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# Converging party systems in Russia and Central Asia: A case of authoritarian norm diffusion?



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## ABSTRACT

Almost twenty five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and several Central Asian republics appear to be converging on what may be termed a 'hierarchical party system', characterised by controlled and unequal competition between parties. Addressing the juncture between international politics and party politics, this article explores this convergence and considers Russian authoritarian norm diffusion as a possible explanation. This article argues that although Russia continues to build significant party-based linkage in Central Asia, similarities between party systems are the result of complex, multi-directional norm diffusion, as regimes look to liberalise or close their respective political systems.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide much needed detail on Russian and Central Asian party systems, but also to engage with the related issue of authoritarian norm diffusion. Despite the fact that the five former Soviet Central Asian republics embarked on their own independent political course in 1991, there is a growing consensus that Russia, as the key regional actor, 'sets' the political agenda and is increasingly exporting and supporting authoritarian values (Ambrosio, 2008; Bader et al., 2010; Burnell, 2010; Cameron and Orenstein, 2012; Hyde, 2011; Kästner, 2010; Kramer, 2008; Tolstrup, 2009). Moreover, the two seemingly unrelated issues of party politics and norm diffusion have caught the attention of academics working in the region, in particular the 'striking' similarities between the Russian party of power, 'United Russia' and the Kazakhstani equivalent, 'Nur Otan' (Del Sordi, 2011).

Indeed, by 2015, there are growing similarities between the Russian party system and its counterparts in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with signs that Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan may follow suit. This type of party-system may be termed 'hierarchical' in the sense that party competition is controlled and unequal, with a clear stratification between parties, based on their relationship with the authoritarian regime in question. At the top of the hierarchy are so-called 'parties of power' or regime parties that, although unequivocal leaders in these party-systems, are none the less subservient to the president and executive branch (Bader, 2011; Roberts, 2012a). At the next level of importance is a coterie of systemic or 'soft' opposition parties, affording the party system an outward appearance of pluralism, but without ever challenging the regime. The lowest rung of the party system sees a mixture of minor soft opposition parties, but also anti-systemic or 'hard' opposition groups, which are typically marginalised by the regime, denied official registration, and/or their leaders imprisoned or exiled from the country completely.

In line with the growing interest in authoritarian norm diffusion in the post-Soviet space, the question arises whether it could be that Russia, having successfully engineered its own hierarchical party system, is now exporting its know-how to Central Asia in a bid to thwart the spread of democracy and bolster pro-Moscow regimes. To answer this question this article

proceeds as follows. The first part briefly outlines the emerging literature identifying Russia's support of authoritarianism in the post-Soviet space. This material also characterises the hierarchic party system that was established early on in Vladimir Putin's first term of office (2000–4). The second part then examines the similarities between party systems in Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as the growing authoritarian linkage between United Russia and analogous parties of power in these aforementioned states. The final part then considers some of the problems with Russian norm diffusion as an explanation for party system convergence, as well as the outlier cases of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

Despite the undoubted influence of Russia in post-Soviet Central Asia and unequivocal evidence that United Russia is building substantial linkage with other parties in the region, this article argues that Russian norm diffusion is only a partial explanation for convergence. Instead, party system convergence appears to be the result of complex, multi-directional norm diffusion, as regimes look to liberalise or close their respective political systems by 'emulating' or 'rejecting' political innovations seen in neighbouring regimes.

This article draws on a range of primary and secondary sources, as well as a close comparative analysis of the three levels of the hierarchic party-system already identified, including individual parties of power, and soft and hard opposition in Russia and the five former Soviet Central Asian Republics and now independent countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Where possible, official documents, such as party statutes and manifestoes are examined, and party laws and constitutional provisions governing the political systems in the respective states are analysed. This article also draws on data gathered from over 80 face-to-face interviews conducted by the author in Moscow in 2007 and in 2014 with members of the political establishment, including United Russia, as well as interviews conducted with the main opposition parties in Bishkek in 2012 during a sixth month research visit.

## 2. Russian norm diffusion & the hierarchic party system

The concept of 'norm diffusion', also termed 'norm transmission' (Mills and Joyce, 2006) is by no means new, but its application in recent years has coincided with a refocused research agenda in response to the perceived shortcomings of 'third wave' democratisation in the post-Soviet space. The idea of 'negative' norm diffusion is intuitively appealing in the sense that Western actors, notably the US and the EU, have been engaged in 'good' democratic norm diffusion for some time (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Pevehouse, 2002). The current interest in authoritarian norm diffusion simply inverts the focus while employing the same 'passive' and 'active' mechanisms found in the literature on the democratic equivalent (Levitsky and Way, 2010, 38–9; Manners, 2002, 244–5).

Indeed, it is the nature of the international system, of weak and strong states, that provides the opportunity for norm diffusion to occur in the first place, with certain states possessing greater potential to prioritise, spread and establish their norms. According to Levitsky and Way (2005), states which have the greatest potential to diffuse norms are those that have the greatest linkage and leverage. Leverage, relates to conditionality, sanctions, diplomatic pressure and military intervention (2005, 21) and its success reflects the size and strength of the actor applying the pressure, relative to the actor resisting. Linkage, on the other hand, is more subtle and has a number of aspects, including economic, geographical, social, communication and transnational civil society. Importantly, linkage also includes party organisations, which may help increase the exposure and susceptibility of states to foreign norms (2005, 23).

In terms of linkage and leverage, it is obvious that Russia, as an undoubted regional hegemon, has a great deal of influence over its post-Soviet neighbours; a point that the literature is increasingly highlighting. Building on the work of Levitsky and Way, Cameron and Orenstein (2012), identify Russia's favourable 'asymmetry of power', understood in terms of social or ethnic linkage (the large number of ethnic Russians living in its 'near abroad'); economic linkage (the importance of the Russian market for other post-Soviet republics); and growing international linkage (mainly through newly created institutions). The last point relates to the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation; all of which have received impetus in recent years.

In fact, the idea of regional hegemons diffusing authoritarian norms through transnational and international actors has begun to receive scholarly attention, in particular the Russian-Sino dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and its clearly stated reverence for state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs – interpreted as norms that delegitimise anti-regime activities and democracy promotion (Ambrosio, 2008, 1341). However, the idea of a regional hegemon exporting a domestic political model has so far received less analysis. Nonetheless, the similarities between party-systems in Russia and several Central Asian republics raise some interesting questions. Del Sordi (2011, 12), for example, asks if Russia is actively 'promoting' and 'encouraging' the formation of parties of power elsewhere, noting that several post-Soviet countries, including the Central Asian republics, have shown great interest in implementing the autocratic tools used to maintain 'authoritarian stability' in Russia.

While the 'authoritarian tools' at the disposal of the Putin regime are numerous, one of the key innovations in Russia in the post-Yeltsin period (2000–2012) has been to create a façade of relatively convincing political competition based around a party system and parliament controlled by a dominant, yet subservient ruling party with soft opposition providing the necessary pluralistic element and hard opposition marginalised or outlawed completely. Overall, this kind of party-system engineering is important for regime longevity, as elections in Russia, as in similar 'half-way houses', continue to be the main drivers of 'stability and change' in the political system (Schedler, 2006, 12).

In terms of the Russian case, to date, United Russia is the paramount party within the hierarchic party system, 2001–15. The party emerged through a process of reconciliation following the December 1999 State Duma election, when the Kremlin-

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