

CHAPTER 3

Why Politicize Immigration?

Elections and Anti-Immigrant Policy in Russia and Kazakhstan¹

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Abstract

Under what circumstances do autocrats politicize immigration and adopt anti-immigration policy? Much of the existing literature focuses on the politics of immigration in liberal democracies, despite the presence of large-scale immigration to illiberal societies. This research shows how different electoral dynamics can shape the politicization of immigration and policies distinctly, focusing on Russia and Kazakhstan. The ruling regime in Russia has actively adopted anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies whereas Kazakhstan has turned a blind eye to undocumented immigrants. I argue that such differences stem from the variation in pressures from the electorate. Putin and his United Russia party are subjected to significant pressure imposed by anti-immigrant citizens and political opponents. By contrast, Kazakhstan has been closer

How to cite this book chapter:

Joo, Song Ha. 2024. 'Why Politicize Immigration? Elections and Anti-Immigrant Policy in Russia and Kazakhstan'. In *Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe*, edited by Anna-Liisa Heusala, Kaarina Aitamurto, and Sherzod Eraliev, 75–109. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-26-3>.

to a non-competitive form of authoritarianism, with the regime's emphasis on inter-ethnic harmony. This research is based on analysis of original qualitative data, including interviews with government officials, NGOs, local scholars, and migrants, gathered from 11 months of fieldwork in the two countries in 2015–2017.

Keywords: illiberalism, politicization of immigration, anti-immigration, elections, Russia, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Contrary to conventional wisdom that people move to developed democracies, remarkably, large-scale immigration occurs in illiberal states too. In 2020, authoritarian regimes ruled half of the top 20 immigrant-receiving countries in the world.² Illiberal states show a significant variation in the degree of the politicization of immigration and immigration restrictions. Nonetheless, relatively little is known about the politics of immigration in illiberal settings, as the comparative scholarship on immigration politics has focused primarily on Western liberal democracies (Boucher and Gest 2018, 22–24). This is an important research gap, given the significant effects of immigration on the politics and economies of many autocracies and the implications of immigration regulations for migrants and migration flows (Massey 1999; Norman 2021).

In this chapter, I show how different regime dynamics can affect autocrats' politicization of immigration and immigration policies. I argue that the level of electoral competition can be a key factor in explaining the politicization of immigration and the subsequent anti-immigrant policies in illiberal states. When there is a high degree of electoral competition, autocrats are tempted to adopt anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies because the mobilization of anti-out-group sentiment can reinforce the unity of the in-group and form a popular base of support for the ruling regime. These effects begin prior to an election but continue afterwards as a way of demobilizing potential threats that might arise subsequently. Thus, electoral competition can lead to immigration restrictions in electoral authoritarian regimes.

The chapter develops this argument by conducting comparative case studies on two illiberal states, Russia and Kazakhstan, in the 2010s. They are major immigrant-receiving autocracies: in 2020, in terms of the size of the foreign-born population, Russia and Kazakhstan ranked fourth and 15th in the world, respectively (Migration Policy Institute 2020). Given the scale and political significance of low-skill immigration in Russia, Kazakhstan, and many other countries (Peters 2017), this chapter focuses on low-skill immigration. Russia has politicized immigration and imposed tight immigration restrictions since the beginning of the 2010s. In contrast, Kazakhstan has turned a blind eye towards immigration, adopting relatively open immigration policies. The analysis in this research shows that variation in the levels of electoral competition has facilitated such differences in their policies. When Vladimir Putin ran for president again in 2011–2012, his ruling regime faced electoral competition. To mobilize popular support, Putin politicized immigration issues and enacted immigration restrictions before and after the elections. In Kazakhstan, due to the high level of popular support for the regime and the absence of electoral competition, the ruling regime did not need to resort to anti-immigrant rhetoric or policy.

By demonstrating the role of electoral factors, this research sheds new light on a theoretical framework for immigration policymaking in illiberal societies. Assuming that autocrats are insulated from popular pressures, the extant theoretical work on authoritarian immigration politics has dismissed the role of electoral factors while highlighting that of other factors such as economic conditions, bureaucratic politics, and international pressures (Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke 2012; Mirilovic 2010; Natter 2018; Norman 2021; Schenk 2018; Shin 2017). This is a surprising oversight, given the growing evidence of the importance of elections for policy in autocracies (Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2006; Miller 2015). Previous studies on democratic states show that elections affect immigration policy through partisanship, the size of immigrants' co-ethnic vote, and the preferences of swing voters (Abou-Chadi 2016; Akkerman 2015; Money 1999; Wong

2015). In illiberal settings, the influence of such factors is nearly absent, since elections are neither free nor fair. Still, electoral factors influence the politicization of immigration and immigration policy through a distinct mechanism—autocrats striving to maintain overwhelming popularity. This chapter does not contend that electoral factors alone can explain immigration policies. The findings, however, provide building blocks for models of immigration policy in illiberal states.

Previous Research

Existing studies on immigration have focused predominantly on liberal democracies and emphasized the role of national identity and xenophobia (Brubaker 1992; Zolberg 2006), economic conditions (Meyers 2004), welfare benefits (Hanson, Scheve, and Slaughter 2007), organized interests (Freeman 1995; Peters 2017), political parties (Perlmutter 1996; Wong 2015), and liberal institutions and rights-based politics (Ellermann 2009; Joppke 1998). Despite their contributions and insight, they seem limited in explaining immigration policy in illiberal states. For instance, under similar economic conditions, immigration policies vary dramatically, and illiberal states provide little to immigrants in terms of welfare benefits (Mirilovic 2010, 274–275). Interest groups and political parties are not independent, influential actors in the same way as their counterparts are in liberal democracies (Kim and Gandhi 2010; Duvanova 2013; Gandhi 2008).

Making a departure from the focus of extant studies on Western democracies, some scholars have conducted studies on immigration policies in the Global South (Abdelaaty 2021; González-Murphy and Koslowski 2011; Kalicki 2019; Sadiq 2009). A considerable body of literature on immigration in Russia and Kazakhstan also offers important insights into the politics of migration (Abashin 2017; Buckley 2017; Denisenko 2017; Dyatlov 2009; Heusala 2018; Ivakhnyuk 2009; Kingsbury 2017; Laruelle 2013; Light 2016; Malakhov 2014; Mukomel 2005; Oka 2013; Ryazantsev 2007; Sadovskaya 2014; Schenk 2018; Shevel

2011; Zayonchkovskaya, Florinskaya, and Tyuryukanova 2011; Zeveleva 2014). In explaining immigration policymaking in Russia, studies have emphasized the role of the boundaries of national identity, international organizations, and the financial burdens of immigrants, and the salience of the North Caucasus conflict (Shevel 2011; Light 2006, 2016). Recently, scholars have focused on corruption and informality and investigated how they shape migration governance (Reeves 2013; Kubal 2016; Malakhov 2014; Malakhov and Simon 2018; Schenk 2018; Turaeva and Urinboyev 2021). Dissecting migration management, these studies show how migration governance works in Russia and offer deep insights into the politics of migration. Yet, as Shin (2017, 1) points out, few attempts have been made to investigate the determinants of immigration policy in autocracies in a *comparative* perspective and provide an analytical framework applicable to other countries.

A series of recent studies has highlighted the impact of regime type on policymaking and theorized about immigration policies in authoritarian states separately (Mirilovic 2010; Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke 2012; Shin 2017; Natter 2018; Norman 2021; Adamson and Tsourapas 2020). These studies point out that different institutional settings formulate the politics of immigration in autocracies distinctly from those in democracies: policymaking is insulated from pressures imposed by anti-immigrant citizens and other domestic actors, such as political parties and business interests. Thus, they highlight the role of economic factors, such as economic growth, natural resources, and bureaucratic politics (Mirilovic 2010; Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke 2012; Shin 2017; Natter 2018). By taking institutional settings into account, this strand of research has advanced our understanding of migration politics. Nonetheless, positing that autocrats are free from popular pressures, these recent studies have not fully examined the role of elections. This is a surprising oversight, given the growing evidence of the significance of elections in authoritarian settings: the burgeoning literature on authoritarian politics demonstrates that in order to satisfy citizens and ensure the survival of regimes, autocrats pay attention to public opinion and elections and modify

policies around elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Magaloni 2006; Miller 2015).

Elections and Anti-Immigration Politics in Illiberal States

While some scholars contend that regime dynamics exert little influence on the politics of migration (Schenk 2018; Kluczewska and Korneev 2022), I argue that political regimes are an essential component for the analysis of immigration politics. As existing research has shown (Mirilovic 2010; Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke 2012; Shin 2017; Natter 2018), policymaking and migration governance in authoritarian regimes have institutional settings and logic that are distinct from those in democracies. Empirical evidence also shows that immigration policies in illiberal states and democracies diverge remarkably, for instance in terms of inflow restrictions, refugee policies, and enforcement (Shin 2017, 23–25). This suggests that it is necessary to take political regimes into account to explain the politics of immigration.

In this chapter, I develop a theory of illiberal immigration politics that considers regime dynamics and the role of electoral factors. Electoral autocracies have been the most dominant type of contemporary dictatorship (Bernhard, Edgell, and Lindberg 2020, 466): two-thirds of post-Cold War autocracies hold multiparty elections for the legislature (Miller 2020). Although the ruling regimes have resources such as repression, patronage, and electoral fraud to win elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009), their share of votes and popularity is variable, and elections sometimes produce surprising results (Miller 2015). Yet for regime survival, autocrats need sweeping victories. Small margins could signal a regime's weakness and trigger popular demand for democratization (Simpser 2013, 5). Thus, autocrats strive to maintain high levels of popularity and to produce landslide elections to create what Magaloni (2006, 15) calls 'an image of invincibility'. Such an impression shows elites and citizens that the ruling regime is

unconquerable, which discourages potential challengers (Magonaloni 2006; Simpser 2013).

Therefore, when there is a high level of electoral competition, authoritarian regimes need to boost their popularity. Studies show that autocrats are attentive to election results and their approval ratings and adjust social and economic policies accordingly to rally public support (Blaydes 2011; Mahdavi 2015; Miller 2015). My argument is in line with these studies that elections can influence policy in authoritarian regimes. Still, the difference derives from that fact that immigration policy has a mobilization effect, as I will elaborate below.

When there is a high level of electoral competition, autocrats in immigrant-receiving countries have an incentive to adopt anti-immigration policies. First, immigration may be a source of grievance among the electorate, and the ruling regime can tighten immigration policies to appeal to these anti-immigrant voters. Second, authoritarian regimes can scapegoat immigrants and enact anti-immigration policy, even if immigration is not a direct source of grievance for citizens. Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies can be very useful tools for mobilizing popular support. The literature on ethnic conflicts shows that an out-group conflict can increase in-group unity (Coser 1966; Horowitz 1985). As such, politicians have often instigated anti-out-group sentiment to rally popular support. For instance, studies on sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that politicians tend to play the ethnic card to mobilize public support and win elections (Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010; Posner 2004). Given the importance of approval ratings and election results, I posit that autocrats can also utilize this strategy when there is a high level of electoral competition. By whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment, the incumbents can reinforce popular support for the existing in-group.

Nevertheless, an anti-immigration policy can also incur economic and political costs for autocrats. Economically, it means a loss of cheap foreign labour, which would otherwise benefit members of a ruling coalition who own businesses (Mirilovic 2010; Shin 2017). In terms of political costs, the utilization of anti-immigrant

policies and the instigation of anti-immigrant sentiments can pose a threat to the ruling regime. The rise of ethnic nationalism can aggravate inter-ethnic relations and imperil stability. More importantly, heightened nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments can generate popular discontent with the existing regime; if some in-group members have harboured grievances against the existing institution, an out-group conflict can provide an opportunity for the discontented members (McLauchlin and Pearlman 2012). In-group members, who can take a more radical stance on nationalist and migration issues, can challenge the rule of the incumbents (Mansfield and Snyder 2007).

Taking these potential costs of anti-immigrant policies into account, I argue that authoritarian regimes tend to utilize anti-immigrant sentiment and policies when there is a high level of electoral competition—when the costs are far outweighed by the greater need to maintain the stability of the regime. This theory provides two empirical implications. First, authoritarian regimes can change immigration policies in the run-up to elections. Studies have shown that some authoritarian regimes change socioeconomic policies right before elections (Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2006). One could hypothesize a similar mechanism in immigration policies too. By increasing immigration restrictions prior to elections, the ruling regime can mobilize citizens and appeal to voters. Thus, one could hypothesize that in the run-up to elections, authoritarian regimes are more likely to politicize immigration issues and adopt restrictive immigration policies than at other times.

Second, I assume a post-electoral mechanism in which elections influence migration policies in the subsequent periods. Elections enable citizens to signal dissatisfaction with the ruling regime and thus provide the incumbents with information about citizens' preferences and their own popularity (Malesky and Schuler 2011; Miller 2015). The period after elections can pose a danger to autocrats: research shows that elections and electoral fraud have provided a focal point for electoral revolutions in which the incumbents were overthrown (Beissinger 2007; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2015). If the incumbents performed

poorly in the previous election, they need to shore up their popularity using various measures, including anti-migration policy. Thus, I hypothesize as follows: the lower the ruling regime's share of votes in previous elections, the more politicized immigration issues are, and the stricter immigration policies are.

Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, I conduct comparative case studies with process tracing (Gerring 2007; Collier 2011; Bennett and Checkel 2015), focusing on Russia and Kazakhstan in the 2010s. During this period, labour migration replaced the 'forced migration' of former Soviet citizens in terms of scale and importance. Russia's and Kazakhstan's labour demand and higher wages attracted migrant workers from neighbouring countries, and the visa-free agreements among the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States contributed to a great flow of undocumented migration. The two countries share many factors related to immigration policies: economic dependence on resource exports and similar economic growth trends, weak organized interests and political parties, high levels of xenophobia, high degrees of state capacity, promotion of ethnic return migration, and similar border control environment. Nonetheless, they reveal significant variation in labour immigration policies in the 2010s. Although both Russia and Kazakhstan are electoral autocracies, their levels of electoral competition are different. In measuring the degree of electoral competition, I use the ruling regime's share of votes. The ruling regime in Russia faced a higher level of electoral competition in the 2011–2012 elections. By contrast, Kazakhstan has been closer to a non-competitive form of authoritarianism that has, until recently, been dominated by Nursultan Nazarbayev and his Nur Otan political party.

The analysis in this research is based on original data gathered during 11 months of fieldwork in both countries in 2015–2017: government documents, media reports, and 98 semi-structured interviews with local scholars, NGOs, business associations, gov-

ernment officials, and migrants.³ Given the limited access for interviews, as noted by other scholars of Eurasian politics (Goode 2010; Schenk 2018), and because of practical considerations, I used snowball and convenience sampling strategies (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). Considering the politically repressive environment, I anonymized all of the interviewees.⁴ To mitigate potential biases in interview evidence, I also triangulated with other qualitative evidence, such as government documents and media reports (Yin 2014).

The Case of Russia

The incumbent regime in Russia enjoys considerable popular support. Despite widespread fraud and manipulation in elections, the Putin regime's high public approval ratings and share of votes are not entirely fake (Frye et al. 2017). The ruling regime has endeavoured to sustain popular support. For instance, the Russian government closely tracks public opinion to take action and change policies, if necessary (Political Science Researcher 87). Popularity is important for the Putin regime because it is the source of his power (Greene and Robertson 2019). A high level of public support serves as a 'political resource': being the most popular leader in the country helps Putin muster support from the ruling elites and pre-empt potential challengers (Greene and Robertson 2019, 7–8).

Against this background, the 2011–2012 election results and post-election protests came as a severe shock to the ruling regime. In September 2011, Vladimir Putin, then prime minister, and Dmitry Medvedev, then president, declared that Putin would run in the presidential election in March 2012, and that they would essentially switch roles. This decision fuelled public anger. Moreover, the financial crisis and falling oil prices stunted the previously high rate of economic growth which had prompted popular support for the Putin regime (Treisman 2011). Consequently, the ruling regime in Russia performed poorly in the 2011–2012 elections. In the December 2011 parliamentary election, the dominant party, United Russia (UR), obtained 49.3 per cent of the vote

and 238 out of 450 parliamentary seats (Gel'man 2015, 119). Yet several alternative sources estimated that its actual vote share was much lower than the official one (Zimmerman 2014, 268). With slogans like 'Fair elections' and 'Putin, go away!' citizens took to the streets in Moscow, St Petersburg, and some small cities. A few months later, in the March 2012 presidential election, Putin also received fewer votes than in previous elections.

The 2011–2012 elections were unprecedented in three respects. First, it was the lowest share of votes the ruling regime had ever received under Putin's government (See [Table 3.1](#)). If Putin had faced a runoff, he would have defeated the other candidate. Nonetheless, contesting a second round would have made him appear weak and that could have led to a 'fundamental system shift' in Russian politics (Lipman and Petrov 2012; Zimmerman 2014, 287). Thus, the Putin regime took more aggressive measures in the presidential elections to avoid any question of a runoff (Gel'man 2015). Second, with the estimated number of protesters varying from 25,000 to 100,000, the December 2011 mass gathering in Moscow was the largest public protest movement in post-Soviet Russia's history (Gel'man 2015, 106). Third, it was the first time the two major political opponents of the ruling regime, the nationalists and the liberal democrats, were united in calling for the resignation of the incumbent government (Pain 2016, 53).

Table 3.1: The ruling regime's vote shares in Russia (%)

	Legislative election	Presidential election
2003–2004	37.6	71.3
2007–2008	64.3	70.3
2011–2012	49.3	63.6
2016–2018	54.2	76.7

Note: The legislative election results of 2003–2004 should be read differently because up until 2007, Putin and the ruling regime had dismissed the idea of one dominant party and had attempted to build multiple parties (Panov and Ross 2013, 740).

The 2011–2012 election results and post-electoral protests disturbed the authorities. The incumbent regime needed to take measures to boost its low level of popularity. To this end, it found anti-migrant policy a useful tool. Compared with the majority of European countries, Russian citizens have shown a far higher level of xenophobia (Gudkov 2006; Gorodzeisky, Glikman, and Maskileyson 2015). Russian experts pointed out that provoking anti-immigrant sentiment could help boost public support for the ruling regime. A migration researcher noted, ‘If the government cannot provide people with a decent living, how can they sustain their rule? They have no choice but to create common enemies—migrants’ (Migration Researcher 73). In a similar vein, Vladimir Mukomel (2015) pointed out that in a society such as Russia’s, where people’s trust in the authorities is low, xenophobia can function as a foundation for ‘new solidarities’.

Putin began politicizing immigration issues in the run-up to the presidential election scheduled for March 2012. In January 2012, he published a series of articles in major newspapers, declaring the direction of his government as part of the election campaign. In one of these articles, ‘Russia: The National Issue’, Putin touched on the topics of migration and inter-ethnic relations (Putin 2012). Previously, the Russian authorities had tended to avoid ethnic nationalism, which promotes ethnic Russians as the core of the state (Kolstø 2016). In his article, Putin broke with the past and put more weight on ethnic nationalism by using the expression ‘*ruskii* statehood’, announcing that ethnic Russians were a ‘state-forming’ nation (Kolstø 2016, 39). He also promised to solve ‘the migration problem’, providing detailed plans. These included improving the quality of the migration policy on selective admission, toughening registration rules and punishment for violations, strengthening the judicial system and law enforcement, and integrating migrants into society (Putin 2012). In particular, regarding integration, Putin highlighted that the Russian government would require migrants’ ‘willingness to familiarize themselves with our culture and language’, and migrants would have to

pass a Russian language, history, literature, and law exam (Putin 2012).

Putin fulfilled his promises and plans as soon as he entered the presidency. When he took office in May 2012, he issued a series of presidential decrees regarding various political and social issues, the so-called 'May decree' (*maiskii ukaz*). In one of the decrees, 'On Providing Inter-Ethnic Harmony', he ordered the introduction of language, history, and law exams for immigrants and tougher control of illegal migration (*Itar-Tass* 2016). Putin also directed changes in migration policies in the annual presidential addresses. An analysis of presidential addresses between 2000 and 2018 shows that the Russian president placed greater emphasis on migration issues in the 2011–2013 addresses.⁵ In the 2012 address, Putin emphasized the severity of illegal immigration and the necessity to toughen 'penalties against illegal immigration and violations of registration rules' (President of the Russian Federation 2012). He also noted that relevant bills had been already submitted to the Duma, and that he had asked the deputies to pass them (President of the Russian Federation 2012).

In the 2013 address, Putin argued that 'the lack of proper order in foreign labour migration' created labour market distortions, provoked ethnic conflicts, and led to higher crime rates (President of the Russian Federation 2013). After laying out a detailed plan for the work permit system for all labour immigrants, he emphasized the need to enact stricter immigration restrictions:

We need to strengthen control over the purposes of entry of foreign nationals. All civilized countries do this. The government has to know why and for what duration foreigners come to Russia. For this we need to solve problems with foreigners who come to Russia from visa-free regime countries and stay in Russia for a long period of time without definite purpose ... The period of their stay in Russia must be limited, and the entry to Russia must be banned for foreign nationals who violate the law. (President of the Russian Federation 2013)

This 2013 address demonstrates a significant change in the ruling regime's view of migration. No other presidential addresses from 2000 to 2018 emphasized enforcement of the migration policy or provided concrete details as extensive as those in the address of 2013. Even in the 2007 address, President Putin did not refer to migration policy or ethnic conflicts—despite the fact that it was just a year after violent clashes between ethnic Russians and North Caucasians in Kondopoga and other towns, after which migration had become a widely debated issue in the media and politics (President of the Russian Federation 2007).

Following the policy changes directed in Putin's presidential decrees and addresses, the Duma (Lower House) approved laws that tightened both admission and enforcement policies. In November 2011, just a month before the parliamentary election in December, UR parliamentarians proposed a bill that mandated migrants who worked in the housing, utilities, trade, and social service sectors to pass a Russian language exam (Kozenko 2011). Even before this bill was approved, in October 2012, UR members had introduced another bill in the Duma that required all migrant workers, except highly skilled ones, to take the obligatory language, history, and law exam (Russian Legal Information Agency 2012). Dmitry Viatkin, one of the bill's initiators, commented that 'the goals of this bill are absolutely obvious, which originate from the president's decree' (State Duma 2013a). Accordingly, since 2015 all labour migrants, except high-skilled workers and migrants from Belarus and Kazakhstan, have to pass a test on Russian language, history, and law (Ria Novosti 2013). This new policy faced little opposition from businesses (Business Organization Representative 1), as it imposed additional requirements on migrants while reducing them for businesses. A former government official, now employed by a major business association, remarked, 'For businesses, the change is inconsequential'. He emphasized, 'passing exams and paying work permit fees are prerequisites for migrants *before* they can apply for jobs' (Business Organization Representative 2). Regarding this policy, a migration expert emphasized the roles of public opinion: 'I think that

these laws are passed under the influence of public opinion ... it [the exam] was not discussed with experts. It is because experts strongly criticized similar attempts in 2010 and 2011' (Migration Researcher 72). Another expert made a similar remark: 'This was a desire to indulge in xenophobic sentiment that exists in Russian society, and to present a package of measures that seems commonsensical, like providing immigrant adaptation' (Migration Researcher 61). These interviews suggest that the ruling regime introduced immigrant restrictions to strengthen its public popularity by appealing to anti-immigrant sentiment.

The mayoral election in Moscow in September 2013 boosted the politicization of migration and an increase in immigrant restrictions. In this election, Sergey Sobianin, then the mayor of Moscow, was competing with Alexei Navalny, an influential anti-corruption activist and a political opponent to the Putin regime. This was the first time in ten years that Muscovites had had the chance to choose their mayor directly. While all mayoral candidates embraced anti-immigrant rhetoric, Sobianin utilized the migration issue more than any other competitor (Pain 2014; Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2018). Experts point out this was due to the fact that Sobianin faced a certain level of competition (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2018; Abashin 2014). According to Sergey Abashin, 'the appearance of limited political competition in elections caused sharp politicization of a migration issue: the political opposition used it, considering it as a weak spot of the system, and, in response, the authorities tried to demonstrate that they actively worked on this problem' (2014, 22; translated by the author). The media also increasingly reported on migration issues. Aleksander Verkhovsky, director of the Sova Centre, a Russian research organization on racism and nationalism, pointed out a change in the use of migrantphobia in state-aligned TV channels (Taub 2015):

In 2013 ... there was an official anti-migrant campaign that year on TV. Usually, the official line is to avoid talking about [migrant issues], but in 2013 something was broken in this mechanism ... this campaign was conducted in several regions, including Mos-

cow and St Petersburg. We saw a lot of news about the ‘crimes of migrants’, and other such things. Much more than previously.

As acting mayor, Sobianin had also implemented a series of immigration restrictions in the run-up to the election. In the summer of 2013, Moscow conducted multiple large-scale operations to find illegal immigrants, and the number of apprehended and deported immigrants increased dramatically (Vinogradov 2013). According to an unnamed police officer, such operations targeting migrants on such a scale were unprecedented in Moscow (Nikol’skii 2013). In addition, Sobianin proposed to the federal Duma a bill that would broaden conditions for the deportation of immigrants in Moscow and St Petersburg (State Duma 2013b). This bill was submitted to the Duma in July 2013, two months before the mayoral election.

Following President Putin’s order and the politicization of immigration, intensified by the election in Moscow, the Russian federal authorities continued to toughen enforcement and criminal penalties for undocumented migrants. The Duma passed a series of amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences that widened conditions for the deportation and re-entry ban on immigrants. Some laws were initiated directly by the president (such as the law on ‘rubber apartments’⁶) and by the administration (such as the law on the blacklisting of migrants). These amendments led to a sharp increase in the number of expelled immigrants after 2013 (Troitskii 2016). Russian experts linked these changes to Putin’s initiative. A researcher pointed out, ‘After the president signed a presidential decree in May 2012 that emphasized war on illegal migration, the Duma adopted all these measures ... When these laws were adopted, the authorities did not discuss them with experts at all’ (Migration Researcher 72).

However, Russian immigration policy underwent a complete reversal, as the regime faced no competition because of electoral rule changes and Putin’s soaring popularity, due especially to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Hutcheson and McAllister 2018). The Crimea rally had ‘game-changing implications’ for Russian

domestic politics: Putin's ratings remained above 80 per cent between March 2014 and April 2018, and he and UR fared better in the 2016–2018 elections (Hale 2018: 370; see [Table 3.1](#)). The ruling regime no longer needed to gain popularity using migration issues, and this change had a significant impact on the politics of immigration. For example, in 2014–2016, Putin did not discuss migration issues in presidential addresses. Russian media and the authorities politicized migration less, and popular xenophobia declined (Kingsbury 2017). In my interviews conducted in 2016–2017, many Russian experts suggested migration was no longer 'an agenda of the day' (*povestka dnia*) as Crimea had galvanized the political system (Head of NGO 29). In December 2016, the Duma abolished the 2012 amendment that stipulated migrants' immediate deportation from Moscow and St Petersburg (Sputnik Tajikistan 2016). This reversal clearly shows how electoral competition can significantly influence the politics of immigration in illiberal states.

The Case of Kazakhstan

Until recently, Kazakhstan's political scene was dominated by one leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev. President Nazarbayev had ruled the country since before the collapse of the Soviet Union and stepped down only in March 2019. Just like other dictators in Eurasia, sustaining high public popularity was important for him (Hale 2015). According to Schatz (2009), for Nazarbayev to sustain soft authoritarian rule, mobilizing a core of committed supporters was crucial. Nazarbayev had succeeded in this task: experts argued that he enjoyed soaring popularity and would have easily won free and fair elections (Hale 2015, 249; Schatz and Maltseva 2012, 60). He was credited with Kazakhstan's economic growth, ethnic peace, and geopolitical stability, and he remained very popular, notwithstanding the situation (Busygina 2019; Schatz 2009). For instance, even when the 2008 financial crisis and falling oil prices hit Kazakhstan severely, his popularity continued after a brief dip (Schatz and Maltseva 2012). Thus, a leading expert in

Kazakhstani politics pointed out, elections in Kazakhstan were just ‘rituals’, and the ruling regime was uninterested in the election results or approval ratings (Political Science Researcher 82).

Nazarbayev and the ruling party Nur Otan have been unchallenged in all elections. [Table 3.2](#) shows their high share of the votes in the legislative (Lower House, Majilis) and presidential elections, and the absence of electoral competition. Since 2004, political opposition parties have won only one seat in legislative elections (Pannier 2016). In the 2007 legislative election, Nur Otan received 88 per cent of the vote but won all 98 available seats because other parties could not meet the threshold of 7% to win a seat. The complete dominance of the Nur Otan party and Nazarbayev in the elections contrasts with the electoral performance of the ruling regime in Russia.

Table 3.2: The ruling regime’s vote shares in Kazakhstan (%)

	Legislative election	Presidential election
2004–2005	72*	91.1
2007	88.4	–
2011–2012	80.9	95.5
2015–2016	82.2	97.7

Note: * In this election, a pro-presidential Asar party (headed by Nazarbayev’s daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva) ran for the parliament separately. When combining the votes of the president’s Otan party and the Asar party, the ruling regime won 72 per cent of the vote.

With the high level of popular support for the ruling regime and the absence of electoral competition, the Kazakh authorities have not needed to play the migration card. Despite Kazakhstan’s much-touted inter-ethnic accord, research shows that xenophobia and nationalist sentiment are present in the country. When Kazakhstan was still part of the Soviet Union, ethnic tension existed in

the country (Beissinger 2002: 73–74). Survey results show that Kazakhs harbour animosity towards other ethnic groups and immigrants (World Values Survey 2010–2014), and inter-ethnic frictions continue to break out. Yet following Kazakhstan's independence, Nazarbayev adopted a 'subtle and sensitive approach to nationality issues' without instigating Kazakh nationalism (Suny 1999, 175). Although the government has promoted Kazakhization processes through the language policy and repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs, the Kazakh authorities have not fully tilted towards ethnic nationalism (Cummings 2005; Sharipova, Burkhanov, and Alpeissova 2017). Many factors account for such a policy: the significant size of non-Kazakh ethnic groups at the time of independence, 'the fuzzy boundaries' between Kazakh and Russian culture, and the dominance of the Russian language (Cummings 2005, 78; Sharipova, Burkhanov, and Alpeissova 2017).

More importantly, experts point out, the stimulation of nationalism may pose a political risk for the ruling regime in Kazakhstan (Kubicek 1998). Nationalists have the potential to be the strongest opponents of the incumbent regime (Laruelle 2015; Former Government Official 55), although they are weak at the moment. Since Kazakhstan's independence, Kazakh nationalists have been ardent opponents of Nazarbayev, and thus, the authorities have banned them (Kubicek 1998, 35; Laruelle 2015, 26; Political Science Researcher 82). Currently, anti-Nazarbayev discourses are shared mostly by Kazakh nationalist youth (Laruelle 2015, 26). A former government official argued that the ruling regime in Kazakhstan wants to maintain the Soviet model by just replacing Russians with Kazakhs as the titular group (Former Government Official 13).

Consequently, the ruling regime in Kazakhstan has not instigated anti-immigrant sentiment or politicized immigration from Central Asia. The Nazarbayev regime has been adept at framing issues on the political agenda (Schatz 2009; Schatz and Maltseva 2012), and the president's speeches served as one important tool. Thus, to examine the politicization of immigration issues, I analyse the president's annual addresses between 1997 and 2018.⁷ The

results reveal the depoliticization of immigration from Central Asia by the regime. The president touched on the topics of immigration control only in 2006 and 2012, with neutral descriptions, while placing greater emphasis on emigration, high-skill immigration, and *oralman*.⁸ In the 2006 address, Nazarbayev described immigration as a strategy to develop a modern social policy and proposed the legalization of undocumented migrants:

We need a modern concept of migration policies. The current favourable social and economic situation in Kazakhstan creates conditions for inflow of a foreign workforce. The Government, considering the experience of other countries, needs to develop a mechanism for conducting a one-time [sic] legalization of labour migrants illegally working in Kazakhstan by registering them with Internal Affairs and other appropriate authorities. (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2006)

It is noteworthy that Nazarbayev did not depict irregular migration negatively in the 2006 address. He did not delve deeply into issues relating to low-skill migration but rather emphasized the need to attract high-skilled migrants and to repatriate ethnic Kazakhs from other countries:

Moreover, we need to develop mechanisms to attract highly qualified and professional workers to Kazakhstan who could work in our country on a permanent basis ... Our attention should be focused more on creation of conditions for preparatory training in special centres, and the adaptation and integration of *oralman* into our society. If they are taught the language and a profession, as is the case in other countries who have returnees, they will adapt to new conditions more quickly. (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2006)

After 2006, it was only in December 2012 that President Nazarbayev again discussed migration issues in the address. In 2012, similarly to the 2006 address, he paid greater attention to the question of how to reduce emigration than to controlling immigration into the country:

We need to take measures to resolve complex migration problems that have an influence on labour markets in the regions of the country. We need to strengthen control on migration flows from the adjacent countries. As a prospective aim we are expected to create favourable conditions for the local qualified workforce in order to prevent their excessive outflow to the foreign labour markets. In 2013 the Government will have to develop and approve a complex plan to resolve the migration problems. (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2012)

As the 2006 and 2012 addresses demonstrate, the Kazakh president highlighted the need to attract high-skilled immigrants and prevent emigration, rather than focusing on control of irregular migration to the country. In addition to the two addresses, President Nazarbayev emphasized the need for high-skilled workers in the 2008 address.⁹

Other government documents also demonstrate the ruling regime's depoliticization of undocumented immigration. In presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, politicians rarely discussed migration control or ethnic issues, while highlighting inter-ethnic harmony (Oka 2009). On the Akorda website, using the keywords 'migrant' (*migrant*) and 'migration' (*migratsiia*) in Russian, I searched and analysed Nazarbayev's public speeches and reports of government meetings (Security Council, Ministry, and Nur Otan party).¹⁰ The results show that in meetings, the president and officials focus on *oralman*, high-skill immigration, and internal migration. Immigration control has attracted attention occasionally in relation to terrorism and extremism, yet it has always received a lower priority.

The president's neglect of migration has had significant implications for migration policy. To quote Dosym Satpaev, a leading expert in Kazakhstani politics, Kazakhstan has 'an expert presidential system, where the president has greater control of all political levers, and all political players' (cited in Isaacs 2011, 79). The president has the most formal authority over every policy, while the legislature has no political opposition or power to check the president (Cook 2007, 202–203). Thus, policies reflect the ideas of

the president and the officials he selects (Darden 2009, 207–2078). Migration policy has not been an exception. One example is an amnesty for undocumented immigrants declared in 2006. Following the aforementioned president's address in 2006, Kazakhstan legalized the status of 164,000 undocumented immigrants. Local migration experts have indicated that the presidential administration and his ministries have played an important role in migration policymaking processes, while parliamentarians have seldom proposed bills and businesses have exerted little influence on policymaking, notwithstanding their attempts to do so (Migration Researcher 65; Former Government Employee 11; Legal Consultant 30; Ministry Official 74).

Following the president and his circle's ideas, the Kazakhstani government has turned a blind eye to undocumented migrants, without introducing policies to control them. A former employee at Nur Otan's think tank, the Institute of Public Policy, stated that the government had been indifferent to migration issues (Former Government Employee 11):

When I was in the working group for the Security Council in 2015, the Council was not interested in illegal migration at all. They were more interested in internal migration from south to north ... The government did not acknowledge the existence of unregistered migrants from Central Asia. For instance, in a TV show, migration police officers said that migrants are in Kazakhstan for private reasons, not for work.

Other migration experts and political analysts shared this view (Davé 2014; Migration Researcher 51). One sociologist pointed out, 'It is not even a denial, but they [the government] just do not look at them [inter-ethnic conflicts]. And they do not want to change it' (Sociology Researcher 98). Officials tend to focus on interracial tension between Russians and Kazakhs, but most conflicts occur between Kazakhs and other marginal ethnic groups in the countryside due to acute economic competition for resources (Sociology Researcher 98). Officially, Kazakhstan is free of inter-ethnic problems. When ethnic violence breaks out, the authorities

emphasize that it occurs at the domestic level (*bytovom urovne*), not because of structural factors or government policies (Shirokov 2016). Even for local governments in immigrant-receiving regions, migration control is of little importance. In the city council election in Almaty, a popular migrant destination, none of 36 elected deputies touched upon migration in their election programmes.¹¹

Ignoring the issue results in an absence of immigration policies. The Kazakhstani government has rarely modified immigration policies for low-skilled immigrants. The current low-skill immigration policy keeps most migrants out of state control. In a press interview in 2007, the director of the migration police said that the authorities had discussed changing regulations pertaining to low-skilled migrants (Regnum 2007). However, it was only in 2013 that Kazakhstan amended its policy by introducing permits (*patent*) for low-skilled immigrants working in non-commercial activities. Regarding this policy change, government officials pointed out that it was motivated by Russia's permit system (Ministry Official 74; Ministry Official 75). An official from the Ministry of Healthcare and Social Protection said: 'If there are better things, then we adopt them ... In a neighbouring country [Russia], they introduced a system based on permits ... We studied it. Why not take it? Then we introduced it' (Ministry Official 74). It is noteworthy that the Kazakhstani authorities did not change their policy until they saw the Russian example. Still, this new policy does not regulate most low-skilled immigrants hired by enterprises. A government official in the Ministry of National Economy acknowledged: 'Anyway, they [immigrants] come and work ... The issue of low-skilled immigration has not been solved by the state' (Ministry Official 75). The case of Kazakhstan demonstrates how the absence of electoral competition facilitates no policy for immigration, and, paradoxically, a country open for immigrants.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to our understanding of the politics of migration by demonstrating how regime dynamics of illiberalism can shape immigration policies, focusing on the hitherto neglected effects of electoral factors. I show that electoral competition can be a key factor facilitating immigration restrictions, even in illiberal regimes. In that regard, as Natter (2018) and Schenk (2018) argue, the politics of immigration does not vary strikingly between liberal democracies and illiberal states. This research, however, provides nuanced insights by suggesting a different mechanism through which the same electoral factors play a role, depending on political regimes: electoral factors affect immigration policy because autocrats endeavour to sustain popularity, not because the influence of far-right parties, swing voters, or immigrant voters matter for politicians, as they do in a democracy.

Considering that the findings are based on comparative case studies on Russia and Kazakhstan, the generalizability of this research has limitations. Russia, Kazakhstan, and their immigrant-sending states share Soviet legacies, and political opposition consists of nationalists, not moderates, in both countries. Nonetheless, given the significance of public popularity for autocrats and the mobilization effect of anti-immigrant sentiment, the findings could be relevant to other immigrant-receiving autocracies outside Russia and Eurasia. For example, Natter and Thiolett (2022) show that even in Saudi Arabia, a strongly authoritarian country, the monarchy utilizes immigration as a legitimacy-generating tool. To validate the applicability of the findings in this chapter rigorously, future studies could explore cases in which the ruling regime faces political opponents who are moderates or have pro-immigration interests.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is released under the CC-BY 4.0 license, as it builds on the author's earlier work: Joo, Song Ha. 2024. 'Elections and Immigration Policy in Autocracy: Evidence from Russia and Kazakhstan'. *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* 59: 482–503. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.47>.
- 2 In 2020, in terms of foreign-born population, the top 20 immigrant-receiving countries included Saudi Arabia, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Thailand, Malaysia, Jordan, Pakistan, and Kuwait (Migration Policy Institute 2020).
- 3 IRB approval was obtained for this study on 25 May 2016 (Protocol# 7740).
- 4 The full list of interviewees is provided in Table A6 on pages 19–21 in the following link: <https://static.cambridge.org/content/id/urn%3Acambridge.org%3Aid%3Aarticle%3AS0017257X22000471/resource/name/S0017257X22000471sup001.docx>.
- 5 Available on the Kremlin website, www.kremlin.ru, accessed 1 August 2022.
- 6 According to Russian law, foreign citizens must register if they stay in Russia longer than a week. 'Rubber apartments' denotes a situation in which hundreds of foreign migrants are registered in the same apartment to obtain registration documents.
- 7 Available on the Akorda (the presidential administration) website, www.akorda.kz, accessed 8 February 2019. I analysed documents both in Russian and in English-language translations.
- 8 *Oralman* denotes ethnic Kazakhs who migrated to Kazakhstan from other countries such as Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and China after the country's independence.
- 9 In the 2008 address, Nazarbayev said, 'Second, I commission the Government and national entities ... to develop and implement the program on the further development of professional and technical education. This program should provide for the attraction of foreign scientists and teachers to the areas of education most useful to the national economy.' (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2008).
- 10 I accessed the Akorda website on 8 February, 2019, and the keyword search yielded 32 documents.
- 11 Almaty City Council website (www.mga.kz), accessed 20 February 2019.

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