



Enough votes: Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev greets supporters in 2011 after being reelected with 96 percent of the vote.

YURI KOCHETKOV / EPA / CORBIS

# VOTING AGAINST FREEDOM

Recent history in the countries of the former Soviet Union suggests that the appetite for freedom may not be as strong everywhere as we assume.

BY JOSHUA KUCERA

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WITH ITS INSPIRING IMAGES OF CITIZENS around the Middle East taking to the streets to demand an end to dictatorship, the Arab Spring rekindled our faith in democracy. As the dramatic events unfolded on television, it was impossible not to believe that however tightly autocrats may try to hold on to power, and however messy transitions may be, in the end, despotism must yield to the will of the people.

But a look to the east and north, toward the former Soviet Union, provides a sobering reminder that democracy is not the inevitable result after dictatorships fall. The 15 former Soviet republics have seen dictatorial regimes ousted in not one but two distinct waves—the first after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the second a dozen or more years later in the so-called color revolutions that brought down autocrats in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Yet no real benefits have accrued to political and civil rights in the region; indeed, they are more limited than before. (The three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, are exceptions; not absorbed into the Soviet Union until 1940, all three have become democracies and members of the European Union.) Freedom

House, an American organization that promotes the advancement of democracy worldwide, produces annual measures of political and civil freedoms in every country. According to its data, only two of the ex-Soviet republics outside of the Baltics—Georgia and Moldova—have better scores today than they did when they gained independence in 1991. Armenia's have not changed. The scores of the other nine states have gone backward.

Two leading scholars on democratization, Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, of Harvard and the University of Toronto, respectively, have written that “expectations (or hopes)” for democracy in the former Soviet Union have “proved overly optimistic,” and that it may be “time to stop thinking of these cases in terms of transitions to democracy and to begin thinking about the specific types of regimes they actually are.” And that was in 2002. Yet U.S. officials still cling to the notion that the region is in a “transition” to democracy. When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton paid a visit in 2011 to Uzbekistan and its president, Islam Karimov, one of the harshest dictators on the planet and perhaps the least likely leader



Kazakhstan's domed presidential palace in Astana is flanked by golden office towers.

JANE SWEENEY / JAI / CORBIS

The city has been rebuilt on a monumental scale after becoming Kazakhstan's new capital in 1997.

in the region to move anywhere close to democracy, a State Department official told reporters on the trip that “President Karimov commented that he wants to make progress on liberalization and democratization, and he said that he wants to leave a legacy of that for his—both his kids and his grandchildren.” Pressed by an incredulous reporter, the official added, “Yeah. I do believe him.”

Evidence, however, is mounting that not only has democracy failed in most countries of the former Soviet Union, but that people there do not particularly regret it. Surveys by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project have found that the percentages of Lithuanians, Russians, and Ukrainians

who believe that a “strong leader” is preferable to a democratic government have risen significantly over the past 20 years. A survey last year of 10 ex-Soviet states by the Russian research institute Integration found that Russian strongman Vladimir Putin is even more popular in other parts of the former Soviet Union than in Russia itself. “People

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want a strong hand, stability, growth, and prosperity,” explained the institute’s director, Sergei Moroz.

The divergent trajectories of two neighboring countries in Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are illustrative. In the early days of independence, Kyrgyzstan was widely described as an “island of democracy.” It had genuinely competitive political parties, an open, combative press, and a parliament that was popularly elected, not a rubber stamp. In 1993, Strobe Talbott, then President Bill Clinton’s special envoy to the new post-Soviet countries, called Kyrgyzstan’s president “a true Jeffersonian democrat.” And while Kyrgyzstan’s politics have had their ups and downs since then, it still has the most open government in Central Asia. For instance, the constitution promulgated in 2010 established a parliamentary system, a marked departure from the strongman model that is ubiquitous in the region.

Kazakhstan, meanwhile, is still ruled by the same ex-Communist Party boss who was in control in 1991, Nursultan Nazarbayev. He has systematically eliminated any political competition and built an extensive cult of personality. In the last presidential election, in 2011, his three token opponents endorsed him and one said he voted for him. Nazarba-

yev won 96 percent of the vote.

Yet Kazakhstan is prospering and stable, and is building a middle class, while Kyrgyzstan is chronically mired in chaos. Kazakhs, at least in the big cities, can shop at nice malls and afford beach vacations in Turkey. One Western expat who has worked throughout Central Asia told me that Kazakhstan is the only place in the region where you can go to a restaurant where entrées cost more than five dollars and be surrounded by locals, not other expats. One of my visits to Kazakhstan, in 2010, happened to coincide with a bout of horrific ethnic violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan. Several hundred people, mostly Uzbeks, were killed. When I broached the subject of Nazarbayev’s rule with Kazakhs, I heard the same thing over and over. After some complaints about cronyism and corruption, my interlocutors would add, “But at least we’re not Kyrgyzstan.” An opinion poll conducted around the same time found that 39 percent of Kazakhs blamed the violence in Kyrgyzstan on a “low standard of living,” while 38 percent attributed it to “the authorities’ weakness.” The same poll found that only seven percent of Kazakhs opposed recently passed constitutional amendments that cemented Nazarbayev’s rule

into the future, giving him the title “Leader of the Nation.”

In 2009, Kazakh human rights advocate Yevgeny Zhovtis, who had testified several times before the U.S. Congress about his country’s lack of progress toward democracy, was sentenced to a disproportionately long prison term following a conviction for vehicular manslaughter. The harsh sentence drew the ire of human rights groups around the world, which argued that its severity was related to Zhovtis’s political activities. Yet in Kazakhstan his plight did not appear to move anyone. One official at a Western democracy-promotion organization told

me about observing a rally in support of Zhovtis shortly after his sentencing. The official approached carefully, not wanting to appear to be part of the event and give credence to the inevitable government claims that it was organized by foreigners. But when he got to the demonstration, he realized that “it was maybe 25 people, and I knew all of them—they all worked for NDI, DRL,” and other Western democracy-promotion organizations, he said, referring to the National Democratic Institute and the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. The ranks of such groups in the region have been shrinking



**In Tbilisi with President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2005, President George W. Bush hailed Georgia as a “beacon of liberty.”**

KEVIN LAMARQUE / REUTERS / CORBIS

for years. Some have simply closed their operations, while others have shifted their focus to consumer rights and other issues more relevant to the day-to-day concerns of Central Asians, concluding that, at least for now, the ground in the region is simply not fertile for democracy.

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And Central Asia is not unique in the former Soviet world. In 2010, disillusioned with the 2004 Orange Revolution that was supposed to have ushered in democracy, Ukrainians voted back into office Viktor Yanukovich, the very apparatchik whose attempt to steal the election six years earlier had sparked the “revolution.” In Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, pro-democracy movements have failed to gain any traction, and autocrats seem as entrenched as ever.

**S**O WHAT HAPPENED? WHY HAS DEMOCRACY failed to gain any purchase in the former Soviet Union? Political scientists have identified a number of possible explanations. Some are not specific to the region: Low levels of economic development mean that people are more focused on economic issues, while countries that do succeed economically, but only on the strength of oil and gas or other natural resources (e.g., Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan), tend to breed autocrats.

But some explanations are unique to the region. All the countries of the former Soviet Union maintain close ties to Russia (often willingly, sometimes not) and, increasingly, China, neither of which do much to help the cause of democracy. In particular, China’s economic success has inspired poor countries around the world, not least those just across its northern and western borders in Central Asia. And the fact that Beijing has achieved such success while maintaining the Communist Party’s monopoly on power feeds into the widespread belief in the former Soviet countries that a leader’s strong hand is what is needed to grow. Meanwhile, the other major regional power, India, is a democracy—and has not done

nearly as much to relieve the crushing poverty under which many of its citizens suffer.

“China is a model to be copied—India is just a basket case,” said Stephen Kotkin, a historian who specializes in the former Soviet world. Central Asia’s leaders know that China is rising, and that its model will be the dominant one in the region, he said in an interview.

Some scholars advance cultural explanations for the region’s lack of interest in democracy. The dominant religions of the former Soviet lands are Orthodox Christianity and Islam, both of which cultivate values not conducive to democracy, this argument goes. In the case of Orthodoxy, writes former Georgian government official Irakli Chkonia, those values include “submission to authority, discouragement of dissent and initiative, discouragement of innovation and social change, [and] submissive collectivism rather than individualism.”

Citizens of the former Soviet states also suffer from ideology fatigue. Especially on the periphery of the former Soviet Union, where communism was experienced as a reform imposed from a distant capital, many people today see democracy in similar terms, as a foreign ideology that has little to do with their lives. Sean Roberts, an anthropologist

and Central Asia specialist at George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs, writes that “most citizens of Kazakhstan, and perhaps most post-Soviet peoples outside the Baltic states, engage the concept of democracy much as they embraced communism before—as a mostly empty ideological framework to facilitate deference to the authority and power of the state, not as a system of formal institutions that can effectively represent people’s interests and make governance more successful in serving the people.” Roberts further observes that “if many Americans saw in the end of the Cold War the victory of American ideals, per [Francis] Fukuyama’s ‘end of history,’ most former Soviet citizens viewed it more as an ‘end of ideology,’ or a sign that grand ideals are essentially incompatible with the realities of life.”

In each of these countries, the dictator, too, has done his part to discredit democracy, painting it as “alien to the country’s history, tradition, and identity, funded by foreign security services, or driven by U.S. and Western geopolitical and economic interests,” political scientists Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M. Brudny wrote in a recent article. And in every case, the ruler has taken aggressive steps to nip democratic movements

in the bud by restricting independent media, muzzling opposition, trying to censor the Internet, and using state resources to buy political support. The dictators of the region reacted to the color revolutions by kicking out Western democracy-promotion organizations they believed were responsible for orchestrating those events.

Fear of democracy per se has not been a driving force in the region. To Western audiences the Arab Spring and color revolutions may have looked like inspiring outbursts of people power, but they were read very differently by the leaders, and many of the citizens, of the former Soviet countries. There, the Arab Spring was seen from the beginning more as an outbreak of chaos and Islamist extremism. The color revolutions, too, failed to inspire many people in neighboring states—the events in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, in particular, were seen primarily as events that weakened those countries.

**I**F DEMOCRACY CAN HAVE ANY CLAIM TO success in the former Soviet Union, its best case is Georgia, whose 2003 Rose Revolution, led by the U.S.-educated Mikheil Saakashvili, brought dramatic reforms and a sharp geopolitical turn toward the West. Saakashvili's affection

for the United States was reciprocated: President George W. Bush visited the country in 2005 and famously called it a “beacon of liberty.”

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But “democracy” was never quite the right word to describe what Saakashvili was trying to implement. His successes, while undeniable, are better thought of as progress toward modernization or good governance. Saakashvili's youth (he became president at 36), fluency in English, and rhetorical embrace of “democracy” cleverly disguised what was in effect a more enlightened version of the strongman model favored in many parts of the former Soviet Union.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia was notorious as its most corrupt republic. After independence, things failed to improve. The government of Edward Shevardnadze was so corrupt that when the noted



foreign-affairs writer Robert Kaplan visited in 2000, he couldn't imagine the pervasive venality ever being weeded out: "Corruption is deeply rooted—perhaps the most corrosive ultimate consequence of communism. It will continue at high levels long after Shevardnadze's death." But Saakashvili wasn't so fatalistic, and he undertook an ambitious project to reform the police, then one of the most corrupt institutions in the country. In a massive housecleaning, he laid off 16,000 police officers. He also dramatically restructured the police bureaucracy and raised salaries. The reforms worked: By all accounts, Georgian police are far less corrupt now than they used to be. In 2010, the international corruption watchdog Transparency International found that 78 percent of Georgians believed that corruption overall had decreased in the previous three years—the highest such figure in the world. (And for what it's worth, despite Kaplan's prediction, Shevardnadze is still alive.)

This was Saakashvili's greatest achievement. But the reforms were far from democratic, and couldn't have even taken place in a democracy, according to Matthew Light, a University of Toronto criminologist who has studied Georgia's police reform. Saakashvili "was able to

do those things because there was no one he had to bargain with," Light said in an interview. "Institutional change of the kind Saakashvili implemented would involve more stakeholders in a fully functioning democracy."

While the reforms succeeded in rooting out corruption and improving the performance of the police, it did so at the cost of remaking the force into a politicized institution responsible to Saakashvili personally. The fruit of that politicization was visible in 2007, when the police violently broke up anti-government protests and shut down a major opposition-friendly television network, events that did "serious damage to Georgia's reputation as a champion of human rights," Human Rights Watch said in a report analyzing the crackdown. Furthermore, the reforms failed to create the sort of oversight of a police department that would be expected in a democracy, and other parts of the justice system remained unreformed. Of cases brought to court, for example, 99 percent resulted in convictions. In other words, Saakashvili's reforms were about strengthening the power of the state, not democracy.

Meanwhile, according to Freedom House, measures of civil and political rights in Georgia flatlined from 2003

to '10 (but did tick up slightly thereafter). The organization bluntly concludes, "Georgia is not an electoral democracy." That is hardly surprising, given that Saakashvili has frequently cited authoritarian Singapore as a model (as does Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev). "Singapore has a lot going for it, but that [Saakashvili] says that is revealing," Light said. "He doesn't say Switzerland, or Sweden, or Canada, or the U.S.; he says Singapore." It was not democratic principles that inspired Georgia's focus on police reform. That was motivated largely by Saakashvili's fear of Russia and his worry that a dysfunctional state would not be able to defend itself against its superpower enemy to the north.

"I don't think they were lying when they said they wanted a democracy, but they saw Georgia as on the brink of state failure," Light said, referring to Saakashvili and his allies. The president gave "lip service to democracy, and he believed it on some level, but it just wasn't the priority. That's the benign interpretation. The less benign was that he genuinely saw the model for Georgia as authoritarian capitalist development like [that in] Singapore."

The contradictions of Georgia's democracy were on full display during the 2012 parliamentary election, the first in

which Saakashvili's party faced a truly credible opponent. When billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili formed a political party called Georgia Dream to vie for power, Saakashvili's government threw up substantial roadblocks. It stripped Ivanishvili of his Georgian citizenship (after several years of living in Paris, he had also acquired French citizenship), levied extraordinary multimillion-dollar fines on his party for campaign finance violations, and harassed and intimidated his supporters. In the end, however, Ivanishvili's deep pockets helped Georgia Dream overcome these obstacles. While Georgians were pleased by the drop in corruption under Saakashvili's administration, that was outweighed by their discontent over its failure to raise living standards.

Ivanishvili had warned his supporters to be ready for the incumbent president to steal the election, and even sympathetic outsiders wondered how Saakashvili—who holds an outsized impression of himself and his role in Georgian history—would take a loss, but he graciously accepted defeat. "There are very deep differences between us, and we believe that their views are extremely wrong, but democracy works in this way—the Georgian people make decisions by majority," he said. "That's what we of course

respect very much.” Peacefully handing over the reins of government to a rival was perhaps Saakashvili’s most democratic move.

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In the end, Saakashvili was trapped by his own rhetoric: Though he knew that democracy wasn’t what he was bringing to Georgia, his legacy depended on outsiders perceiving that to be the case. Democracy, while it may not be particularly relevant in places such as the former Soviet Union, remains the standard of the “international community,” or at least the portion of it that wields the most power—the United States and its allies. So Saakashvili and his Western backers had to carry out a sort of mutual charade: He had to pretend that Georgia was “transitioning” toward democracy, while the United States—which wanted good relations with Georgia for a variety of geopolitical reasons—

had to pretend it cared. This phenomenon can be seen in the emergence of several ersatz “democracies” in the former Soviet Union, with varying degrees of credibility.

**K**AZAKHSTAN PROVIDES AN ESPECIALLY stark example. President Nazarbayev has shrewdly developed what he calls a “multivectored” foreign policy, trying to maintain good relations with many powers so as to not be too dependent on Russia. Ties with the United States and Europe depend to some degree on being democratic, so even while it in no way resembles a democracy, Kazakhstan makes great efforts to pretend to the world that it is one. The country’s diplomats campaigned hard, over several years, for it to be given a turn as chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a multinational body that is perhaps best known for its election monitoring. Many OSCE members had reservations, but as part of its campaign Kazakhstan’s government promised wide-ranging reform of laws relating to national elections, political party registration, and the news media.

The gambit worked, and Kazakhstan was awarded the chair for 2010. But the reforms were only partially implemented, and the experience of chairing

the OSCE for a year seems not to have done much to whet Kazakhstanis' appetite for democracy. Indeed, 2010 was the very year they named Nazarbayev their de facto president for life. Kazakhstan recently celebrated a new national holiday in his honor, First President's Day, amid a fresh assault on opposition media and political figures.

Meanwhile, the government's PR efforts continue unabated. Shortly after the Arab Spring began, Nazarbayev published an op-ed piece in *The Washington Post* touting Kazakhstan as a model for Middle Eastern countries. "It took the great democracies of the world centuries to develop," he declared. "We are not going to become a fully developed democracy overnight. But we have proved that we can deliver on our big ambitions. Our road to democracy is irreversible, and we intend to provide economic and political opportunities for our citizens."

The Kazakhstani government has on retainer several Washington lobbying and public-relations firms, and it has contributed to prestigious Washington think tanks. In 2009, for example, it gave the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a smaller organization, the Institute for New Democracies, a \$290,000 grant to create a task force to

prepare for Kazakhstan's then-upcoming OSCE chairmanship.

Ironically, when Kazakhstan held parliamentary elections early last year, the OSCE was critical, saying the process "did not meet fundamental principles of democratic elections." Nazarbayev fired back at the organization he had been so eager to have his country chair, saying that "hired" monitors with an agenda would not be invited to observe his country's elections in the future. But in Washington, Kazakhstan's lobbyists put a brave face on the results, and a Kazakhstan-funded group of American experts who made up their own smaller observer mission praised the vote. "Kazakhstan has taken an important step forward towards a multiparty polity with the election," the group said in its official statement. "The conduct of the election, while falling short in some respects of the 'gold standard' . . . demonstrated a commitment to widen voter choice."

At a press conference, one member of the group lauded what he called the "orchestrated approach" to the elections. "The opening of the political process cannot proceed in a chaotic, disorderly fashion," said Vladimir Socor, an analyst with the Jamestown Foundation, a Washington think tank that recently signed a partnership agreement with

the Nazarbayev Center, an institute run by the Kazakhstani government. “When that happens, as in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the consequences can be disastrous. Reforms need to be coordinated from above.”

But could all this be changing? In Russia, the massive, unexpected protests that erupted in 2011 in reaction to Vladimir Putin’s announcement that he would seek another term as president have changed the political landscape. Putin still won handily, and democracy still seems a distant prospect, but the demonstrations—in a country with an illustrious thousand-year history of despotism—suggested that the relationship between the Russian government and its citizens has changed. Russians seem to be demanding more say in how things are run. More than half now believe that voting matters, according to the Pew Research Center’s surveys, a significant increase from only a few years ago.

Russia is the wealthiest of the ex-Soviet republics, with the largest middle class. A substantial scholarly literature has correlated rising incomes with increased expectations of political liberalization, and indeed it was Moscow’s middle class that led the anti-Putin protests. Over the past three years, Pew’s surveys found, Russians have in-

creasingly come to value a judiciary that treats all citizens equally, a civilian-controlled military, uncensored media, and honest elections—the building blocks of democracy.

## **The massive, unexpected anti-Putin protests that erupted in late 2011 have changed Russia’s political landscape.**

Even in Kazakhstan, a few months after Nazarbayev bragged in *The Washington Post* about how his country avoided mass protests by meeting its people’s economic needs, riots broke out (and were violently put down) in the remote city of Zhanaozen among oil workers who had been striking for months. This was a different sort of protest from those in Moscow: mounted by the working class rather than the educated elite, and demanding not political rights but higher wages. Yet it similarly demonstrated the fragility of the strongman model.

Could these developments in Russia and Kazakhstan be the first cracks in the antidemocracy façade of the former

Soviet states? As fearful as people in this region are of chaos, could that fear one day soon be outweighed by their desire to have more say in how their countries are run? Even if that is the case—a big “if”—that is the easy part, said Stephen Kotkin, the historian specializing in the former Soviet states. Far harder, he noted, is the work of building the institutions of a democratic society, such as a responsible

parliament and an effective bureaucracy. Protests can't do that, he said, drawing a parallel to the Arab Spring. “You can break the regime with protests, but then you're Egypt,” he said. “Then what?” ■

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