Asia as 'pervasive', stressing that it can be seen in any relational process in the region. By adopting the typology of Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, Costa Buranelli maintains that 'to analyze power in Central Asia means to make Central Asia *political*' and seeks to broaden the understanding and the theorization of power in the region, now seen as compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive. At the same time, indebted to Guzzini, Costa Buranelli encourages scholars and students to be more reflexive when adopting the concept, by providing an analysis of how the way we formulate and define the concepts we use necessarily rests on specific, albeit not always explicit, normative values and principles. In the second article for this special issue, Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro engages with a skilful treatment of the theorization of power as 'domination', identifying its merits but also its conceptual and analytical blind-spots. Teles Fazendeiro argues that the concept of 'togetherness', defined following Hanna Arendt as the capacity to act in concert, is a useful addition to the established theorization of power as 'domination' present in much of the literature on power in Central Asia by showing how '[a]uthorities and citizens alike in Central Asia push for distinctive ideas about how to position themselves in the international arena, leading to different foreign policy outcomes and alternative ways of constructing the state'. The third paper, authored by Aliya Tskhay, provides a broad and detailed discussion on the use of power in IR literature and Central Asia's foreign policy by bridging Constructivist IR theory with area studies and international political economy. By presenting a case study of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative implementation in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Tskhay offers an insightful reading of power as 'norm-making' and 'compliance with international norms', thus opening the door to further theorization of the role of Central Asian agency in the wider normative structure of international political economy and world order.

The discussion then moves to the paradigms of the power discussion under authoritarian regimes with the articles by Assel Tutumlu and Ilyas Rustemov, and by Sofya du Boulay and Huw du Boulay, who discuss processes of power in discussion of regimes in Central Asia from two different perspectives – principal-agent theory and social and political theory. Tutumlu’s and Rustemov’s paper nicely links power to information asymmetry in Nazarbayev’s Kazakhstan, and aptly zooms into the black box of the state. By considering Kazakhstani bureaucracy as a ‘field’ of relations and practices, the article argues that contrary to common discussions ‘power in authoritarian regimes is not hierarchical and strictly vertical. Instead, a lack of control over information undermines the authority of the ruler, who ends up publicly proclaiming a “reality” that stands in stark contrast with the everyday experiences of people on the ground’. The subsequent article by Sofya and Huw du Boulay defines the process of Latinization of alphabets in Central Asia as a medium for power legitimation. Informed by social and political theory, the approach developed in this paper ‘considers alphabet reforms as guarantors against social and political disintegration, where authoritarian power is exercised via discursive and procedural mechanisms’. The argument, developed through three case studies (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and a mix of textual and interview materials, maintains that ‘[a]lphabet politics are significant because they reveal power legitimation, historical experiences, and cultural expressions.’ The last two contributions, authored respectively by Maurizio Totaro and Diana T. Kudaibergenova, continue this discussion in a more detailed perspective of the citizens’ and ordinary people’s perspective to power in Central Asia and focus on conceptualising “power” and “self” in these power processes from below. By adopting an anthropological perspective, Totaro relies on his situated and embedded fieldwork in Kazakhstan to illustrate the affective dimension of power, and its intertwined nature with our sensorial, emotional and psychological abilities. He does so by elaborating on a theatre play in the city of Aqtau as well as on counter-terrorism exercises and anti-terror simulations showing how the entanglement of power, affective politics and securitisation all play a role in the creation of the categories of ‘threat’, ‘safety’, and even ‘the state’. The last contribution, offered by Diana T. Kudaibergenova, is based on a large ethnographic study featuring several participant observations in different bureaucratic institutions across Central Asia in the period 2016-2018, and offers a conceptualization of power as ‘a process of accepting a collective belief on appropriate behaviour—how things ought to be according to the general, collectively produced

belief'. Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of governmentality and on the two notions of appropriateness and legitimacy, investigate from both a discursive and individual approach, Kudaibergenova brilliantly elaborates on the processes that entrench and most importantly enact the capillary, interiorised, and 'normalised' nature of authoritarian power in the different contexts she surveyed.

A welcome outcome of this interdisciplinary, pluralist approach to discussing power in Central Asia is that the contributions do not stand as 'echo-chambers' on their own, but in fact present valuable bridges and connections between themselves, showing that there can be healthy dialogue between different fields and perspectives. The Special Issue has been organised in a way that allows the authors to compare their different interpretations and conceptualisations of power, and also to build bridges and see similarities between their approaches where, perhaps, they would have not imagined. This shows that a polyphonic, multimethod, theoretically pluralist and interdisciplinary understanding of power holds much potential to explore the different facets and functions and ramifications of the concept in Central Asia. The paper by Costa Buranelli, for example, provides a theoretical framework to explore the two forms of institutional and productive power, which are then developed respectively by Tskhay and Totaro in their contributions. At the same time, both Costa Buranelli and Teles Fazendeiro advocate for 'liberating' power analyses from 'Great Game' stereotypes and for exploring alternative, more agency-based conceptualisations of the term. The stress on 'agency' is what links the contributions of Teles Fazendeiro, Tskhay, and Tutumlu and Rustemov. Explored through the lenses of 'togetherness', 'norm-compliance and norm-making' and 'principal-agent theory', these three papers effectively discuss and show how power in Central Asia has a fundamental agentic component, that runs across different levels of analysis – international, state, bureaucratic, and individual. The role of agency, both of governments and specific agencies within it, is also what nicely pairs Tutumlu's and Rustemov's paper with du Boulay's, in particular when discussing how specific initiatives and projects are aimed at increasing prestige and legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Finally, one may notice the connections between Kudaibergenova's paper with both Totaro's and Tskhay's. With the former, the links are epistemological and methodological – both rooted in an idea of power as embedded in discourses and practices that can be best explored through ethnographic methods. With the latter, the links are theoretical and

conceptual – both analysing power as a form of governance, normalisation, and acceptability.

At the same time, all the contributions in the special issue are context-specific and refrain from generalisations. There is sufficient awareness, and theoretical humility, that the research offered in this collection does not and cannot present the reader with a theory of Central Asian power, or of a generalisable theory of how power operates from Central Asia to the rest of the world. Rather, with the possible exception of Costa Buranelli and Teles Fazendeiro, who seek to present a framework to diversify power analyses in Central Asia, all the other contributions are idiographic, situational, and contextual. It is in this specificity that the special issue finds its strength, for different forms and facets of power explored and theorised in the context of a region in which material and positivist understandings of power have been predominant.

To conclude, a couple of words on the authors as a collective team and their diversity is, perhaps, necessary. To begin with, the authors of the articles included in this special issue are all very young and at the beginning of their professional career – ranging from lecturers to postdocs to PhD researchers. Despite their relatively new entrenchment in the field, they represent new, original and fresh voices that nicely complement, improve and enrich established scholarships and literatures. Second, they represent a welcome group of young scholars from Central Asia as well as outside of it, while at the same time all having extraordinary, first-class experience with fieldwork and the ‘forms of life’ in the region. When assembling the research team for this Special Issue, we really hoped to form a group that would not necessarily feature scholars from the region (or, worse, only from outside) but rather that would rely on the synergies made possible by the different expertise, traditions of inquiry, approaches and perspectives all supported by exceptional knowledge of the regional field. We are truly glad that this was, in our opinion, successfully accomplished. Third, the authors of this special issue all worked tirelessly and indefatigably to achieve an exceptional level of cohesion and dialogue between their papers, by constant exchange and mutual, supportive feedback. We, as editors, simply felt exceptionally privileged to work with such colleagues.



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