Regional Disparities in the Political Transition Processes of

the Former Soviet Republics

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Abstract

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, we see significant regional disparities in the political transition paths of the former Soviet republics. This study will focus on the three main regions in the Soviet Union (the Baltic region, the Caucasus region, and Central Asia) and the countries within. By comparing the trajectories of political transition in these countries from 1991 to the present and using case studies to display the democratization processes of specific countries, this study aims to identify the regional disparities and explore how different factors, including geographical locations and different historical, social, and cultural legacies, shape the post-Soviet transitions.

Keywords: political transition, former Soviet republics, regional disparity, Baltic, Caucasus, Central Asia

Introduction

The vast territory of the former Soviet Union once consisted of fifteen republics. However, after its dissolution, the world witnessed significant variance in the paths of political transition of these republics. The Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) became liberal democracies rapidly and soon joined the ranks of the freest countries in the world. Meanwhile, the five countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan) retained high levels of authoritarianism. Other republics, notably the Caucasian states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), had a mixed level of democracy and became hybrid regimes. Typically, countries in the same region share similar trajectories of democratic development, while those across regions show more variance in their political transition processes. The goal of this study is to focus on these three regions, display the regional disparities, and explore the underlying factors.

This paper consists of four main sections: historical review, regional analysis, case studies, and final analysis. The historical review provides a brief introduction to the history from 1900 to 1991, offering a general background for each region. The regional analysis uses data from *Freedom House* to recognize and compare the patterns of transitions in the regions. Then, for each region, there is a case study of the specific transition process of a country that best represents the overall pattern in the region. Finally, the analysis concludes the findings of the previous sections, summarizes the underlying factors that led to the regional disparities, and provides future insights.

Historical Review

In order to understand the regional disparities in the political transition processes of the former Soviet Republics, it is necessary to examine how different historical periods affected each region respectively. From the Russian Empire to the Gorbachev reforms, each region in the country experienced vastly divergent patterns of governance, autonomy, and democratic indoctrination, which led to distinct historical legacies that shaped the cultural and political landscapes in the regions and later influenced the success or failure of democratization. This section provides a brief review of three relevant historical periods from 1900 to 1991—that of the Russian Empire, the interwar period, and the Soviet Union—with a particular focus on the political and institutional developments of each region during these periods.

The Russian Empire (1900-1917)

In the early 20th century, the Soviet Union had not yet been established. However, all modern-day former Soviet republics were already part of the Russian Empire, although incorporated and governed in profoundly different ways. The Baltic provinces had been incorporated into the empire since the 18th century. In 1710, Estonia and the northern part of the Latvian shores were conquered. In 1721, the land was officially ceded by Sweden to Russia. Lithuania and the southern part of Latvia were acquired during the partition of Poland in the late 1700s (Vakar, 1943). However, the Tsar retained the distinct legal traditions and the privileges of local elites with limited autonomy in exchange for loyalty and stability. As a result, the Baltic region developed early national identities that would later promote democratization.

In contrast, Central Asia was under more direct control as most of the region was incorporated into the Russian Empire through military conquest and was subject to direct rule through military governors and colonial policies (Khan, 1996). Although these measures tightly controlled the loose tribal society of Central Asia, they clearly did not foster the formation of national identity or democratic progress.

On the other hand, the Caucasus region experienced repression and Russification. The Russian Empire attempted to suppress local culture and force local residents to accept Russian culture. At the same time, the region was also influenced by waves of modern schools of thought (Rhinelander, 1975), which resulted in the active socialist and nationalist movements before 1917. However, ethnic tensions and religious diversity also made governance complex, setting the stage for later territorial conflicts and creating obstacles for democratic developments.

The Interwar Period (1917-1940)

The collapse of the Russian Empire after World War I and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk granted independence to the Baltic states and the Caucasian states, but not Central Asia. The Baltic states successfully established internationally recognized republics with democratic institutions that lasted until they were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. The experience of long-term independence during the interwar period further fostered the national identities and democratic traditions in the region and laid the groundwork for rapid and successful democratization after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan were also briefly independent but were quickly annexed in the early 1920s. Due to the continued ethnic strife and international

competition in the region, the short period of independence did not contribute significantly to democratic progress. Central Asia, on the other hand, remained under direct Bolshevik control. No independent states emerged, and the region was reorganized into Soviet Socialist Republics without real autonomy or democratic experimentation.

The Soviet Union (1922-1991)

Under Soviet rule, although a centralized one-party system dominated all regions, local paths were largely distinct. In the Baltics, the 1940 annexation was widely viewed as illegitimate both domestically and internationally, and despite forced Russification and repression, strong national identity and collective memory persisted. Exposure to Western media and economic standards further strengthened the resistance to Soviet rule and civil society in the region (Annus, 2012). As a result, when Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, devised drastic reforms represented by *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*, they sparked mass mobilization and large-scale popular movements in the Baltic region (Geron, 1991), which was vital to the democratic establishment in the Baltic states. In the Caucasus, despite the industrial and economic developments, fragmented ethnic distributions remained an unsolved problem. Therefore, Gorbachev's reforms incited nationalistic movements in the region and led to refreshed territorial disputes (MacFarlane, 2011), causing significant obstacles for democratization. Political life in Central Asia, however, remained tightly controlled by the elites, and civil society there remained underdeveloped (Matveeva, 1999), which led to a minimal response to Gorbachev's reforms among the three regions.

Regional Analysis

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of the third wave of democratization. Across its vast territory, fifteen new countries gained independence and formed different government institutions. While these newborn republics all underwent a certain extent of political shift from the Soviet regime, their democratic transition processes and outcomes are widely different as a result of their respective geopolitical situations and socioeconomic backgrounds. A key indicator of these differences is the countries' freedom scores, which show distinct patterns of change from 1991 to the present, as will be analyzed in the following section.

Generally speaking, the former Soviet republics can be categorized into three types of regimes based on their current systems: democratic, semi-democratic, and authoritarian. The Baltic states are widely recognized as fully democratic, while the Central Asian countries are clearly authoritarian. The remaining countries, such as the Caucasian states, mainly fall into the semi-democratic category, with varying degrees of democratic features and authoritarian practices.

In this paper, the *Freedom House* data of the countries will be presented and analyzed as an indicator of the degree of democracy. *Freedom House* is a nongovernmental organization in the United States that promotes democracy and monitors the extent of political and economic freedom in countries throughout the world. It publishes annual reports evaluating the degree of freedom in countries around the world with a freedom score ranging from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating the highest degree of freedom and 7 the lowest (Armstrong, 2011). The calculation is performed by taking

the average scores of Political Rights (PR) and Civil Liberties (CL). The freedom score of each country is then used to classify countries into three categories: "Free," "Partly Free," and "Not Free."
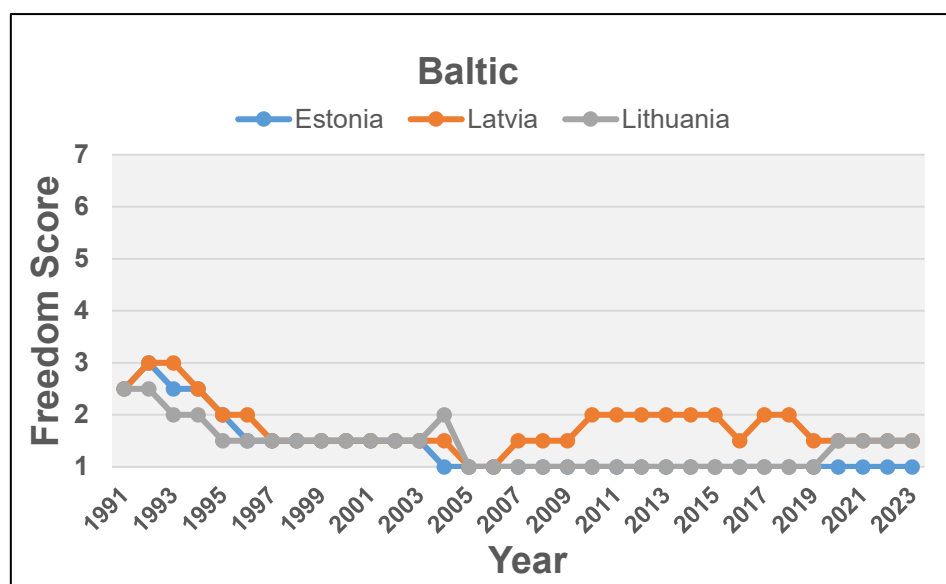
This paper will examine the political transition processes of former Soviet republics in three regions: the Baltic, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The countries will be divided into regional clusters because there are significant regional disparities and intraregional homogeneity in the trends of their freedom scores, as the data will illustrate. For instance, Lithuania and Georgia have freedom score trends that vary greatly from each other, while the freedom scores of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan show highly similar patterns. This is largely the effect of various historical legacies (Pop-Eleches, 2007), which will also be analyzed in order to explain the differences in their political trajectories. However, it is important to note that Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova will not be included in the regional analysis because these four countries fall outside the three major regional clusters and do not share a cohesive geopolitical or cultural trait that would justify treating them as a single group. This is supported by their freedom score trends, which display significant distinctions from one another, reflecting divergent political trajectories. While Ukraine and Moldova can be classified as "Partly Free" most of the time according to *Freedom House*, Russia has turned from "Partly Free" to "Not Free," and Belarus has been classified as "Not Free" most of the time. Due to the lack of regional cohesion and divergence in their respective paths, these countries are excluded from the comparative analysis of this paper.

The Baltic States

Among the fifteen former Soviet republics, the Baltic states are the ones with the highest degree of democracy. Not only did they rapidly transform into democratic regimes after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but they also successfully maintained a stable democracy over the years. As seen in Figure 1, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the freedom scores of the three countries were 2.5, which already put them in the "Free" category according to *Freedom House*. The following year, the Baltic states became freer as their freedom scores decreased to 1.5. From 1991 to 2023, their freedom scores never exceeded 3, which serves as strong evidence of democratic consolidation in the region.

Figure 1

Freedom Score of the Baltic States, 1991-2023

There were three main factors that contributed to the fast and successful democratic transition in the Baltic states: the success of grassroots movements, strong national identities, and geographical proximity to Western Europe.

One dominant dynamic in the process of political transition in the Baltic region was the emergence of grassroots movements. Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, influential grassroots organizations had already been established, including the Popular Fronts of Estonia and Latvia and the Sajūdis movement in Lithuania (Muiznieks, 1995). These organizations played a vital role in promoting the independence of the Baltic states because they mobilized the masses. A primary example of this was the "Baltic Way" of 1989, a movement that involved nearly two million people forming a human chain spanning over 600 kilometers across the three Baltic states. After gaining independence, these organizations kept serving as important platforms for spreading democratic ideals, sponsoring democratic movements, and calling for reforms. Under the influence of these organizations, grassroot movements in the Baltic region received support from broad segments of society, including youth, intellectuals, workers, and rural populations, and achieved high levels of success. As a result, the balance of power shifted greatly toward those who support democracy and reform, enabling smooth transitions into democratic governments.

Another factor that stimulated the grassroots movements and played a central role in shaping the Baltic path to democracy was the strong national identities of the Baltic people. Nationalism has always been an important aspect in the political landscape of the Baltic states, resulting from their lasting historical periods of independence and statehood. The Lithuanian Kingdom was recognized as early as 1251 and was one of the strongest powers in Europe. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, all three countries fell under Russian control. Then, in 1920, the three countries gained

independence again from Soviet Russia, which lasted until 1940 when they were incorporated into the Soviet Union again (Geron, 1991). However, the peoples of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia retained distinct cultural, linguistic, and historical identities throughout the Soviet era, despite decades of efforts by Soviet authorities to impose Russification and suppress local traditions. Due to the collective memory of national independence and pride, appeals to national identity played a vital and unifying role in the independence movements of the late 1980s. After independence, the strength of national identity also provided substantial legitimacy and support for the new democratic regimes.

The last factor to be discussed, which was also non-negligible in the Baltic states' political transformation, was their geographic location. Compared to other former Soviet republics, such as the Caucasian countries, the Baltic states are more proximate to Western Europe. This was a significant advantage in their fight for independence and democracy, because the long-established democracies in Western Europe were able to provide direct assistance. For instance, to reduce their dependence on the Soviet market, the Baltic states received substantial foreign investment from Western Europe and the United States in the late 1980s. By the spring of 1991, over 130 joint ventures had been founded in Lithuania alone (Geron, 1991). Besides economic aid, Western influence also served as an external factor that promoted democratic reforms. In 2004, the three Baltic states collectively joined the European Union, which required them to accept the Copenhagen Criteria. Consequently, they had to establish more democratic institutions, enforce rules of law, and promote legislation that protects civil rights and liberties.
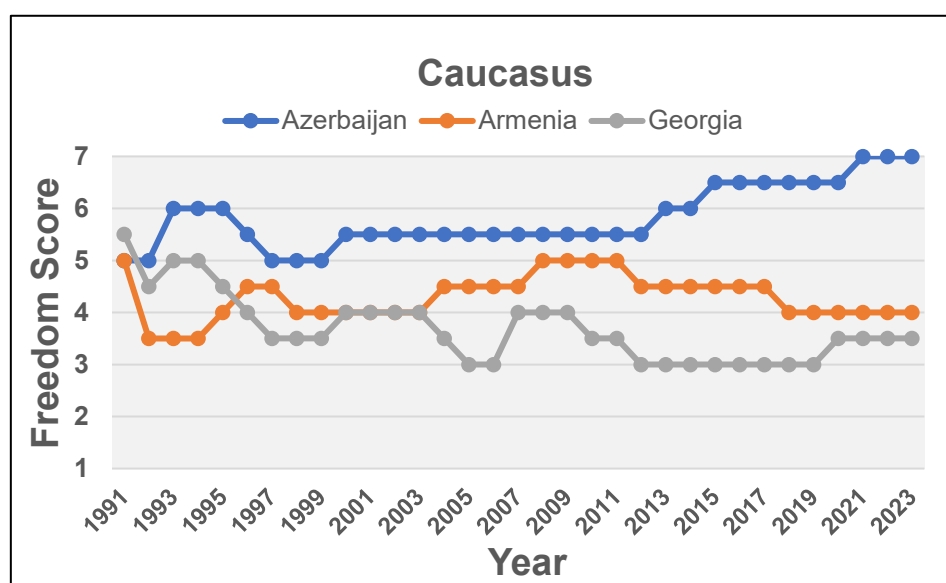
Therefore, the geographic position of the Baltic region played a major role in the establishment and consolidation of democracy in the area.

The Caucasian States

The freedom scores of countries in the Caucasus region are clearly divergent from those of the Baltic states. From Figure 2, we see that the freedom scores of the three countries never fell below 3, and the constant fluctuation indicates an unstable political environment in the region. Among these countries, Armenia and Georgia exhibited semi-democratic features and have been categorized as "Partly Free" countries since 1991, while Azerbaijan is more authoritarian and is categorized as "Not Free" most of the time, according to *Freedom House*. Despite this, the three countries still have lower freedom scores than the authoritarian countries in Central Asia, which is the reason that they can all roughly be counted as semi-democratic countries.

Figure 2

Freedom Score of the Caucasian States, 1991-2023

As with the Baltic states, historical factors and the geopolitical environment have also had substantial impacts on the political transition in the region. The contested ethnic tensions and territorial disputes in the Caucasus, along with more complicated geopolitical situations, prevent the Caucasus states from transforming into fully democratic regimes.

In the Caucasus region, there are over fifty ethnic groups that possess different cultural and linguistic features. For instance, 30% of the population in Georgia consists of ethnic minorities, with the largest minority being Armenians, who make up 8% of the population (MacFarlane, 2011). The fragmentation of ethnicity in the Caucasian states presents problems for a unified national identity, thus making civil society considerably less cohesive and powerful than that of the Baltic states. Additionally, the intertwined distribution of ethnicities often gives rise to territorial disputes. For instance, a significant number of the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan inhabit the autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which remains the focal point of the largest and longest conflict in the Caucasus (MacFarlane, 2011). These factors not only raise questions about national identity and citizen loyalty but also undermine cooperation between states, making joint efforts for democracy more difficult.

Besides ethnicity, geographical location was also a significant dynamic that influenced the path of democratic transition in the Caucasus region. Unlike the Baltic region, the Caucasus is located in Asia and farther away from Western Europe, which made it easier for Russia to exert its influence on the region and harder for Western powers to send aid. Access to the sea was also a factor that hindered Western influence.

Among the three Caucasian states, only Georgia had access to the Black Sea, whereas Armenia and Azerbaijan were landlocked (Shaffer, 2009). For this reason, Georgia's freedom score has consistently been lower than those of the other two states since 2004, as shown in Figure 2. Despite this, the Western powers still fought fiercely against Russia in the region for influence. The external pressure from competing ideologies and internal conflict between different political practices created an unstable political environment in the region, leading to frequent fluctuations in freedom scores. Additionally, it facilitated the characteristics of hybrid regimes because while pressures from Russia often reinforced illiberal tendencies, Western-oriented civil society actors and reformers still managed to gain a certain level of influence, promoting limited democratic practices and reforms.
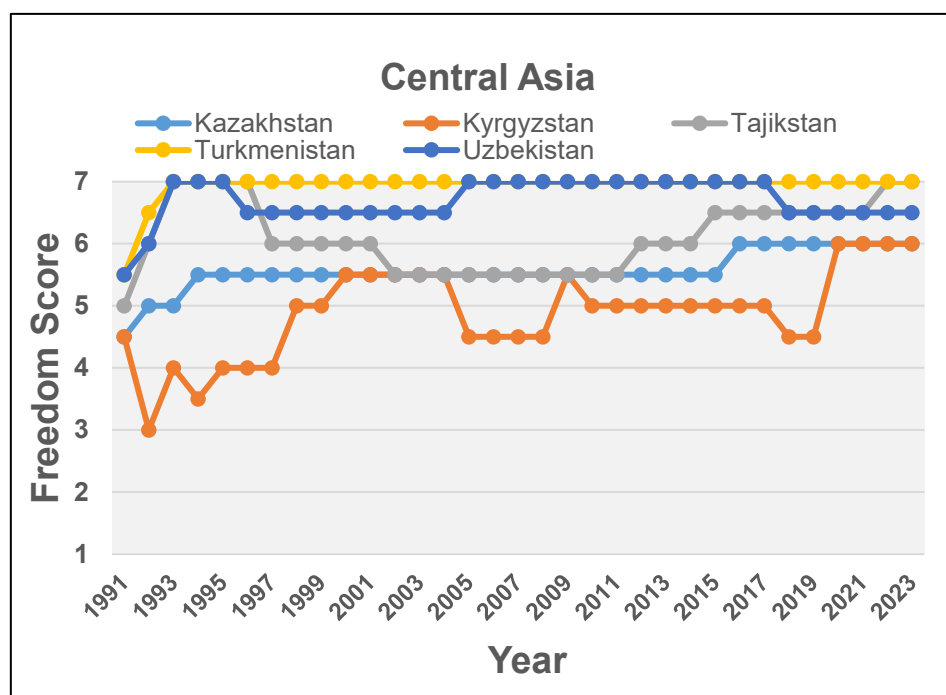
Central Asian States

Unlike the Baltic region and the Caucasus region, the five countries of Central Asia have undergone minor political transformation in the past few decades and remain authoritarian countries today. This trait also reflects in their freedom scores. Figure 3 illustrates that from 1991 to the present, the Central Asian states have all been categorized as "Not Free" according to *Freedom House*, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan's relatively low freedom score that occasionally falls in the "Partly Free" category. Turkmenistan, an extreme case, has even maintained the highest freedom score, which indicates the least degree of freedom, ever since 1993. However, the persistence of authoritarian rule in the region is not merely a matter of repression, but

rather the product of several historical and cultural factors, including the continuation of Soviet practices and the underdevelopment of civil society.

Figure 3

Freedom Scores of Central Asian States, 1991-2023

Despite gaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian regimes never fully broke away from their Soviet roots (Matveeva, 2009), and many of the Soviet Union's political practices, bureaucratic structures, and ruling elites remained intact. In several countries, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, former Communist Party leaders simply turned into presidents and continued authoritarian rule in new national contexts. The administrative systems remained highly centralized, with limited room for opposition, and Soviet-style mechanisms of control, such as surveillance and state patriotism, continued to operate under new nationalist banners. While there are calls for reforms and reduction of Soviet influence, there are also many officials who enjoy the benefit of the legitimacy and stability brought about by the

Soviet tradition and therefore want to maintain the status quo. Nonetheless, the Soviet past still has a strong influence on the Central Asian states today and fosters authoritarian practices.

In addition to the sustained Soviet legacy, the underdevelopment of civil societies was also a crucial factor that contributed to the failure of democratization in Central Asia, which was consistent with the Soviet era. In the Soviet Union, state control of public expression significantly restrained the development of civil society, as it repressed the voices of individual citizens. More importantly, the constant repression created a passive political culture among citizens as they were discouraged from expressing their political views and taking part in public affairs. The Baltic states, which had closer relationships with Western Europe and the United States and had more progressive social factions, were able to reverse the inactive political culture through the joint efforts of free media, government propaganda, and social actors. Therefore, the civil societies in the Baltic region thrived and significantly promoted the democratization process. In Central Asian states, however, the political culture remained highly conservative because these societies consisted almost exclusively of traditional groups, such as extended families, kinship associations, and religious communities, which were not designed for playing political roles (Matveeva, 1999). The social background, combined with the tendency of authoritarian leaders to restrict the development of civil societies to secure their own power, did not provide the foundation for civil societies to grow in Central Asia, which was one of the most important factors that led to the weak and fragmented status of civil societies in the
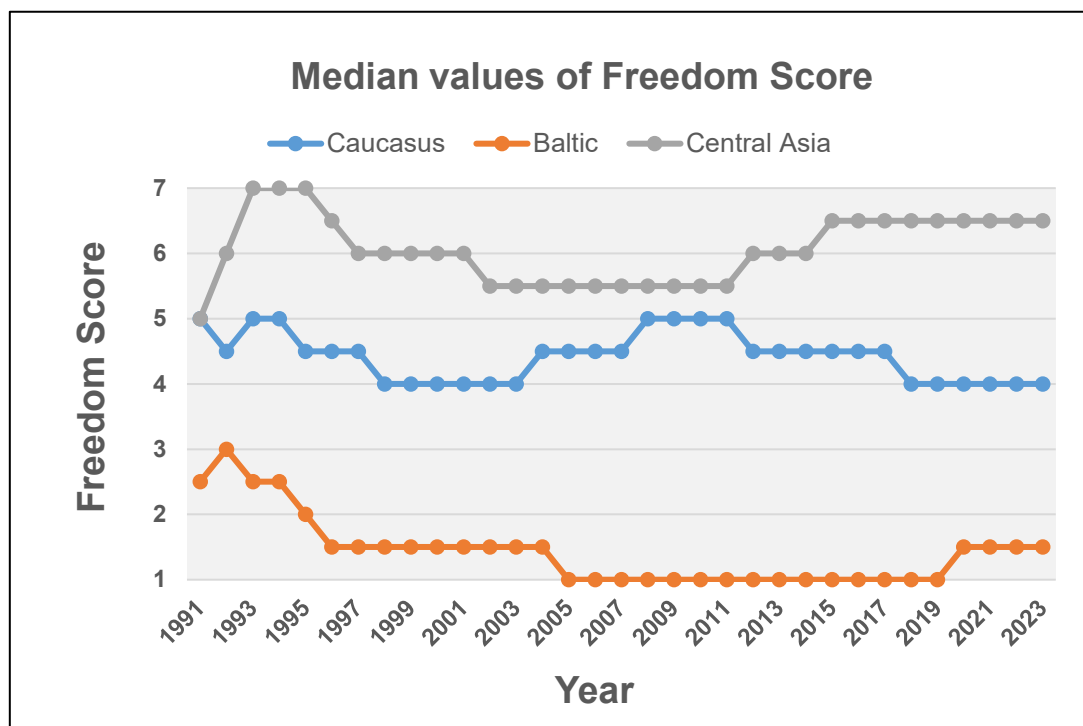
region. Eventually, the underdevelopment of civil societies hindered the process of democratic transformation.

Comparison of Median Scores

As shown in Figure 4, the median values of freedom scores from 1991 to 2023 clearly demonstrate the regional disparities in the democratization processes of the former Soviet republics. The Baltic states, with scores consistently between 1 and 3, show patterns of rapid and successful establishment and consolidation of democracies. Meanwhile, the Caucasus region remains in the middle, with median scores between 4 and 5, suggesting the characteristics of semi-democratic regimes in the region. In contrast, the Central Asian republics have maintained high freedom scores of no less than 5, indicating entrenched authoritarianism and minimal democratization. These patterns underscore the impact of distinct historical legacies, civil society dynamics, and geopolitical factors that have led to divergent political transition processes among the former Soviet republics.

Figure 4

The Median Values of the Freedom Scores of Different Regions

Median values of Freedom Score

Summary

In conclusion, the regional disparity between the trajectories of political transformation of the former Soviet republics is the result of distinct historical legacies. The Baltic states successfully transitioned into stable democracies as a result of their active civil society, strong national identity, and advantageous geographic location. In contrast, the Caucasian states failed to fully transform into democracies due to the complex ethnic distribution, territorial disputes and geographical competition. Finally, Central Asian states remained authoritarian due to the sustained Soviet impact and the weakness of their civil societies. These regional disparities exemplify that the political transformation in the post-Soviet space was not a random process, but rather the outcome of different social backgrounds, historical legacies, and geopolitical factors.

Case Studies

This section presents the case studies of Lithuania, Armenia, and Uzbekistan to further explore the patterns of political transformation in the former Soviet republics. Each country will be examined from the aspects of political development and civil society. The principle is to choose the counties that best represent the political transition processes in the different regions and analyze their trajectories, so that the regional disparities can be better exemplified and understood.

Lithuania

Political and Institutional Development

Among the fifteen former Soviet republics, Lithuania was the first to reassert independence. Even before the official dissolution of the Soviet Union, when the domestic situation was still unclear, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania had already declared independence on March 11, 1990. This bold decision was bolstered by the strong national identity rooted in Lithuania's collective memory, resulting from a long history of statehood and experience of independence between 1918 and 1940. The independence movement was led by Vytautas Landsbergis, the head of an umbrella organization of intellectuals, reformers, and social activists called the Sajūdis movement that emerged in 1988. On March 10, 1991, the same day when the program for Lithuanian independence was pushed forward for discussion, he was elected the chairman of the Supreme Council (the legislative body and de facto parliament of Lithuania until 1992), which made him the president in effect (Senn, 1991).

Upon gaining independence, Lithuania quickly became a democratic country. In 1992, the first democratic constitution, the Constitution of Lithuanian Republic, was ratified through a referendum (Vilpišauskas, 2014), marking Lithuania's departure from Soviet institutions and the establishment of a democratic system. In the same year, the first peaceful transfer of power was conducted via free election, as Algirdas Brazauskas's Democratic Labor Party of Lithuania won an absolute majority of the seats in the *Seimas*, the new parliament, and he became the first popularly elected president in 1993 (Senn, 1994), marking the maturity of the democratic system in Lithuania. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Lithuania consistently carried out democratic reforms that steadily improved government transparency and accountability, consolidating its democratic tradition. In 2004, Lithuania, along with other Baltic states, became a member state of the European Union. Since then, it has continued to reform its democratic institutions in line with EU standards, marking a new chapter in its democratic progress.

Citizen Participation and Civil Society

Lithuania maintained a vibrant culture of civil participation due to the strong national identity and preceding independence movements. Historically, the mass mobilizations such as the Baltic Way and the Singing Revolution fostered the public awareness of political participation. As a result, after gaining independence, elections in Lithuania were transparent, competitive, and received high engagement and voter turnout rates. The elections in 1991 and 1992 saw turnout rates of 71.72% and 75.22%, respectively, and most subsequent elections also achieved turnout rates of over 50%

(Danilevičius & Gudžinskas, 2024), which exemplifies a high level of citizen participation in political affairs.

Apart from robust civil participation, Lithuania's civil society is also highly developed. Since independence, the government has taken active measures and established legislation that facilitates the growth of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For instance, the right to freedom of association is protected in Lithuania's constitution, and the establishment of an NGO only requires two people. There is also a legal code that allows citizens to designate 2% of their income taxes to a selected NGO or public institution (Mačiukaitė-Žvinienė & Grigaliūnaitė, 2006), opening an important new revenue source for NGOs. These measures significantly promote the development of civil society in Lithuania, eventually contributing to the country's democratic progress.

Summary

The case of Lithuania is representative of the democratic transition process of the Baltic states. Under the influence of national identity and independence movements, they were able to establish democratic institutions quickly after independence, therefore setting the foundations for liberal democracies. The same factors also contributed to the vibrant culture of political participation and robust civil society, which further consolidated their democratic achievements.

Armenia

Political and Institutional Development

Like other Caucasian states, Armenia's political transition process was complex due to the contested ethnic distribution in the Caucasus region. Since independence, nationalism in Armenia has been closely related to democratization, yet at the same time, it has hindered the pace of political reforms. The popular movement to free Nagorno-Karabakh, a region under Azerbaijani rule but inhabited by a significant number of Armenians, was "the locomotive of democratization" (Rutland, 1994). The nationalistic drive served as a rallying point around which the Armenian public organized the earliest assault on the institutions of the communist regime, fostering a strong sense of civic engagement and contributing to the country's early democratic aspirations. The first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, was the leader of the Karabakh Committee, which gave him the popularity and support to come to power in the 1991 election.

However, while inspiring the early democratization, the nationalistic fervor in Armenia also had multiple negative impacts on democratic developments. The ethnic tensions along the borderlines not only led to frequent conflicts with neighboring countries, but also caused the government to allocate large military budgets and low social spending, which had a significant influence on overall state capacities (Gallina, 2010). Moreover, the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh and the ensuing confrontation with Azerbaijan have become the dominant factor determining the behavior of all social groups and political activists in Armenia, from dissidents and intellectuals to the established communist elite (Rutland, 1994). This phenomenon distorted the development of democracy because it attracted the most public attention and therefore

pushed other issues off the political agenda. Furthermore, the continued conflict and instability contributed to a political culture centered around charismatic leadership and personal authority, resulting in the concentration of power in the presidency and the gradual erosion of the role of parliament.

A notable break from this pattern came in 2018, when the Velvet Revolution forced President Sargsyan, who was still trying to extend his rule after 10 years in office, to resign (Iskandaryan, 2018). The revolution was a successful mass nonviolent movement led by opposition politician and reformist Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power following the revolution. It led to freer and fairer elections and evoked a renewed demand for accountable governance. However, the revolution still had limitations as it did not fundamentally alter the distribution of power between different democratic institutions and the problem of nationalism persisted. The strong presidential authority, weak parliament and judiciary, and unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remained significant issues that continued to restrain deeper democratic reforms in Armenia.

Citizen Participation and Civil Society

The Armenian civil society is described as "moderately developed," with a relatively strong level of organization but with weak impact and low civic engagement (Paturyan & Gevorgyan, 2014). Chronologically, there are two climatic periods of high citizen participation, which are the early post-independence period and the period after the 2018 Velvet Revolution. During these periods, civil society actors and organizations were relatively active in organizing protests, calling for reforms, and participating in political affairs. However, although not repressed by the government, they still faced

suspicion from both political elites and common citizens. In other periods, citizens' willingness to participate in politics or NGOs was even lower.

On the other hand, civil society organizations have developed rapidly in Armenia since 1991. Every year, hundreds of NGOs emerge, and there were 3,552 registered NGOs in Armenia by 2013 (Paturyan & Gevorgyan, 2014). The problem, however, lies in the influence and sustainability of these organizations. Although the government does not repress these organizations, it tends to ignore them, which significantly restrains their ability to affect public policies and legislation. Besides, many organizations rely on financial support from Western funding and charitable organizations for their daily operation (Dudwick, 1995), which casts doubt on their sustainability. Therefore, although the number of NGOs is growing steadily in Armenia, their impact on public decision-making is rather insignificant.

Summary

Armenia is a representative case among the three Caucasian states. The close and problematic relationship between nationalism and democratization in Armenia is also seen in Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the impacts of national identity, ethnic issues, and territorial disputes on their respective political transition processes are also similar. Although there are numerous civil society organizations, they fail to have a significant influence on government policies, resulting in incomplete democratization and hybrid regimes in the region.

The Case of Uzbekistan

Political and Institutional Development

Despite declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan has remained an authoritarian state since its formation, as evident in its political structure and power distribution. Although technically a presidential republic with legislative, executive, and judiciary branches, the legislative and judiciary branches in Uzbekistan are highly subordinate to the president. The power distribution is hardly balanced and political power is dominated by a few elites from the former Communist Party. This characteristic was clearly manifested in the presidency of Islam Karimov, the first president of Uzbekistan, who was also the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. Retaining his power through an uncompetitive election in 1991, he immediately adopted a strongman model of governance, suppressing opposition parties, censoring the press, and subordinating democratic institutions to the presidency in order to consolidate his personal rule. Throughout his 25-year rule, corruption grew rapidly, wealth distribution polarized, and mass arrests and repression were common (International Crisis Group, 2016). The most extreme event happened in May 2005, when security forces opened fire on protesters in Andijan Valley, leading to hundreds of deaths (Edel & Josua, 2017) and severe crises on civil liberties and international condemnation.

After Karimov's death in 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded to the presidency behind closed doors and has held the presidency to this day. He introduced limited reforms in judicial transparency and economic regulation, which led to a minor improvement in the freedom score. However, the authoritarian nature of the Uzbekistan

regime remained intact, as opposition is still repressed, a free press is still absent, and political participation is still tightly controlled by the government.

Citizen Participation and Civil Society

Uzbekistan's authoritarian characteristics are also reflected in the limited citizen participation and underdevelopment of civil society. In Uzbekistan, citizen participation is minimal and tightly controlled. Elections are held regularly but lack competitiveness and transparency, as presidential candidates are typically vetted and opposition parties are either banned or excluded from running for office. Although official voter turnout is reported to be high, these figures are widely regarded as manipulated (Ilkhamov, 2002). Political dissent is rare due to the risks of government reaction, and mass protests, such as the 2005 Andijan uprising, have often been violently repressed. Since then, there have been very few public mobilizations.

Besides the lack of political participation from citizens, the civil society in Uzbekistan is also largely constrained. The registration of NGOs is strictly restricted, and their daily operations are closely monitored. In early 2004, the Uzbek authorities began to close non-governmental organizations involved in political or social activities, and this process accelerated after 2005. Many international organizations, including *Freedom House*, were expelled. In April 2006, the government closed the local office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Albeit a few foreign organizations returned under Mirziyoyev, most of them were charitable and medical organizations, and those involving political elements were still rejected (Dilmurod Zukhriddinovich, 2020). Moreover, media freedom is also severely limited, as independent journalists are

continuously harassed and receive government instructions on how to cover events (Jones et al., 2006).

Summary

The case of Uzbekistan represents a typical model of political transition in the post-Soviet space in Central Asia, where the continuation of Soviet-era institutions, deeply entrenched political elites, and a weak civil society collectively contribute to the failure of democratization. Although reforms exist, such as those in Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev, their effectiveness in promoting democratization is highly questionable.

Analysis

Although they shared the history of being part of the Soviet Union, the fifteen former republics experienced distinct political transition processes. While the democratic transitions in the Baltic states were quick and successful, the Caucasian states encountered significant obstacles, resulting in their transformation into semi-democratic regimes, and the Central Asian states remained highly authoritarian. In the regional analysis and case studies, this divergence has been clearly demonstrated. The following part of this section will focus on explaining the main factors that contributed to the regional disparities and sharing the insights gained from the previous sections.

Geographical distance to the West and distinct historical, social, and cultural legacies are the two key factors that shape the divergent paths in different regions. The analysis of the median freedom scores of the three regions reveals a clear pattern: the closer a region is to Western Europe and the United States, the higher its degree of freedom tends to be. The underlying mechanism is also easy to explain. Greater

proximity to the West increased access to external support and guidance during the democratization process. In the case of the Baltic states, their proximity to Europe not only facilitated direct assistance from Western institutions, including governments and NGOs, but also accelerated their integration into Western economic and political frameworks such as the European Union. Moreover, geographic closeness increased the possibility that citizens in these countries would be exposed to Western media, political ideologies, and democratic values, especially during the late 1980s and 1990s, when the countries gained independence and people began to explore new models of governance. A counterexample is Central Asia, where geographical distance from the West limited both the aid and support from the consolidated democracies and the diffusion of democratic ideas, allowing Soviet legacies and authoritarian regimes to persist with minimal external challenges. The Caucasus region, located between these two extremes, experienced a medium level of Western engagement, which contributed to its unstable and hybrid democratization outcomes.

In addition to geographical locations, historical, social, and cultural legacies also play a vital role in shaping the political trajectories of different regions. The Baltic republics had a prolonged history of independence and statehood before Russian and Soviet occupation, including the established democratic institutions during the interwar period. This legacy fostered a strong sense of national identity and democratic tradition, which contributed to their rapid transformation into liberal democracies after 1991. In contrast, the Caucasus was marked by ethnic fragmentation and unresolved territorial conflicts, such as the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. These challenges made nation-

building more complicated and often generated instability that disturbed the checks and balances between democratic institutions and hindered democratic consolidation. Moreover, the legitimacy of the leadership often centered around personal charisma rather than policies and ability, which also had negative effects on the cultivation of democratic values. Meanwhile, the Central Asian republics inherited traditional social structures characterized by tribal ties, clan-based hierarchies, and strong patronage networks, which significantly increased societal resistance to liberal reforms and weakened the demand for democratic practices. Combined with the enduring Soviet institutions and communist elites that controlled political power, these factors led to limited civic engagement, an authoritarian political culture, and weak institutional checks, ultimately resulting in the persistence of authoritarian regimes across the region.

In conclusion, the divergent political trajectories of the former republics reveal that democratization is not a uniform or inevitable process but one deeply shaped by regional context. The comparative approach adopted in this paper not only recognizes the distinct transformation processes in different regions of the Soviet Union but also explores how underlying factors, specifically geographical locations and distinct legacies, can result in the success or failure of democratic transformations. It highlights that democratic transitions are not solely determined by elite decisions or power struggles. Rather, it is deeply embedded in the regional context and closely associated with geographical, historical, social, and cultural backgrounds. Recognizing and understanding the influence of these backgrounds in specific regions not only enriches

the study of post-Soviet transitions but also provides broader insights into the

conditions under which democratization can happen in other post-authoritarian contexts.

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