

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

‘Taking it to the streets: Mass mobilization and protest in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (2010-2016)’

The last two decades have seen an increase in the frequency of major citizens’ protests in every region in the world (Carothers and Youngs 2015) and this independently of the political context. Citizens seem to be more demanding with their governments and to more readily mobilize in pursuit of their demands.

Region that, for years, has been rarely affected by citizens’ outbursts was Central Asia dominated by traditional kin-based relationships of clans and tribes (Schatz 2004, Collins 2000), patronal politics and neopatrimonialism (Mesquita 2016, Lewis 2012, Laruelle 2012). Turkmenistan for example until today have not seen any major social protest. Uzbekistan experienced one mass mobilization in 2005 and in Tajikistan protests were merely local. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan was called an ‘island of democracy’ and Kazakhstan an ‘oasis of stability’ and both were until mid-2000’ unaffected by mass citizens’ protests.

However, Kyrgyzstan is today the most turbulent in terms of societal protests with the latest mass mobilization in 2010. Kazakhstan is still believed to be stable, but a widespread mass protests in June 2016 suggests increasing tensions in this most prosperous Central Asian republic. Were the latest mass protests in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Kazakhstan 2016 the harbingers of instability, democracy or maybe just a neopatrimonial occurrence, remains a puzzling and unanswered question.

Thus, in this PhD proposal I ask:

Who initiates mass protests in the contemporary Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and why?

- ✓ Are protests organized, and if yes, by whom and how?
- ✓ What are the goals of the protesters? Is a protest directed towards a specific actor or is it exclusively a goal oriented action?
- ✓ Whether and how informal networks and elites influence or frame protests in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan?
- ✓ What is the level of responsiveness of the state and how precisely did it respond to the protest?

Theoretical framework of this thesis lies in the intersection of the elite theory (Higley and Lengyel 2000, Nourzhanov 2006, Radnitz 2010), democratization theory (Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner 2010) and the patronal politics and neopatrimonialism (Bach and Gazibo 2012, Clapham 1982, Hale 2015). It derives from the tools and aspects of the social movement theory, in particular the game theory, theory of relative deprivation, political opportunities theory and theory of collective action.

This thesis aims to propose a theoretical framework to gain a better understanding of the ‘culture of protests’ in Central Asia. By the comparison of mass protests in lastingly stable and resource-rich Kazakhstan vis-a-vis protest torn resource-poor with a recurring specter of instability Kyrgyzstan, this thesis seek to identify any differences in the ‘in play’ mechanisms of protests within contemporary Central Asia. By the same token this thesis will contribute to the under researched issue on political change in this region and address the question of where does the key to political mobilization in contemporary Central Asia lie- in grassroots ‘revolutions’ or divisions among elites.

The thesis will be composed of tentative six following chapters in addition to an introduction and a conclusion.

- **Chapter I** will construct a theoretical framework for this study by applying three hypotheses of the putative explanatory approaches to protest.
- **Chapter II and III** will explore the interrelations between the attributes of a state and its society in order to understand factors that influence and shape the occurrence of protests.
- **Chapter IV and V** will constitute the empirical part of the thesis and will analyze two case studies: the mass protests in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and the one in Kazakhstan in 2016. These will inform the theoretical discussion by analyzing and evaluating the hypotheses embodied in Chapter I.
- **Chapter VI** will provide a comparative analysis of the mechanisms of protest between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

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