

Decentralization, legitimacy, and democracy in post-Soviet Central Asia

David Siegel

Abstract

During the 1990s, a conventional wisdom emerged, based on literature going back decades, that political decentralization might be among the most effective forces for democratization. If ordinary people could participate in autonomous local governments, democracy would be built from the ground up, ultimately shaping the entire political system. Once decentralization reforms were implemented across the world, however, the results were disappointing. Authoritarianism not only thrived at the local level, it could also undermine democratization at the national level. Thus, local-national transference still held, but sometimes as a poison. In this context, the case of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan is an anomaly. Here, the relative success of political decentralization—rather than its failure—nevertheless failed to spur democratization at the national level. I argue that this is because decentralization allowed national authorities to appease international donors while they consolidated their own power. Moreover, while decentralization empowered local communities, it did so in ways that personalized local authority and pitted local and national authorities against one another, resulting in intense localism and antagonistic center-local relations that undermined any democratic transference. The case study findings are based on ten months of field research, which includes interviews with local and national officials, ordinary villagers, and representatives of NGOs and international organizations.

Keywords

decentralization, democratization, local government, post-communism, Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kyrgyzstan was viewed as a potentially successful democratizer. Among the many processes that seemed to contribute to its increasing levels of democracy was political and administrative decentralization, defined here as the creation of local self-governments with autonomy from central authorities and high levels of local participation. Indeed, during this late stage of third wave democratization, it had become conventional wisdom—among scholars, political leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations—that decentralization would strengthen and consolidate national democracy. Implied in this thinking is a theory of transference, whereby the political competence that citizens develop in localities would carry over to the national level, an idea at least as old as Tocqueville's study of America.

While Kyrgyzstan's system of local self-government is far from perfect, it did succeed in creating high levels of local autonomy and participation, particularly when compared with its counterparts across Central Asia. Contrary to existing theory, however, decentralization did not lead to successful democratization; instead, Kyrgyzstan's nascent national democracy began eroding precisely as decentralization accelerated, as if the two were inversely related. By the mid-2000s, Kyrgyzstan saw impressive levels of democracy at the local level alongside authoritarian consolidation at the national level, thus confounding the expectations of Western analysts.

St. Joseph's College, NY, USA

Corresponding author:

David Siegel, Department of Social Sciences, St. Joseph's College, 245 Clinton Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11205, USA.



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The outcome in Kyrgyzstan also contrasts with other developing countries. Across Latin America, for example—most notably in Bolivia and Mexico—but in other world regions too, political decentralization resulted in authoritarian strongholds at the local level. National democratization was undermined as a result. Ordinary people, intimately familiar with the misdeeds of local political bosses, saw the entire political system as hopelessly corrupt. Ironically, theories of transference work in these cases, just not in the ways pro-democracy advocates hoped: if the success of democracy at local levels can transfer to the national level, so too can its failures.

This only further highlights the paradox of the Kyrgyz Republic, where successful decentralization and relatively robust local democracy—defined here as high levels of autonomy and participation—went hand-in-hand with authoritarian consolidation at the national level. At a minimum, this shows that the achievements of decentralization did not transfer to the national level. To understand why, I argue, we need to consider the context in which decentralization reforms were adopted and how they were implemented. To start, the impetus for decentralization came predominantly from international donors. Three notable dynamics resulted.

First, financial constraints gave leaders in Bishkek, the state capital, few options for addressing rural poverty throughout its hundreds of villages. Rather than devolving authority as an idealistic liberal virtue, central authorities sought merely to limit their own responsibilities, a logic that overlapped with the neoliberal prescriptions of the international donor organizations promoting decentralization. With incoming donor funds—alongside tax revenue that no longer had to be shared with villages, which were now responsible for their own budgets—leaders in Bishkek maintained control over resources that would end up fueling authoritarian clientelism.

Second, fulfilling some donor priorities gave Bishkek leeway to ignore others. This meant that central authorities—Kyrgyzstan's first two presidents in particular—were able to jealously guard their own power while conceding to donors elsewhere, namely, in villages in small cities. What we see here is that devolution can mean a multiplication of power rather than the dispersal of a fixed sum; more specifically, central authorities enhanced presidential powers during the same time that new village authorities were being created. Indeed, it is precisely *because* new village authorities were created—thereby satisfying donor organizations—that authoritarian consolidation could proceed without sacrificing donors' goodwill.

Finally, the legislation that created local self-government was vague and ambiguous. This is because central authorities were not deeply committed to reform but were trying to design policies that donors valued. The inadvertent result was that local authorities had the flexibility to define their own role. They often did so in ways that legitimized and personalized local power while demonizing Bishkek as corrupt

and hostile to local interests. The upshot was that the political dynamics of decentralization created higher levels trust and legitimacy at the local level at the expense of central authorities rather than in a way that could be transferred to them.

Taken together, these three interrelated factors reveal political struggles at multiple levels: On the one hand, leaders in Bishkek had to interact with and appease organizations like the World Bank; on the other, they had to face off against their own local officials and villagers. They did so while seeking to preserve and enhance their own power. These local-national dynamics made it less likely that the achievements of local autonomy and participation could transfer to the national level, thus undermining a key causal mechanism in existing theory. Moreover, local-national dynamics in the Kyrgyz Republic muddle the unidirectional causality that prevails in the literature. Insofar as decentralization was a concession that national authorities made to donors in order to protect their own power, it was not so much the cause of authoritarian consolidation as an inadvertent consequence of it.

The evidence to support these claims comes from 10 months of field work in 2013 and 2014 and includes interviews with current and former officials at the national and local levels, ordinary villagers, and the representatives of international donor organizations and NGOs; it is corroborated and supplemented with the findings from polls, surveys, and secondary sources.

The article proceeds in two sections. First, I review theories of decentralization which emphasize that local democracy can transfer to the national level. I also focus on how these ideas were adopted by international donor organizations. Then, I proceed with an in-depth case study of decentralization in the Kyrgyz Republic. After outlining basic facts about how decentralization unfolded, I present evidence to support the three-part argument summarized above, outlining the ways in which the process and outcome of decentralization made democratic transference to the national level less likely.

Decentralization and democracy

The era following the collapse of the Soviet Union was marked by intense optimism about the prospects for democracy. For two long decades, this optimism was borne out by the success of new and consolidating democracies across the world. An integral part of this democratization wave—which is only now receding—was political and administrative decentralization, which entailed transferring the powers and responsibilities of ostensibly centralized states to local-level governments.

The proponents of a “pragmatic” approach to decentralization saw it as a technical solution to economic and social problems, whereby government activities could be made more effective if they were localized (Schönwälder, 1997, p. 757–758). The

“political” approach was more closely linked to democratization itself and framed decentralization as a “vehicle for political reform” (Schönwälder, 1997, p. 759–764). In this view, increasing levels of political participation and autonomy at the local level would infuse communities with the power, competence, and organizing skills necessary for full-fledged democratization at the national level. Indeed, some have argued that bolstering democratic legitimacy should be the ultimate goal of decentralization (Vetter & Kersting, 2003).

Perhaps the most widely cited version of this argument is in Larry Diamond’s *Developing Democracy* (1999). In it, Diamond argued that decentralization can improve a country’s overall prospects for democratization for five reasons: Democracy at the local level (1) fosters the development of “democratic values and skills”; (2) increases responsiveness to local interests and enhances accountability; (3) improves representativeness by giving more weight to historically marginalized groups; (4) acts as a check against centralized state power; and (5) increases opportunities for opposition parties to exert legitimate political power (pp. 121–132). Although Diamond issues caveats and acknowledges several practical and political pitfalls, the overwhelming emphasis of his argument is that decentralization can promote and consolidate democracy.

These ideas received widespread attention during the 1990s, but they were hardly new. Tocqueville argued that local government was a crucial component of American democracy precisely because it facilitated the development of citizenship and civil society (Gannett, 2005). Among the arguments in Almond and Verba’s widely cited study of “civic culture” from (1963) was that citizens’ sense of “political competence” develops primarily at the local-level because it is here that ordinary people have the most meaningful opportunities to participate (pp. 137–167). Importantly, they also argue that this “local political competence” has vast implications for the national civic culture and democracy in general: “...local government may act as a training ground for political competence. Where local government allows participation, it may foster a sense of competence that then spreads to the national level” (p. 145).

This idea of a *transference* between the local and national levels is key. Almond and Verba—like Diamond and others in the 1990s—claim that democracy at the local level is not merely an end in itself; it helps to develop and facilitate the practices, competencies, and values that then transfer to national-level politics. In a study of 12 European states, Vetter replicates Almond and Verba’s findings to conclude that participatory local-level politics act as “a ‘training ground’ for democracy” because “locally socialized positive attitudes can be transferred to national politics, strengthening legitimacy at higher levels” (Vetter, 2002, p. 15).

Importantly, the theoretical claims discussed above—and the empirical findings that support them—are heavily grounded in the experience of Western democracies. Yet,

leading international development agencies, like the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in conjunction with powerful liberal democracies themselves, adopted the underlying logic in their efforts to promote democracy across the world. Indeed, this is among the reasons for the widespread implementation of decentralization reforms after 1991. After reviewing some of the general problems that arose from decentralization initiatives in developing countries, I come back to the issue of transference specifically; while the evidence from developing countries shows links between local and national levels of government, it rarely does so in ways that theories of decentralization and democratization predict.

Decentralization and democratization in developing countries

In support of their decentralization initiatives, international financial and development institutions went beyond linking decentralization to democratization. They also suggested that the empowerment of local government was a crucial and hitherto missing aspect of successful economic development. The World Bank characterized the past “failed approaches” to economic development “as too centralized and statist,” thereby leaving rural communities in a state of perpetual poverty (The World Bank, 1997a, p. 82). Another widely cited report sponsored by the World Bank, though admirably nuanced in most respects, describes a “widespread notion that centralized governance had failed” and a new “unease with commandism [*sic*]” (Manor, 1999, p. 36). Yet another report cites the failures of the Soviet “central state model” specifically, noting that new models of development were needed, particularly those with “a broader-based pyramid of legitimacy,” which could be achieved through decentralization (UCLG, 2008, p. 285).

Thus, the Bank’s development priorities would be “to strengthen the capacity of local governments [...] to manage their own development through decentralized, participatory mechanisms” (The World Bank, 1997a, p. 82). Likewise, the 1997 *World Development Report* urged reforms to facilitate “broader participation and decentralization” (1997b, p. 3). The logic of decentralization used here expands beyond mere democratization to encompass privatization and market reform, all explicitly articulated according a unifying neoliberal logic: “that power over the production and delivery of goods and services should be rendered to the lowest unit capable of capturing the associated costs and benefits” (1997b, p. 120). Likewise, the UNDP (2004) introduced the concept of “decentralized governance for development” envisioned as the “empowering of sub-national levels of society to ensure that local people participate in, and benefit from, their own governance institutions and development services” (p. 2).

It did not take long before these hopeful theoretical assumptions were undermined by innumerable complex

realities. Decentralization reforms in developing countries have had vastly different outcomes, few of them successful. In many Latin American cases, authority devolved to the local level could easily be consolidated by reactionary local elites, leaving communities just as disenfranchised as before (Schönwälder, 1997). In Turkey, decentralization empowered local powerbrokers and private businesses, doing very little to strengthen local democracy (Alkan, 2011). Even in South Africa, which seemed to have the best possible preconditions—a sincerely committed political elite, strong state capacity, and vibrant grassroots social movements—the promise of political decentralization was thwarted by the ANC, which co-opted or marginalized local movements to limit their participation (Heller, 2001).

As this small sample of cases shows, the outcomes of decentralization can vary significantly. Grindle (2007) outlines four contingencies and variations that complicate existing theory: (1) if competitive local elections might increase accountability, a lack of competition will lead to corruption and clientelist strongholds; (2) the success of local government will depend on the skill of public officials as well as their commitment to reform; (3) understaffed, poorly organized, and financially struggling public sectors that lack technology and skilled personnel will perform poorly; and (4) while it is true that some localities will have organized grassroots movements that can demand change and accountability, others will lack this level of “civil society” development and leave local authorities no more accountable than their national counterparts (pp. 10–23). Another way to account for high levels of variation is that developing countries have vastly different histories and starting points for decentralization, a factor that Eurocentric literatures fail to grapple with in a serious way (Hutchcroft, 2001).

But, what about the issue of transference? In many respects, the underlying assumptions behind transference theories were correct, but not always in ways that result in the development of good governance or democracy. In Bolivia, for example, the performance of newly empowered local authorities did, in fact, shape citizens’ perception of national politics; the problem is that many local authorities used their new powers for corrupt political purposes rather than to empower local communities, resulting in the erosion of public trust in the country’s entire political system (Hiskey & Seligson, 2003). Here, the failures of local government transferred to the national level rather than the successes.

In Mexico, the proponents of democracy celebrated the victories of opposition candidates in local elections during the 1990s; however, it was during this same period that national policies of radical economic liberalization created “policy vacuums” at the local level (Snyder, 1999, p. 296). Local authorities took steps to “reregulate” the economy for their own political benefit, creating “subnational authoritarian regimes” that undermined central authorities’ ostensibly democratizing reforms (Snyder, 1999, p. 296).

Indeed, local governments in Mexico might be “the principle source of inertia and resistance to democratization, rather than the prime breeding ground for democratic advances” (Cornelius, 1999, p. 11). The uneven development of local democracy in Mexico was shown to affect citizens’ perceptions of democracy at the national level with those living in competitive localities more likely perceive Mexico as a democracy while those living in localities still dominated by the PRI less likely to do so (Hiskey & Bowler, 2005).

At a minimum, these findings suggest that the effects of decentralization on national-level democratization are contingent; others have gone further to suggest that the theoretical link between decentralization and democracy is, itself, deeply flawed (Hutchcroft, 2001, p. 33). In fact, successful democratization requires some degree of state centralization as highly decentralized non-democratic states like Afghanistan and Somalia make clear; thus, while decentralization might sometimes facilitate democratization, the opposite is also possible, whereby “authority is devolved to authoritarian enclaves at the local level,” in an “autocratic decentralization” (Hutchcroft, 2001, p. 33). American history provides lessons for both possibilities: alongside the virtues of local government described by Tocqueville sits the use of “states’ rights” to enslave, oppress, and systematically disenfranchise black Americans. As Heller concludes, all governance is about power and “there are no a priori reasons why more localized forms of governance are more democratic” (Heller 200, p. 132).

The following case study of decentralization in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan reveals yet another possibility. Here, decentralization, though imperfect, resulted in increased levels of local autonomy and participation between 1994 and 2008, and only slightly less so thereafter. Yet, increasing levels of democracy at the local level—through the development of local self-government—seemed to contribute little at all to national-level democracy, which was already in decline by the late 1990s. Thus, this case turns the empirical findings of other studies upside down: here, authoritarian consolidation proceeded despite the successes of political decentralization.

Case study: The Kyrgyz Republic, 1991–2018

Kyrgyzstan became an independent country in 1991. As one of the poorest Soviet Republics, it depended heavily on Moscow and faced an economic crisis after the Soviet collapse. As a result, it turned to the IMF for an emergency loan, and received additional assistance from the World Bank, which required the implementation of standard economic adjustments, including liberalization, marketization, and privatization (Abazov, 1999; Pétric, 2005).

Donors also emphasized “good governance,” which entailed political and financial decentralization, as discussed above (Baimyrzaeva, 2005, 2010, 2011; Fraser, 2009, p. 67–68). In addition to the direct assistance from the IMF and

World Bank, a number of other organizations helped to design and implement reforms for the development of local self-government. The most instrumental among them was the UNDP and USAID, which collaborated with dozens of local and international NGOs.

The result was a series of presidential decrees—issued between 1994 and 2009, primarily during the presidency of Askar Akaev (1990–2005)—that established a system of local self-government at the city- and village-level with democratically elected leadership and significant decision-making autonomy; the reforms also entailed financial decentralization, allowing local governments to raise and spend their own money. Throughout this article, the term “local”—as well as local self-government or local government—refers only to the village or city levels, unless otherwise noted.¹

Between 1994 and 1996, presidential decrees established village councils (*ayil kenesh*) with its members chosen through direct elections (Alymkulov & Kulatov, 2001, p. 527). They also established executive administrative offices, roughly the equivalent of a village mayor (*ayil okmotu*). At first, the *ayil okmotu* was appointed by district-level authorities, with approval of the village council. Then, between 1996 and 2001, direct elections for *ayil okmotu* were held across different localities; by 2001, all 453 *ayil okmotu* were directly elected (UNDP, 2012, p. 121).²

Although President Akaev’s successor, Kurmanbek Bakiev, limited some of the democratizing effects of these reforms in 2008, for example, by establishing indirect elections for *ayil okmotu* through the village council, other developments strengthened the institutional and social position of village-level authorities. For example, between 1994 and 2000, under the guidance of the World Bank, a series of “community user associations” devolved governing authority for pasture management, drinking water, and irrigation to the local level.

Although these associations are formally independent from village governments, the *ayil okmotu* and members of the village council are typically formal members or leaders; informally, they play influential roles (Herrfahrdt-Pähle, 2008, pp. 292–293). The result is that the authority of local officials is multiplied and enhanced while the number and complexity of their social ties with co-villagers is increased and regularized in the course of managing village-level affairs. The *ayil okmotu* of a given village might also be a pasture committee representative and head of the water-users committee; simultaneously, he or she might be the patron of shepherds who are also members of the pasture committee, the former head of schools, and lifelong colleague, acquaintance, or friend to countless others.³

Finally, decentralization reform also created an independent local budget, giving village-level authorities the ability to raise funds for their own initiatives. Due to high levels of poverty across Kyrgyzstan and limited local tax

bases, the practical effect is that local governments could now raise funds directly from third-party donors—typically international donors and non-state financial institutions—without approval from Bishkek (Alymkulov & Kulatov, 2001, p. 528; UNDP, 2012, p. 34). For example, the Agency for Development and Investment in Communities (ARIS),⁴ which was created in 2003 through a World Bank program, raises money from foreign governments and international donors and then distributes money directly to local communities. The intent is to enhance local autonomy. As ARIS itself notes, its funding “will enable local communities and institutions” to “reduce their dependence on higher levels of government” by “strengthening local capacity to select, design, and implement viable investments” (ARIS, 2015).

In addition to enhancing local autonomy, third-party financial support is also designed to increase local participation. Donors require a “local contribution” in exchange for releasing funds such that village inhabitants must pay a part of the expense for projects, either through cash payment, labor, or other in-kind contributions (Earle, 2005). Indeed, the point of the contribution is not to raise revenue—often it amounts to as little as five percent of a project’s cost—but to encourage and even require direct community participation in local governance. As a project coordinator from ARIS put it, “The main goal of our projects is not the implementation itself, but to teach local communities to rationally use the wealth of the country. We teach them how to use the money that they collect themselves for the improvement of infrastructure and for maintaining pastures [...] we’re interested in social mobilization.”⁵

The *ayil okmotu* is typically responsible for mobilizing local participation, relying heavily on his or her own social ties to secure the local contribution in order to maintain and repair roads, schools, and other village infrastructure. The Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), an international NGO that provides financial resources for village infrastructure projects, explains that, “this all requires community work and community mobilization, and the *ayil okmotu* is at the center of this mobilization. We cannot ask villagers to do these things. It is the *ayil okmotu* who goes into the community and explains the project and gathers support and makes the mobilization happen.”⁶ A USAID official in Bishkek noted, “some *ayil okmotu* have gotten quite good at generating their own streams of revenue based almost purely on their personality and connections. These officials have the ability to initiate their own projects and act on their own without consulting the central government.”⁷

Thus, the local contribution not only mobilizes communities, thereby increasing local participation, it also strengthens the position of locally elected government officials, particularly the *ayil okmotu*, because they must continually activate their own social networks in the normal

course of village governance. Arguably, the informal social ties between village authorities and their co-villagers have become more important than the formal powers of the village government itself, which are quite limited. I discuss these important political implications in greater detail below.

The overall result of decentralization is that there is an impressive level of local participation and autonomy in Kyrgyzstan, particularly compared with other post-Soviet Central Asian states. This does not mean that Kyrgyzstan's system of local self-government is perfect. Widespread poverty alongside a lack of professionalism and training significantly limit the scope of possibilities. Moreover, corruption and clientelism remain common problems.⁸

In the end, however, when local officials *can* accomplish important tasks, it happens against all odds and through the support of their own community. As one villager described, “the *ayil okmotu* does his best, but he cannot do much without local help. These days, most of the main jobs are done by common people.”⁹ Likewise, a local official himself noted that “the effectiveness of the *ayil okmotu* depends on how well they know people, and how they get along with people...you have to be very flexible and work with everyone.”¹⁰ Another villager put it even more simply: “the *ayil okmotu* relies on everyone else.”¹¹

In the course of field work, I observed local officials engage with villagers to fix roads, dig irrigation ditches, patch roofs, build and stock a fishing pond, hunt predatory wolves, and lobby a telecom company to provide cellular service in a small remote village—the villagers themselves provided labor in every case. Countless small favors were traded between local officials and members of the community on a daily basis. These are, no doubt, relatively small accomplishments, but they occurred and were experienced only through the mechanisms of local self-government and can be listed among the few improvements to village life in Kyrgyzstan since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A divergence in democratization at the national and local levels in Kyrgyzstan

Decentralization was not the only sign of democratization in Kyrgyzstan during the early 1990s. There was also an increasingly free media, the proliferation of political parties and national-level elections, alongside other examples of political liberalization. Western proponents of democracy were hopeful that Kyrgyzstan could become a model for the region, not only because of these reforms but also because its first president, Askar Akaev, seemed sincerely devoted to the cause. Indeed, it quickly became conventional wisdom that Akaev's personal commitment to liberalism was the driving force behind democratization and decentralization (Anderson, 1999, pp. 23–67; Olcott, 1996, pp. 87–91). Like many other liberal reformers throughout the Soviet Union

and Eastern Europe, Akaev was a political outsider who had proven his liberal credentials as an outspoken Gorbachev supporter.

Yet, this view does not grapple with the economic, political, and historical context of Akaev's presidency and, as a result, it cannot adequately explain the rapid deterioration of Kyrgyzstan's nascent democracy, which is a crucial part of Akaev's legacy. The undeniable reality is that the country Akaev led was financially dependent on international donors. So, while Akaev may have seemed more willing to implement the reforms his counterparts across Central Asia resisted, he did so at a time when few other options were available to him. As Baimyrzaeva notes, “it appears that much of the reform was produced and remained to please donors and continue securing their funds” (2011, p. 559).

There are three interrelated but distinct ways that this dynamic shaped decentralization such that increasing levels of democracy at the local level failed to transfer to the national level. Theoretically, a key causal mechanism in the existing literature—namely, transference—was undermined by these three factors such that successful decentralization had no observable impact on national-level democratization. I discuss these factors and political dynamics in the following three subsections.

1. Public finances and presidential patronage networks. First, even had Akaev preferred to maintain centralized control of all villages and cities, Bishkek's financial emergency was so dire that shifting responsibilities to new local governments was likely a political and financial relief. An Akaev ally noted, in reference to decentralization, that “the donors did not force us to do it, but we also didn't refuse because we did not have the money to contribute to development in local areas [...] we were weaker [than our neighbors] and decided to develop this way, with the help of donors.”¹² Mukanova argues that it was “because of increasing fiscal pressure,” that the central government “found it politically appropriate to transfer responsibility for its functions to LSGs to solve regional and local tasks” (2008, p. 204).¹³

In this broader context, we see that Akaev was not celebrating the autonomy and political participation of local communities as a liberal political value; rather, he was telling villages that they must fend for themselves because Bishkek could not afford to help them. From the perspective of neoliberal donors, this attitude was appropriate and commendable. As the UNDP put it, central authorities had “freed themselves from having to solve a whole range of issues and problems of local significance” in villages, “giving them the opportunity to pay more attention to matters of national significance” (UNDP, 2012, p. 34).

Unfortunately, the “matters of national significance” that Bishkek could tackle—now that it had “freed” itself from the responsibility of building roads and schools in poor rural

areas—ended up enriching Akaev and his allies. Even after the 2005 Tulip Revolution forced Akaev from office, bringing to power his more corrupt and authoritarian successor, Kurmanbek Bakiev, the successes of decentralization helped keep donors enamored. In 2013, a high-level official at USAID in Bishkek, for example, privately acknowledged that approximately 60% of external budget support for the central government ends up in officials' pockets. Yet, donors had still "not completely given up" because Kyrgyzstan is "still viewed as a hopeful case." Compared to its neighbors, it is "still more open, more democratic, and more willing to work with outsiders."¹⁴ It would be hard to make a statement like this if not, in part, for Kyrgyzstan's record on decentralization. Thus, decentralization not only preserved scarce funds in national coffers, it also seemed to give international donors enough confidence to keep giving. Importantly, Kyrgyzstan's national elites are far more dependent on foreign funds to maintain authoritarian patronage networks than their counterparts in Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan (McGlinchey, 2011).

2. Decentralization as endogenous to authoritarian consolidation. A second factor, related to the first though even more significant for the fate of democracy in Kyrgyzstan, was that decentralization was the easiest way for central authorities to appease donors without forcing them to sacrifice their own political power. Indeed, concurrent with decentralization, President Akaev was undermining democracy at the national level. As one study points out, the reforms that were most fully implemented "affected lower levels of government, and ignored the highest levels" (Baimyrzaeva, 2010, p. 289). It seems that decentralization enabled Akaev to get what he needed from donors while giving him the leeway to marginalize parliament, attack political opponents and the press, and place increasingly overt political pressure on the courts (Freedom House, 2003; International Crisis Group, 2001).

By all accounts, presidential power increased during Akaev's tenure and Kyrgyzstan became increasingly authoritarian throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, a trend that accelerated under Bakiev (2005–2010) and remained evident under President Jeenbekov (2017–2020), as discussed below. It is ironic, yet little commented on, that the most significant laws establishing local self-government were determined through an authoritarian process: unilateral presidential decree. Importantly, these reforms not only failed to transfer to the national level; rather, they may have been promoted precisely to preclude or limit that possibility. That is, the achievements of local democracy were less likely to act as an independent causal factor shaping Kyrgyzstan's national-level regime because they were, themselves, an endogenous outgrowth of those very regime dynamics. This is a notable contrast to existing theory, which imagines that local to national democratic

transference follows a linear bottom-up causal logic. Here, it seems there was a counterintuitive top-down dynamic that may have mitigated or even prevented the transference of bottom-up democratizing effects.

Many of those who had praised Akaev for his commitment to democracy were ultimately disillusioned by his energetic accumulation of power. In fact, in this respect, Kyrgyzstan's regime dynamics in the post-Cold War era were somewhat typical: rulers democratize as needed to meet Western demands, but not enough complete a full transition to democracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Akaev's political ideology required a new interpretation. His status as a political outsider during the Soviet era did not mean he was a committed liberal; it simply meant he had fewer loyal clients and could not consolidate power as easily as his Central Asian counterparts (McGlinchey, 2011).¹⁵ In the end, he succeeded in consolidating power; unlike his counterparts, he had to make concessions to international donors to do so, and this included decentralization.

3. The personalization of power and legitimacy at the local level. A third factor that explains the failure of local democratic achievements to transfer to the national level was the way in which local self-government came to depend on the personalized social networks of local officials, as I described in the section *Case Study: The Kyrgyz Republic, 1991–2018* above. If we consider Dahl's definition of an ideal democracy—one in which the government is equally responsive to the preferences of *all* citizens, a responsiveness best assured through free and fair elections, universal suffrage, and a host of civil and political rights—then highly personalized political representation could never be adequate at a national level (Dahl, 1972). Personalized political representation will, by definition, be shaped by the social relations of the particular person in power. While this might not be a total barrier to participation and representation at the local level—in a setting where nearly all village residents personally know village-level officials—it is not possible that it could be scaled or transferred to accommodate a national population, even in a small country. This is precisely why professionalization and a strong rule of law are also crucial components of national democracy: they impersonalize political power, making it possible that all citizens can obtain political representation, even if perfect equality is never achieved in the real world, as Dahl clearly acknowledges (1972).

The personalization of political authority in villages and cities in Kyrgyzstan stemmed from the fact that the formal institutions for local self-government were never well specified by national authorities, leaving discretion to local actors. New institutions were created, but their powers were poorly defined, and the precise legal distinction between "national" and "local" administration remained unclear (Ibraimova, 2009, pp. 58–59, 73–74). As a former director of the

National Agency on Local Self-Government Issues said, “the first and biggest problem” with local self-government in Kyrgyzstan is that “there is no strict division or boundary between state services and local self-government issues.”¹⁶ Proponents of local self-government criticize Bishkek “for failing to implement a coherent long-term strategy” (Marat, 2012, p. 310).

If the reforms establishing local self-government lacked vision, it could be attributed to the fact that national-level authorities were not sincerely devoted to them; the impetus for reform, after all, came from donors. As a result, “the Kyrgyz government lacked a clear concept for the realization [of local self-government] from the start” (Alymkulov & Kulatov, 2001, p. 528). The central government’s support for local self-government was arguably more of a slogan than a real policy (Mukanova, 2008, pp. 204–206). One of Kyrgyzstan’s most vocal public supporters of local self-government, Nadezhda Dobretsova, complains that few officials in Bishkek “understand the role of local self-government in our system.”¹⁷ Bekbolot Bekiev, formerly of USAID’s Urban Institute, says the development of local self-government was really due to the work of donors. State officials never understood the purpose and many were skeptical or outright hostile:

People who work in the state generally have a negative attitude toward international initiatives, but make an effort [publicly] to show that they support it [...] USAID’s project for the development of democracy was not evaluated positively by the administration. I can even tell you frankly that some representatives of state organs even see such work as espionage and as harmful to the country.¹⁸

The UNDP’s own report on local self-government in Kyrgyzstan repeatedly notes that the government was a stubborn partner. It states that “the key lesson that we can draw from the 20-year history of the development of LSGs” is that the government “is inclined to yield to the temptation of controlling the decision-making process from above” (UNDP, 2012, p. 31). The report blames national authorities—particularly after 2005—for their lack of commitment, “conflicting decisions,” “lack of effectiveness,” greed for power, and authoritarian tendencies (UNDP, 2012, p. 38). One account summarized the incoherence of Kyrgyzstan’s system of local self-government accordingly:

There is no complete set of normative legal acts based on a uniform understanding of the nature, content and forms of national policy on the decentralization of government and the introduction of new relations between the center and regions. There is no set limit on the powers to be redistributed in favor of local self-governments, nor is there an official register of functions by territory [...] The ambiguous delineation of

powers and responsibilities among bodies of different branches and levels of government poses another major problem (Alymkulov & Kulatov, 2001, p. 529).

But the ambiguity of reform, by itself, is not what mattered most. The political significance of this ambiguity, and its lasting effects on center-local relations, is that the formal institutions of local government remained somewhat superficial while the authority of local officials became highly personalized. The actual practices of local self-government, left poorly defined by central authorities, strengthened the local social ties between local authorities and co-villagers, and gave them the opportunity to frame Bishkek as a political enemy staffed by distant, selfish, and corrupt officials who have no regard for village interests. Interestingly, many *ayil okmotu* heads claimed not to be state officials at all, which illustrates either a lack of clarity about their formal role, a desire to distance themselves from Bishkek, or both.¹⁹ The overall result is that increasing levels of local participation and autonomy developed in a way that became deeply dependent on local personalities and social ties rather than through formalized institutional channels that could more easily transfer to the national level.

Bakhtiyar Fattakhov, a political ally of President Akaev who held several ministerial posts related to the development of local self-government, explained why the *ayil okmotu* became so important despite legal ambiguities. Fattakhov argues that since the privatization of collective farms, villages lacked institutions responsible for addressing local problems. “As a result,” he writes, “nobody was occupied with the maintenance and development of village infrastructure” or basic public services (2013, p. 8). There was “a period of anarchy” that “gradually brought about the destruction of social infrastructure” and “the lowering of the quality of life” in rural areas (Fattakhov, 2013, p. 8). Though central authorities might not have known why they were creating village-level authorities—save to please donors—the *ayil okmotu* themselves found, in the village, a concrete and urgent need for their existence and “became the real organizers of social-economic life in local communities (Fattakhov, 2013, p. 8).

Moreover, precisely because *ayil okmotu* heads and village council members are selected by local communities, they are invariably well-known individuals, often with deep and multiplex social ties within the locality, which bolsters and legitimizes their position. Aside from the local need for creating formal village government offices, informal social ties often provide broad-based support for the individual office holders rather than for the institution itself.

A list of individual *ayil okmotu* heads in 2013, acquired from the State Agency on Work with Local Self-Governance, reveals their prior occupation and indicates that the *ayil okmotu* is frequently chosen from among ordinary social classes.²⁰ It includes taxi drivers, teachers, war

pensioners, school directors and deputy school directors, farmers and former *kolkhoz* workers, deputies of the corresponding local council, private business owners, and the “temporarily unemployed.” The former occupation of one *ayil okmotu* is listed simply as “village elder.”²¹ Thus, these data suggest that local officials are not merely well-known by village residents, they are often ordinary people who are part of the village’s preexisting social fabric. A UNDP report stresses the personalized nature of these relationships:

...in every village, the elder is a personal acquaintance, and every [village] leader is known and familiar to his constituents. A survey, conducted as part of [the] research for this Report, confirms that three out of four Kyrgyz citizens (75%) personally know their mayor or head of the village municipality (UNDP, 2012, p 50).

Moreover, precisely because financial decentralization normalized widespread participation in village governance—for the purpose of securing funds and executing projects, as discussed above—village officials’ social ties are routinely activated and strengthened. From this perspective, local self-government in Kyrgyzstan formalizes the social fabric of the village. Informally, it does more than this. The local officials who betray the village threaten to harm their own families, friends, and lifelong acquaintances. This helps to establish accountability, trust, and legitimacy. Conversely, outsiders—particularly those in Bishkek, who owe nothing to the village or its inhabitants—are treated with suspicion, a point often exploited by local leaders themselves.

As one villager in Naryn *oblast* explained²²:

The *ayil okmotu* is a local person so people know him and he knows them. He knows the place and the people and he knows how to talk to people. His family lives here, he is not going to go anywhere so you can trust him to do honest work [...] If he came from somewhere else he could just steal and be willing to take bribes ... everyone knows that he [a non-local] can just leave.²³

Likewise, a villager from Jalalabad *oblast* expressed trust in local authorities and suspicion of those from elsewhere:

The reason [the *ayil okmotu*] works so hard and cares so much is because he’s from here and he knows the people. I don’t think someone from outside [this district] would work so hard and if they did people would have to ask “why is he working this way? What for?” And it would cause people to be more suspicious.²⁴

A village elder complained that higher levels of state administration were unwanted and unnecessary precisely because they are further removed from the village.

Having a local person to do these jobs is better. Local people know more. They know the problems of the community and the

people of the community so they are the only ones who can help. The *akim* [of the district] and the governor [of the province], these are just names. They don’t know anything or anybody. What do we even need them for?²⁵

These sentiments are captured in other research. A study on local self-government includes an interview with a village teacher who expressed the importance of local officials’ involvement in education. “We know [local officials] will help because their own children go to the same school. They went to school here when they were little. Their daughters and wives work here” (UNDP, 2012, p. 58).

A former official in Bishkek complained that “people think that if a person is local he is interested in helping local people, but if he is not local he is only interested in helping himself.”²⁶ A sentiment heard from many villagers was that “local officials care about the community because they live in it.”²⁷ By contrast, officials in Bishkek are “just businessmen,” who “have no respect for people”; they “don’t know people” and “don’t care” about them.²⁸ One village elder argued that central authorities “don’t even know their own job. They don’t care about people’s needs. They work for a day and leave.”²⁹ Another said, “It’s always better to have local people running the government. If the person is local, then they understand local problems, they get along better with people, and they are more honest. They will not steal from the people whom they know. But, the people in Bishkek steal.”³⁰ Many officials in Bishkek will deny that this is true, but few would claim that the sentiment is not real; as one noted, “there is a stereotype that a person who comes from a different region is not interested in helping to develop the region that they work in, but this is a stereotype.”³¹

Local officials express the same ideas as ordinary villagers, highlighting their self-awareness about community expectations and the management of moral shame. The *ayil okmotu* of Kenesh (Jalalabad *oblast*) said:

When [a local official] is from Kenesh it means that their parents live here, their friends live here, they are in touch with people, and they must live with these people. And this means he has obligations to the community and must work honestly. He must go to weddings and funerals and it is very hard to do these things if you’ve cheated people and not maintained your responsibilities to them. I think only local people can truly be trusted to do honest work for the community. Anyone else can just leave when they finish their job. They have no responsibility to the community. They will just take their money and go someplace else.³²

Another *ayil okmotu* argued that “only the *ayil okmotu* knows the problems in the village [...] Even when there is someone who is more qualified and educated, people want someone who is local. In every region, in every village,

people will only support someone who is from their community.”³³ Another *ayil okmotu* explained that “it is easier to be from here. I get a lot of help from people and they trust me to do the right thing.” He invoked a Kyrgyz saying: “If someone comes from another place he can eat and leave, but if he’s a local person, he will eat and still be here.”³⁴ Importantly, anyone might “eat” in this metaphor, but only outsiders could then leave. The deep social ties of local officials burden them with reciprocal obligations—even if tempted to “eat,” they will feel obliged to feed others as well.

This dynamic is exploited by local officials who can claim credit for successes while blaming failures on Bishkek. When facing complaints from local residents, one *ayil okmotu* pushed blame on national authorities:

All the officials at the higher levels are corrupt. In the Ministry of Finance and Energy...I paid money but the electricity is still cut. This is because they don’t work, because they are corrupt...and all of them just eat and drink everything. We have to kick their asses! All of them!³⁵

Indeed, local officials regularly exploit widespread antipathy for outsiders, sometimes defined as any state office outside the village. The deputy of a local council said, “instead of increasing the status of the *akims* and governors [as the prime minister had proposed], it is better to increase the power of village authorities because only local level officials know the needs of the population. Only we work directly with the people.”³⁶ A village elder in a different village noted, “the *akim* [of the district] does not really work in the village or know about village issues. The *ayil okmotu* should have this power!”³⁷ Likewise, a school director asked, “What is the governor for? We don’t need him. We have an *ayil okmotu* and that is enough.”³⁸

Polling data corroborate the idea that local officials enjoy higher levels of trust and legitimacy than central authorities. In 2013, a state poll asked citizens about their “personal trust” (*lichnaya doveriya*) in multiple state agencies, including ministries of the central government, all state structures at the provincial and district levels, and the organs of local self-government. Of 41 institutions listed, local self-government ranked the highest. Moreover, it was among very few to receive an overall positive rating (National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2013). All central government agencies—save only for the Agency for Culture and Sports—were given a negative rating.³⁹

Likewise, a series of USAID focus groups showed that local government institutions had the highest levels of public support. “Unlike the general cynicism towards the role of the President and Parliament,” the report notes, “there are higher expectations for sub-national government structures, and groups expressed that a number of entities

are currently meeting or viewed as capable of meeting public expectations” (USAID, 2013, p. 32). Even in localities where officials’ work was viewed negatively, villagers still believed “that they could continue to demand more of their local officials” and “find a way to get things done.” The report concludes that “while there was a wide range of satisfaction with *ayil okmotus*, they did come across as being viewed as legitimate, generally well-intending problem-solvers” (p. 32). Other research has shown that local officials are responsive to local demands and prioritize local needs; importantly, there was little evidence that this had any effect on government accountability at higher levels (Babajanian, 2015).

This is not a typical center-local political dynamic in post-Soviet authoritarian states. In neighboring states that had little or no decentralization, we find that national authorities enjoy immense popular support while local officials are maligned. Admittedly, this finding is potentially confounded by the repressive nature of these regimes, where ordinary people may not feel safe openly criticizing the president. Yet, research shows that the general sentiment is probably real even if polling numbers are almost certainly inflated (Dave, 2013; Frye et al., 2017; Siegel, 2016, pp. 194–228).⁴⁰ Moreover, in the very places where criticizing central authorities is not safe, speaking out against local authorities also carries risks, yet we find that people are willing to record negative reactions nonetheless. What matters most here is not the absolute rating of either central or local authorities, but the relative differences between them: those differences are consistent across cases in the region except for Kyrgyzstan, where the relationship is inverted. Importantly, these other cases not only contrast with Kyrgyzstan empirically. They, unlike Kyrgyzstan, also conform with the assumptions of existing theory. In each case, authoritarian consolidation at the national level occurred alongside a process that limited or eliminated local autonomy and participation.

In Kazakhstan, for example, village-level authorities are embedded in a larger hierarchy of state administration, have no autonomy, and do not depend on or facilitate local participation. As a result, local officials are less likely to have deep social ties in the village (Siegel, 2016). Indicators of trust are the inverse of what we find in Kyrgyzstan, with national authorities enjoying the highest levels of favorability and local officials, the lowest (Siegel, 2016, pp. 194–228). Polling by the International Republican Institute showed that President Nazarbayev—who ruled from 1990 to 2019—had more favorable ratings than any state institution and was viewed far more favorably than local and regional government officials between 2008 and 2011 (2011, p. 45). The Central Fund for the Development of Democracy, a local NGO, found that “the highest levels of trust were shown toward the higher organs of the vertical of power, most of all, the head of state” (Umbetaliyeva, 2009, p. 5).

Though by themselves somewhat anecdotal, the following two comments illustrate the contrasting social and political positions of village authorities in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, respectively:

I personally hate when officials from Bishkek try to interfere or tell me what to do. I do not allow it. As for the *akim* [head] of the district, he has no power over me and I have no power over him (village head (*ayil okmotu*), Naryn *oblast*, Kyrgyzstan).⁴¹

Let me explain my work to you: I am the representative of the president and the government in this territory [...] It is my job to carry out the state policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan and explain the policies of the president of Kazakhstan, his orders, his decisions...I must spread his message in order to improve the social and economic life of the population (village head (*akim*), South Kazakhstan *oblast*, Kazakhstan).⁴²

Similar to political centralization in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan's "Mahallization policy" of the 1990s was based on limiting local autonomy and participation. That is to say, authoritarian consolidation went hand-in-hand with administrative centralization. The *Mahalla*, though ostensibly a "traditional" form of local authority described by state officials as a form of "self-administration," was, in fact "linked directly to the state apparatus" and overseen by central authorities (Massicard & Trevisani, 2003, p. 207). As a result, the *Mahalla* has "not led to an increase in its [local] decision-making powers," but, "to the contrary," is "placed under the supervision of the state apparatus via integration into [a] strongly hierarchical administrative system" that "limits [its] autonomy" (208). Notably, a recent survey measuring "trust in institutions" in Uzbekistan found that the national government had the highest ranking when compared with other domestic institutions, including faith-based institutions and domestic civil society (World Bank, 2019, p. 13).

Russia re-centralized state administration in the mid-2000s, a move widely interpreted as part of a broader authoritarian consolidation. Recent experimental research shows that robust public support for Vladimir Putin is "real," estimated to be at about 80% in 2015 (Frye et al., 2017). Public polling by the Levada Center consistently shows a higher "Index of Trust" for the Russian president than for sub-national authorities (2019, p. 69). Although the absolute levels of both "trust" and "approval" for Putin have declined in the past 5 years, from the mid-80s to mid- or low-60s, this is proportional to an equivalent decline in the level of trust for regional authorities (p. 69, 71). In other words, Putin's popularity remains consistently high relative to sub-national officials even as it declines in absolute terms.

Most would agree, justifiably, that these states are more authoritarian than Kyrgyzstan, thus raising the possibility that Kyrgyzstan's decentralization did, in fact, make it more democratic by comparison. There are at least four problems

with this interpretation. First, while it is true that Kyrgyzstan's overall political system might still be more democratic than its neighbors, that gap has become narrower since the earliest stages of the post-Soviet transition. The most notable comparative dynamic over time has been that Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have remained fully authoritarian while Kyrgyzstan has become increasingly similar to them. This gradual convergence of national-level authoritarian regime dynamics is all the more remarkable if we consider that it has occurred during the same period in which Kyrgyzstan's local self-government reforms were implemented.

This suggests a second consideration: it is important to situate these comparisons within the theoretical literature. In Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia, authoritarian consolidation was possible, in part, because of the level of control that central authorities maintained over villages. This is what we should expect, based on existing theory. Kyrgyzstan is so interesting, theoretically, precisely because authoritarian consolidation occurred *despite* the fact that central authorities made such significant concessions at the local level—the goal of this paper is to show how and why this was possible.

Third, to many observers—including many of the international donor organizations discussed above—Kyrgyzstan is viewed as more democratic than its counterparts, in part, because of the relatively higher levels of autonomy and participation at the local level. Thus, in evaluating Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the context of the analysis presented above, we must be mindful of a specific aggregation problem: decentralization is viewed as a democratic attribute in its own right insofar as it can facilitate democracy at the *local* level—a view I have adopted here. But this, by itself, is insufficient for characterizing the aggregated national-level regime, which is part of a theoretical puzzle that this paper seeks to highlight. Put differently still, and related to the first point made above, Kyrgyzstan today looks far more democratic than Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan the more we focus on local-level political dynamics—but this difference, while still real, is less dramatic if we are looking only at the national level.

Finally, the personalization of trust relations in Kyrgyzstan's villages has created significant challenges for central authorities even as authoritarian consolidation unfolded, though not in ways that led to national democratization. In contrast to other states in the region, the suspicion and distrust of outsiders in Kyrgyzstan's villages—central authorities above all others—often gives rise to local mobilization against appointed incumbents at and from higher levels of state administration (Radnitz, 2010). The Kyrgyz neologism *ketsinizm* describes the political practice of demanding that an appointed official vacate his or her office, usually in deference to a local favorite.⁴³ As one villager casually noted, "if we don't like

the [district] *akim* or the governor, we can tell him to go to hell!”⁴⁴ A lawyer in Bishkek explained:

When there is a person who is appointed by the central government that the population does not accept they will just bring their own person and say “get out of here, our person will work here.” If the prime minister is smart enough he will appoint from the local level.⁴⁵

As this testimony suggests, the distinction between local and non-local personnel is politically resonant. It is noteworthy that Kyrgyzstan’s revolutions in 2005 and 2010 were, in a sense, not national-level events at all. As Radnitz shows, these revolutions were led by local and regional elites who mobilized their own supporters, literally busing them to the capital city (2010). Yet, in his account, these events do not reflect the interests of ordinary people. Rather, ostensible grassroots support has been paid for by local elites as a strategic “investment” in protection against predatory central authorities. This leads only to a “re-shuffling” of those at the heights of state power, redirecting revolutionary energies to prevent the true empowerment of rural masses.

While it is true that Kyrgyzstan’s revolutions have not resulted in democracy, Radnitz’s account minimizes the broader center-local dynamics that have occurred as a result of more than two decades of political decentralization and, thus, treats villagers as dutiful clients who lack their own agency. Highlighting the role of political decentralization sheds light on the important role played by ordinary villagers themselves: local autonomy and participation empowers ordinary people *at the local level*, strengthens local social ties, and legitimizes local officials at the expense of their national-level counterparts. According to one study, Kyrgyzstani opposition leaders cannot cooperate at the national level precisely because “the most powerful geographical attachments are not to the nation,” but to “one’s district or village” (Huskey & Iskakova, 2010, p. 252). That is, many national political figures *are*, in fact, deeply popular and viewed as legitimate leaders, only this support stems from their home village and does not adhere at the national level.

A note on methodology and research design

The interviews for this research were conducted in a variety of different formats and in countless different settings across several regions in the country. Most of research at the local-level came from 5 months in two villages, one in Jalalabad *oblast* and the other in Naryn *oblast*—selected for regional variation—with extensive research also conducted in the neighboring villages of each district. I entered each setting with a local research assistant who helped introduce me to

local residents and officials; but, in addition, I met many others at the tea house or market, where I had innumerable informal conversations. As I went along, I adopted a snowball sampling method, relying on those whom I had met to introduce me to a broader range of local residents, including local officials. Local officials were often reluctant to meet with me unless I was introduced to them by someone from within the community—and some did not want to speak with me at all.

Thus, I only had access to a self-selected group, defined by their willingness to speak to a foreign researcher, which is not a random sample. This might raise legitimate questions about biases in interview data. For example, it is possible that the population of those who were unwilling to participate might have provided different responses to the same questions. Although this possibility cannot be ruled out, it is hopefully mitigated in two ways. First, due to the ethnographic nature of the field work, interviews within a given locality were always contextualized in relation to each other, and often in relation to events that I was able to witness (or even participate in). This provides some independent bases for evaluating interview responses. Second, whenever possible, I tried to find corroborating material from other research and secondary-source data, as presented above.

The remainder of research was carried out in Bishkek, meeting with current and former officials in various government ministries, leaders of NGOs focusing on democracy and local self-government, in addition to local journalists, lawyers, and scholars. Formal interviews were semi-structured, with a common set of questions for officials of the same category or role. Though I also had a common set of questions for others—including ordinary village residents—many interviews were conducted in informal everyday settings, and some were little more than casual conversations, though only ever recorded—either by sound or in writing—with consent.

There are a number of inherent and well-known limitations on the kinds of conclusions we can draw from a case study. The case study method—and even the comparative method more broadly—is generally not capable of giving equal weight to every conceivable causal variable. As George and Bennett note, the strength of the case study method does not come from its ability to tell us *how much* a particular variable mattered, but *whether and how* it did so; or, in the particular case study presented above, whether and why it did *not* do so (2005, p. 25). The methodological strength of case study on decentralization in the Kyrgyz Republic—in accordance with the “congruence method”—is that the empirical data from this single case is analyzed strictly within the context of already-existing theory, and in relationship to previous research on other world regions, creating an implicit comparison with previous work (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 181–204). Thus, while we

might not be able to definitively conclude that decentralization caused authoritarian consolidation—an outcome that might have many possible causes—we can at least conclude, in contrast to the expectations of existing theory, that its democratizing effects remained localized and failed to transfer to the national level.

Conclusions

It might go too far to say that the gap in democratization between the local and national levels in Kyrgyzstan continues to grow, but it certainly has not closed. In December 2016, for example, Kyrgyzstan held local elections that were highly contested, demonstrating that political participation remained high in villages and small cities (Marat, 2018). There were, admittedly, some problems with these elections, particularly in some larger cities, and the limited capacity and resources of local officials remains a persistent problem. Arguably, local self-government in Kyrgyzstan is less democratic today than it was before 2008, when the *ayil okmotu* was directly elected.

Yet, in comparison with the fate of democracy at the national level—and relative to its regional counterparts—the success of local autonomy and participation in Kyrgyzstan is remarkable. Indeed, during the same 2016 local elections, President Atambayev hastily scheduled a national referendum, without public debate, that successfully enhanced presidential powers at the expense of the parliament and judiciary while cementing advantages for his political party (Marat, 2017). As a result, Freedom House's annual *Nations in Transit* report changed Kyrgyzstan's categorization from a "semi-consolidated" to a "consolidated" authoritarian regime (Marat, 2017). The next year, President Atambayev's hand-picked successor, Sooronbai Jeenbekov won power in an election marred by fraud. Jeenbekov's victory was followed by an avalanche of criminal cases against his political opponents, culminating in the arrest and prosecution of Atambayev himself, Jeenbekov's one-time patron, undermining claims to a peaceful democratic transfer of power. Jeenbekov was then deposed, in yet another revolution in October 2020, and power was seized, undemocratically, by Sadyr Japarov. Though there were elections after the fact, they were accompanied by a series of measures to further expand presidential powers at the expense of the parliament.

These more recent developments in Kyrgyzstan's national politics follow the trend toward authoritarianism that was started under President Akaev. Arguably, the most significant and lasting pro-democracy reforms of the Akaev era occurred at the local level; the theoretical contribution of this paper has been to point out the significance of the fact that those gains have *remained* local only. Contrary to existing theory—but in a way distinct from cases in other world regions—Kyrgyzstan's relatively successful process of decentralization has not led to democratic consolidation at the national level. The irony of increasing the autonomy, participation, and empowerment of local communities is

that people seem to have learned that the only officials who care about their problems are those whom they know personally. Animosity and distrust toward central authorities grows inversely to the trust gained by local officials. But these, I have argued, are merely the inadvertent results of decentralization. I have also argued that national authorities favored decentralization because it was the easiest way to secure donor approval as they proceeded with authoritarian consolidation at the national level. In the end, this paper demonstrates the significant limitations and powers of international development agencies in promoting democracy and helps to account for the many ways in which decentralization reforms may, even if successful in their own right, fail to transfer to the national level, contributing little to the broader goal of democratization.

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Notes

1. Kyrgyzstan has a 4-level administrative system: the unitary state consists of nine provinces (*oblast* level), within each province are districts (*raion* level), within each district are villages and cities (village level). The two largest cities in the country—Bishkek and Osh—have the status of provinces. "State administration" extends from the national level down to the district level but not below this. "Local self-government" is limited to the lowest level of administration in villages and small cities.
2. The original administrative boundaries of the village-level government overlapped with the former boundaries of collective farms; thus, several different villages within a district might comprise one "village government."
3. This is a composite description of an *ayil okmotu* taken from dozens of cases recorded during field work over the course of 2013 and 2014. More detail provided below.

4. Known by its Russian name *Agenstvo Razvitiya I Investirovaniya Soobshchestv*, hence the acronym ARIS.
5. Interview with author.
6. Interview with author.
7. Interview with author.
8. Corruption at the local level should be distinguished from corruption at the national level. Local officials who must ask co-villagers for assistance are often compelled to give something in return, as I discuss below. When a public official enlists helpers to repair a road—a public good—the participation is driven partly by *private* obligations to that official as a person, who many expect will return those favors in the future. Thus, if corruption is defined strictly as the use of public resources for private gain, then local people are sometimes the beneficiaries. Corruption that occurs at the heights of power, by contrast, is not only greater in scale, but also creates harm without any comparable benefit for ordinary people. More importantly, the distinction between corrupt officials in Bishkek and the actions of local officials is one that ordinary villagers make themselves. This is not to say that some local residents are not excluded from local authorities' patronage, thereby truly suffering from corruption at the local level. The point made here is not to suggest that any form of corruption is good, only that there are meaningful social distinctions in how corruption operates based on the social ties of a given setting. As Humphrey notes, the common understanding that "one cannot bribe a relative or a friend" means that "inducements paid to such closely related people do not count as bribes but as something else" (2000, p. 217–218).
9. Interview with author.
10. Interview with author.
11. Interview with author.
12. Interview with author.
13. LSG stands for local self-government.
14. Interview with author.
15. Hale's theory of regime dynamics in Eurasia also supports this interpretation—what outside observers often see as a sign of democracy is, in fact, the result of competing patronage networks that lack a single uncontested leader (2015).
16. Interview with author.
17. Interview with author.
18. Interview with author.
19. Author field notes. In fact, the largest share of the local government budget comes in the forms of grants from Bishkek, funds set aside to pay the salaries of all local officials who receive one, including teachers. All other funds must be raised by LSGs themselves, as discussed above.
20. The data are for 196 *ayil okmotu* in Issyk-kul, Batken, and Chui *oblasts*. The most common occupation is as an incumbent member of the village government, either as *ayil okmotu* or a member of the village council (63.8%), which shows relatively stable tenures for local officials. As further testament to officials' local roots, very few previously held office outside the locality, either as a member of a different local government (3.1%) or in higher-level offices at the provincial or national levels (7.1%).
21. Incumbent village officials and people with "ordinary" occupations (e.g., those listed above), taken together, held office as *ayil okmotu* in 143 out of 196 local governments across three provinces (73%) in 2013. There were no data for 11 individuals.
22. Where specific identifying names have been omitted—including village names—it is at the request of the interviewee.
23. Interview with author.
24. Interview with author.
25. Interview with author.
26. Interview with author.
27. Interview with author.
28. Interview with author.
29. Interview with author.
30. Interview with author.
31. Interview with author.
32. Interview with author.
33. Interview with author.
34. *Bashka zherden kelgen zhep, zhep kalat. Ozubuzdun kylulndu kaicy mezgilde bolso dagy surap alabyz*. Interview with author. No native Kyrgyz speaker I consulted was at peace with a definitive translation, so I have included the original language here.
35. Meeting between *ayil okmotu* and residents, Issyk-Kul *oblast*.
36. Interview with author.
37. Interview with author.
38. Interview with author.
39. The same poll in 2014 showed that nearly all institutions were rated higher in absolute terms, compared with 2013, but the organs of local self-government still had the highest relative ratings. In subsequent years, the poll excluded questions about local self-government.
40. In the case of Kazakhstan, a Freedom House report notes that "few observers disagree" that Nazarbayev could "easily win a truly free and fair election by at least 65–70 of the vote" (Dave, 2013: 266).
41. Interview with author.
42. Interview with author.
43. *Ketsin!* means "leave!" One often hears and sees the demand at public rallies against incumbent state authorities. The suffix *-izm* has the same meaning as its English counterpart, *-ism*.
44. Interview with author.
45. Interview with author.

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