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Conceptualising autocracy promotion as commercialisation: marketising narratives and Chinese responses to central Asian protests

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Abstract

In recent decades, the global rise of autocracies has spurred scholarly investigations into why and how these regimes support one another. This article advances these debates by addressing the undertheorised question of *what* states promote in autocracy promotion. Drawing on insights from narrative theory, it introduces the concept of 'autocracy commercialisation', a process through which autocratic practices are framed and disseminated via narratives that present autocracy as a desirable and pragmatic response to states' governance challenges. These narratives enable the circulation and normalisation of autocratic practices, without relying on direct ideological alignment or intent. The study interprets the variation in narrative strategies through ideal-typical motivational logics, illustrating how autocracies frame governance challenges differently across contexts. Using a multiple holistic case study design, the article conducts a frame analysis of Chinese official discourse on political protests in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, employing MAXQDA for qualitative data analysis. In so doing, the article moves beyond intention-centric models, offering a unified framework for diverse mechanisms and conceptualising autocracy promotion as the narrative-based circulation and normalisation of autocratic governance rather than the export of coherent ideology.

Keywords

Autocracy promotion, narrative theory, regimes, China's foreign policy, frame analysis

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Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed the global diffusion of autocratic practices, prompting scholars to investigate how autocratic regimes support each other through mechanisms of autocracy promotion (Börzel, 2015; Burnell, 2010; Dukalskis, 2021; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2016; Tansey, 2016a; Weiss, 2019; Yakouchyk, 2019). Taking stock of these debates, this paper introduces the concept of autocracy commercialisation, which aims to extend the focus of investigations from why and how states promote autocracy to the object of autocracy promotion itself. By integrating insights from narrative theory in International Relations (IR) (Browning, 2008; Hagström, 2012; Miskimmon et al., 2013; Suganami, 2008), the study argues that autocracy promotion operates through marketising narratives of autocratic behaviour. These narratives frame autocratic governance as desirable and pragmatic, normalising autocratic practices in recipient regimes. Unlike traditional approaches, which often focus on ideology or state intent, this framework highlights the centrality of storytelling and posits that autocracy promotion should be understood as the normalisation of autocratic governance practices through narratives marketising autocracy as a product.

To illustrate this framework, the study examines China's contrasting responses to political unrest in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan, the October 2020 protests marked the country's third major political upheaval since independence, triggered by disputed parliamentary elections and widespread allegations of fraud. Mass protests in Bishkek, escalating into violence, forced President Sooronbay Jeenbekov to resign and prompted the declaration of a state of emergency. China's response was notably restrained, offering rhetorical support for stability while refraining from direct intervention. In contrast, Kazakhstan's January 2022 unrest, which began as fuel price protests escalated into violent nationwide unrest, prompted a more assertive response from Beijing. The protests, fuelled by broader socio-economic grievances and discontent with former President Nursultan Nazarbayev's lingering influence on government turned violent to such an extent that the protests are still remembered as 'Bloody January' (*Qandy qantar*). In response, current President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared a state of emergency, ordered a violent crackdown on demonstrators, and sought military assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), primarily led by Russia. In this case, China supported the Kazakh government by invoking narratives of external terrorism and stability, showing direct support for the Kazakh regime.

The structure of the rest of the article is as follows. The next section discusses debates on autocracy promotion, highlighting shortcomings in existing theoretical and empirical studies. The subsequent section introduces the concept of autocracy commercialisation and explains the value of narrative theory in understanding the research problem. The following three sections detail the research design, methodology and summarise the findings. The conclusions discuss the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and outline the study's contribution to the existing literature.

What is 'autocracy' in autocracy promotion?

Studies on autocracy promotion have flourished across IR, Comparative Politics and Regime Studies. This surge in interest primarily stems from a decline of democracy and

a perceived rise of autocracies worldwide, prompting scholars to explore the role of external actors in autocratisation (Ambrosio, 2012; Bader, 2014; Grimm, 2015; Lankina et al., 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; O'Loughlin et al., 1998). For example, Russia and Venezuela have been frequently studied as prominent autocracy promoters due to their support for regimes such as Belarus under Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega, which have progressively adopted more autocratic practices (Börzel, 2015; Gratius, 2022; Kneuer, 2022; Way, 2015).

Since Peter Burnell (2010) first introduced the term, debates on autocracy promotion have predominantly centred on questions of conceptualisation. While most scholars view autocracy promotion as a means of democracy prevention, this outcome-focused perspective has faced criticism (Börzel, 2015; Carothers and Samet-Marram, 2015; Tansey, 2016b), with a core question in scholarship being tied to *intentionality* – that is, whether states actively seek to promote autocratic governance (Nodia, 2014; Treisman, 2020; Whitehead, 2015).[1] In this context, Oisín Tansey (2016a) offered a stringent definition, arguing that understanding state intentions is crucial for distinguishing between autocracy promotion and other forms of state influence, such as economic coercion or diplomatic pressure. This focus on intent has led scholars to differentiate between active and passive dimensions of autocracy promotion. While active promotion includes intentional actions, passive promotion can occur when states adopt policies aligned with autocratic norms without explicitly aiming to spread them (Vanderhill, 2013; Yakouchyk, 2016). For instance, disinformation campaigns regarding labour rights targeted at foreign audiences exemplify active promotion, while the adoption of strict labour laws mimicking those in powerful autocracies illustrates passive promotion. In the latter case, a state may not intend to spread autocracy by implementing these restrictive labour laws, but by adopting policies like those used by other autocracies, it indirectly normalises these practices. This can signal to other countries that such restrictions are acceptable, encouraging the passive spread of autocratic practices.

While the distinction between active and passive forms of autocracy promotion has been valuable for understanding autocracy promotion, scholarship still largely hinges on the intentions of states to promote autocracy. Such a bias has contributed to narrowing the scope of analysis in autocracy promotion research, while also overlooking the importance of passive autocracy promotion. Indeed, not only can autocracies refrain from actively promoting autocracy, but democracies can also serve as unwitting agents of autocracy promotion. Through mechanisms such as signalling, democracies may, in fact, unintentionally validate autocratic behaviour (Pavlović, 2023; von Billerbeck and Tansey, 2019). For example, the initial reluctance of Western democratic powers to criticise the erosion of judicial independence in Turkey, particularly in the aftermath of the purges following the 2016 coup attempt, arguably signalled that a certain level of state autocratisation is tolerable if it serves to stabilise alliances. This example illustrates a shortcoming in scholarship, particularly in discussions about autocracy promoters. Traditionally, studies have focused on powerful autocracies as primary promoters, overlooking the role of democracies, smaller or less prominent autocratic regimes, as well as non-state actors (Babayan, 2015; Bader, 2015a; Kneuer, 2022; Obydenkova and Libman, 2014; Way, 2015).[2]

Further complicating the study of autocracy promotion is the lack of a unified theoretical framework to explain why and how states engage in promoting autocratic

governance. Scholars have identified several mechanisms, including economic, military and political categories, but these are generally treated in isolation. Economic mechanisms may include incentives like energy subsidies, loans or trade agreements (Tansey, 2016a; Vanderhill, 2013; Yakouchyk, 2016), while military mechanisms involve exporting or donating arms or deploying troops and military advisors to bolster the security of autocratic allies (Tansey, 2016a). Finally, political mechanisms often involve strategic and diplomatic cooperation as well as the dissemination of legitimising discourses on national media or international fora (Tolstrup, 2015). For instance, electoral observation missions conducted by organisations like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) often play a role in reinforcing autocratic practices by validating elections in member states. While these missions are apparently aimed at ensuring the fairness of electoral processes, they frequently declare elections 'free and fair', even when independent observers report significant irregularities, such as vote-rigging, media suppression or restricted opposition activity. By endorsing these elections, CIS and SCO missions provide a form of legitimacy to autocratic regimes, signalling to domestic and international audiences that these states meet acceptable standards of governance. This approach not only strengthens the stability of autocratic regimes but also normalises lenient standards for democratic processes among member states, promoting an environment in which autocratic governance is seen as legitimate and viable. Although useful, these categories lack an overarching framework that explains *why* certain autocratic mechanisms resonate with certain states and not others or *how* unintentional support mechanisms, such as economic or diplomatic engagement, strengthen autocratic practices. Without a comprehensive theory, the diverse mechanisms of autocracy promotion cannot be fully understood, limiting scholars' ability to assess their impact on spreading autocratisation.

Building on these conceptual challenges, an additional inconsistency in the existing scholarship emerges: the question of 'what is autocracy' in autocracy promotion. While scholars have primarily focused on conceptualising the 'promotional aspect' and its effects (Dukalskis, 2021), this emphasis often leaves ambiguous whether autocratic regimes are exporting specific governance models or simply aiming to reinforce regime stability. Unlike during the Cold War, when authoritarian regimes promoted clear ideological alternatives like communism or fascism, autocracy promotion today lacks a cohesive ideological foundation. As Ghia Nodia (2014) argues, in fact, there is no longer a universally accepted ideology of authoritarianism for states to promote. Autocratic states often promote stability or regime survival rather than a specific governance model. Even within the current 'new Cold War' framing between China and the United States (Allison, 2017; Niblett, 2024), the promotion of an autocratic 'China model' is typically understood as offering an alternative to a US-led global order, rather than an effort to spread Communist regimes or a distinct China-led autocratic ideology. This lack of ideological coherence complicates efforts to theorise autocracy promotion, raising questions about whether states aim to export specific governance practices or merely seek to sustain autocratic regimes against democratic pressures.

Observing this ideological ambiguity, what is argued here is that ideology should be set aside as the primary motivation of autocracy promotion and instead focus on other drivers behind autocracy promotion.[3] Fear-of-contagion theories, for example, suggest that

autocratic states support one another to prevent the destabilising effects of spreading democratisation, which could threaten the stability of their own regimes (Yakouchyk, 2019). Daniel Odinius and Philipp Kuntz (2015) propose a two-stage decision-making process in which autocrats assist other autocratic regimes only when they perceive a high threat to their own stability. Moreover, practical benefits, such as maintaining advantageous trade linkages, can incentivise autocracies to support each other and avoid revenue losses following democratisation (Bader, 2015b). These motivations imply that autocracy promotion today may be less about exporting an ideological system and more about preserving political and economic stability within an ideologically diverse autocratic landscape.

In sum, while research on autocracy promotion has advanced considerably, key shortcomings persist. These include an overemphasis on intentionality, the absence of an overarching theoretical framework to integrate diverse mechanisms of autocracy promotion and ongoing ambiguity regarding the ideological aims of autocratic states. To advance this scholarship, a re-conceptualisation is required – one that moves beyond intent and ideology as central tenets and instead examines how autocratic practices are normalised.

To this end, recent scholarship in IR on narratives as tools of governance and meaning-making proves particularly useful. Somers (1994), in fact, conceptualises narratives as temporally sequenced representations that construct links between events, actors, and outcomes. This article builds on recent contributions that move away from agent-centric accounts, emphasising instead how narrative power is embedded in recurring structures shaped by pre-existing narrative terrains (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021). In the context of autocracy promotion, narratives thus serve as discursive devices actors employ to normalise autocratic practices through broader stories of order, stability and development. In the following section, the concept of autocracy commercialisation is introduced, reframing the discussion on autocratisation through the lens of narrative theory.

Autocracy promotion as commercialisation

To address limitations in current scholarship, this article introduces autocracy commercialisation as a new conceptual framework for understanding the diffusion of autocratic practices. Autocracy commercialisation is defined as the circulation of behaviours and speech acts, either intentionally or unintentionally, through narratives that frame autocratic governance as a flexible, desirable solution. Rather than aiming at regime resilience or regime change, autocracy commercialisation centres on the circulation of narratives that normalise autocratic practices across diverse settings. Commercialisation functions as a discursive market logic, presenting autocracy as a contextually appropriate response to governance challenges, irrespective of whether it results in regime change. This logic treats narratives as discursive 'products' circulating in a market-like environment.[4] Rather than advancing a fixed model of autocratic governance, commercialisation offers flexible narrative structures adaptable to diverse contexts. In so doing, it fosters demand by aligning narratives with the specific concerns of recipient regimes, enabling autocratic practices to be adopted when they are perceived to 'fit'.

The use of marketisation draws on David Harvey's (2005) understanding of neoliberal rationalities – that is, logics through which governance practices are packaged and

circulated to enhance their perceived utility. From this perspective, autocracy is not marketed in a promotional sense, but *marketised* through narratives that present it as a flexible, desirable solution. Unlike traditional models of autocracy promotion, which typically involve direct support from powerful autocratic states, autocracy commercialisation incorporates a broader array of participants, including non-state actors and international organisations, and operates through indirect, narrative-based mechanisms.

Extending Katsiaryna Yakouchyk's (2019) redefinition of autocracy promotion as 'support', the framework shifts emphasis from ideology to discursive form. It provides a more flexible approach to understanding how autocracy becomes appealing in diverse contexts, without assuming a unified ideological agenda or a fixed sender–receiver model. Narrative theory offers a cohesive framework for explaining how autocracy commercialisation works by bridging diverse mechanisms into a unified story that advances autocratic governance. Rooted in constructivist thought, narrative theory emphasises the role of discourse in shaping identities and behaviours (Browning, 2008; Hagström, 2012; Suganami, 2008). Narratives do not simply reflect governance practices but actively shape perceptions, legitimising certain forms of rule while undermining others (Mattern, 2005; Ringmar, 1996). As such, narrative theory allows to connect various mechanisms, embedding them within broader discursive frames that legitimise autocratic practices. For example, economic incentives are framed within narratives of mutual stability and shared prosperity, while political mechanisms (such as election validation) reinforce discourses that normalise autocratic governance.

Autocracy commercialisation, then, frames autocratic practices as pragmatic responses to local challenges, making them appealing even when recipient states do not align ideologically. Narratives circulated by commercialisers – whether states or other actors – present autocracy as a stabilising force, embedding it within stories that resonate with local priorities. These narratives ultimately construct autocracy as a 'necessary' governance practice (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

While the analysis refers to 'responses' or 'strategies', narrative construction is not assumed to be intentional in every instance. Instead, a pragmatic approach to intentionality is adopted. Narratives, in fact, may be strategically crafted, institutionally reproduced, or embedded in bureaucratic practices. This framework accommodates all possibilities, focusing on the recurrence and coherence of narrative structures. In this sense, recurring narratives are treated as evidence of consistent discursive practices, not as proof of intentionality. Similarly, where ideological content is present, it is considered as discursively expressed and analytically relevant, without assuming intentional promotion. This framework further pushes approaches that reject intentionality (e.g. Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Hansen, 2006; Pouliot, 2008) precisely by placing analytical emphasis on the recurrence and coherence of narratives across contexts – an aspect often under-theorised even in accounts that focus on embodied practices or the fluidity of meaning instead of intentionality.

In line with the idea that promoting autocracy tends to reinforce existing authoritarian structures (Nodia, 2014), it is argued that autocracy commercialisation resonates more strongly in states undergoing political transitions – whether from autocracies to democracies, from autocracies to hybrid regimes, or from hybrid regimes to democracies. Narrative theory explains how autocratic models become appealing in these settings by

embedding autocracy within narratives of, for instance, stability and resilience. These narratives endure not because they guarantee specific outcomes, but because they remain contextually relevant and narratively compelling (Bially Mattern, 2004).

It is also argued here that the motivations driving autocracy commercialisation – fear of contagion (Bader, 2014; Tansey, 2016a) and the benefits of maintaining the status quo (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2016; Odinius and Kuntz, 2015; von Soest, 2015) – are reflected in the narratives themselves. Each motivational logic is reflected in different narrative structures: fear of contagion, for example, is expressed through security narratives that frame autocracy as a defence against democratic transitions, while status quo benefits are conveyed by narratives that highlight stability through autocratic alignment.

These motivational logics form the basis for the four ideal-typical propositions outlined below. Rather than being derived deductively, these propositions were developed through an abductive process: informed by theoretical expectations but refined through engagement with the empirical material. They are not designed to establish causality or imply that actors deliberately construct narratives according to fixed motivations. Instead, they function as interpretive heuristics – that is, conceptual tools that help identify recurring narrative patterns that reflect broader orientations. Since these motivations are not directly observable, they are analytically inferred from the structure and content of the narratives. Table 1 illustrates this heuristic mapping, linking recurring narrative features to underlying motivational logics.

First, in cases where the commercialiser shows little strategic interest in the recipient regime's governance model, narratives tend to remain neutral or procedural, lacking consistent thematic emphasis. This passive logic suggests disengagement rather than promotion (Proposition 1). Second, in contexts where democratisation is perceived as a regional contagion risk, narratives often reactively portray reformist actors as destabilising or externally driven. Here, incumbents are cast as bulwarks of stability and sovereignty, and autocracy is framed as a defensive response to external disruption, thus embodying a defensive logic (Proposition 2). Third, when the commercialiser's strategic or economic interests align with the political continuity of the recipient regime, narratives typically reinforce incumbent legitimacy by emphasising prosperity and order. Reform is framed as unnecessary or harmful, reflecting an affirmative logic that normalises the status quo (Proposition 3). Finally, in contexts where incumbents appear to lack domestic legitimacy or control, narratives may cast autocracy as a stabilising solution. These framings often validate reformist alternatives while presenting authoritarian consolidation as a response to political uncertainty – in other words, what is termed here as a corrective logic (Proposition 4).

Analysing how each narrative type reflects inferred motivations offers insight into the broader discursive logics underpinning autocracy commercialisation. These ideal-type propositions suggest that narrative structures vary across cases depending on how autocratic governance is contextually represented. For instance, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the expectation is that China's narratives will align with Proposition 4 (Corrective logic), as the narrative structure likely addresses concerns about the incumbent government's legitimacy and the need for stability, which, in turn, reflects a drive to stabilise a vulnerable regime. In contrast, China's narrative engagement with Kazakhstan is expected to reflect Proposition 3 (Affirmative logic), where the emphasis on regional stability and

Table 1. Narratives of autocracy commercialisation.

Proposition	Narrative structure	Motivational logic	Logic type
Proposition 1	Narratives lack consistent thematic emphasis; narratives remain depoliticised or procedural	Absence of identifiable motivational logic *(null case)*	*Passive*
Proposition 2	Narratives reactively portray reform as a threat driven by external influence and position incumbents as stabilising forces	Perceived risk of democratic contagion	*Defensive*
Proposition 3	Narratives reiterate the effectiveness of incumbent leadership and frame reform as superfluous or destabilising	Interest in preserving status quo benefits	*Affirmative*
Proposition 4	Narratives delegitimise incumbent leadership and legitimise reformist alternatives	Perceived lack of incumbent legitimacy	*Corrective*

preserving the status quo aligns with China's broader economic and strategic interests in maintaining the existing regional order.

Research design, data collection and pilot study

This research articulates in a multiple holistic case study design (Yin, 2017), comparing two most-similar systems (Levy, 2008). Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were selected as case studies due to their shared regional proximity, centrality within China's Belt and Road Initiative, and experiences with political unrest. What is argued is that analysing cases pertaining to China's immediate neighbourhood is especially useful considering Beijing's understanding of neighbouring security as paramount for stability and development (Smith, 2021). Moreover, the specific focus on Central Asia stems from China's long-standing perception of the region as unstable due to internal political grievances (Godehardt, 2014).[5] Moreover, China has no unresolved territorial disputes with Central Asian states, thus indicating that its role in the region is not motivated by territorial ambitions or other domestic security concerns. Despite the similarities between the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the nature of the protests and China's narrative responses differ markedly, offering an opportunity to examine how autocracy commercialisation varies across contexts.

A software-assisted qualitative frame analysis of Chinese official discourse on the 2020 parliamentary protests in Kyrgyzstan and the 2022 January unrest in Kazakhstan was conducted, coding documents in the MAXQDA data analysis software and setting sentences and quasi-sentences as units of analysis.[6] The study draws on insights from both critiques of strategic narrative theory (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2021) and discourse theory (Fairclough, 2003). This integration allows to address both the structural coherence of narratives and their adaptability to specific contexts. Documents were

coded inductively, building a coding scheme from close-text examination.[7] MAXQDA was used to create source-type sets as well as code (both in vivo and by creating new codes), write memos and analyse data through word explorer functions, such as co-occurrence, frequency, word combination and words-in-context. The coding scheme connects narratives and discourses by identifying specific storytelling elements within broader systems of meaning. Narratives are understood as structured stories with elements like actors, actions, and outcomes, while discourses are overarching frameworks that shape these narratives. For example, portraying protestors in Kyrgyzstan as 'chaotic' fits within a broader discourse of stability and order. The coding scheme captures these different layers by categorising key narrative elements and linking them to discursive patterns.

Regarding data, the focus remained on official political discourse, collecting documents from several sources. Data were gathered in three languages – Mandarin Chinese, English and Russian – to account for cross-language variations.[8] Data were collected by conducting a trilingual keyword search from the first to the last day of the month protests took place. Mandarin Chinese sources were retained because they offer a unique lens into the often-opaque workings of the Chinese political system, adding depth and points of comparison to other languages. This approach builds on studies highlighting the role of translation as a tool in China's foreign policy, showing how translations are adjusted to resonate with foreign audiences by refining narrative construction (Gallelli, 2022; Lavička, 2021). Examining Mandarin, English and Russian sources thus enables to understand how narratives are adapted across linguistic boundaries.

Three sources were taken into consideration – these are, the media articles published by the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, the *People's Daily*, in its Chinese and Overseas editions (both International and Russian), the media articles released by China's official state-run news agency, Xinhua, and official statements and remarks either from the Chinese ambassadors to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (Du Dewen and Zhang Xiao) or Foreign Ministry Spokespersons (Hua Chunying, Wang Wenbin and Zhao Lijian). Data were gathered from repositories such as NexisUni, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (*Zhongguo zhiwang*), the official websites of the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan (kg.china-embassy.gov.cn) and Kazakhstan (kz.china-embassy.gov.cn), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (fmprc.gov.cn). The whole universe of documents was examined, 99 in total. In the Kyrgyz case, 51 documents were examined, including 8 *People's Daily* articles, 35 Xinhua articles and 8 official statements and remarks. In the Kazakh case, 48 documents were examined, including 17 *People's Daily* articles, 24 Xinhua articles and 7 official statements and remarks.

To test the coding scheme and ensure inter-coder reliability, a pilot study on 30 per cent of the documents was performed (specifically, 31 documents, including 11 *People's Daily* articles, 8 Xinhua articles and 12 official statements and remarks). Two coders coded the documents separately following the same coding scheme.[9] After the first coding round, the two coders re-discussed and revised the coding scheme because the inter-coder reliability results (calculated using the Krippendorff's alpha test) were lower than the accepted threshold of .667.[10] After a discussion between the two coders on divergent

coding categories and revisions to the coding scheme, the documents were coded separately again, resulting in an above-threshold inter-coder agreement result (.925).

China's narratives of autocracy commercialization

The results of the analysis are presented in the following two sections, discussing findings separately for the two cases. This is followed by a cross-case discussion in the conclusions.

China's narratives about the 2020 Kyrgyz parliamentary protests

The analysis of China's response to the 2020 Kyrgyzstan protests reveals two interconnected narratives: one framing the unrest and the actors involved, and the other reflecting China's position. These narratives align with the framework of autocracy commercialisation, supporting Proposition 2 (Defensive logic), in which autocracy is discursively legitimised as a protective response to political disruption. Through these narratives, stability and sovereignty are constructed as core values, while reformist movements are indirectly delegitimised.

The first narrative presents the protests primarily as harmful and illegal, arising from disputes over parliamentary election results. While the unrest is framed primarily as a political issue rather than a security one, the emphasis on illegality is consistent and widespread (*People's Daily*, 2020a, 2020b; Xinhua, 2020b, 2020c, 2020e, 2020f, 2020i).[11] Protesters are described as '[s]ome parties which failed to meet the threshold [to enter parliament]', 'protesters dissatisfied with the preliminary results', and 'political forces . . . trying to illegally seize state power' (MFA PRC, 2020a, 2020c; Xinhua, 2020e, 2020i, 2020l). These portrayals suggest that protesters are unwilling to accept the election results, rather than portraying them as citizens with credible concerns. By framing the protests as such, the narrative questions participatory democracy and implies that elections can lead to chaos.

While the political elites are depicted as responsible and law-abiding, the opposition is portrayed as disruptive, with some sources acknowledging factional in-fighting that implies instability inherent to democratic pluralism (*People's Daily*, 2020a; Xinhua, 2020a, 2020d, 2020g, 2020h, 2020k).[12] The narrative does not securitise the protests by linking them to terrorism or foreign interference, nor does it directly reference spillover risks for China or Xinjiang.[13] However, by consistently framing unrest as politically destabilising and normatively undesirable, the narrative performs a delegitimising function aligned with the Defensive logic: it affirms incumbency as a guarantor of order while showing that reform is volatile.

The second narrative reflects China's public stance, which stresses support for Kyrgyzstan, while underscoring limits to China's involvement (MFA PRC, 2020a). For instance, on 14 October 2020, MFA Spokesperson Zhao Lijian was quoted saying that China was 'willing to provide assistance and support within its capacity to this end' (MFA PRC, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d; Xinhua, 2020j, 2020m, 2020n).[14] Expressions of support to the Kyrgyz political elite are commonly paired with demands. Above all, the need for stability and the 'realis[ation of] national economic and social development'

are highlighted. Several statements also refer to the 'legitimate rights and interests of Chinese citizens and enterprises in Kyrgyzstan' and include assurances by Kyrgyz representatives that Kyrgyzstan 'will do its best to safeguard the safety and legitimate rights and interests of Chinese citizens and enterprises in Kyrgyzstan' (Xinhua, 2020j). Chinese political authorities express the view that China has legitimate concerns and interests regarding the unrest (MFA PRC, 2020e; Xinhua, 2020j, 2020m). Bilateral relations are described as 'special' ties between 'friendly neighbor[s] and comprehensive strategic partner[s]' (Embassy of the PRC to the Kyrgyz Republic, 2020a, 2020b; MFA PRC, 2020a, 2020b, 2020e; Xinhua, 2020c, 2020j), reinforcing the idea that China has a stake in Kyrgyzstan's internal stability.

However, Chinese sources rarely suggest specific pathways for resolving the unrest. This can be seen as evidence of the limited role China assigns to itself in resolving the conflict and reinforces the framing of the unrest as a domestic political issue. Chinese representatives caution that the issue should be resolved through dialogue and consultation, and in accordance with the law (Embassy of the PRC to the Kyrgyz Republic, 2020b; MFA PRC, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d; Xinhua, 2020c; *People's Daily*, 2020b). The analysed documents similarly do not provide much insight into which political actors China considers suitable for resolving the issue.

A few articles report on bilateral and multilateral meetings between Central Asian leaders, who, like China's representatives, call for stability while emphasising close neighbourly relations with Kyrgyzstan.[15] Several news stories also discuss Russia's involvement, highlighting Russian President Vladimir Putin's significant role in the crisis (Xinhua, 2020g, 2020o, 2020p). Like China's, Russia's reported statements of support are often accompanied by expressions of concern and calls for a peaceful and swift resolution.

Finally, some documents address the role of the United Nations (UN), referring to the organisation's willingness to 'support all efforts aimed at finding a peaceful resolution of the current situation, including through the 'United Nations Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia' and 'the engagement of the Secretary-General's special representative for Central Asia' (Xinhua, 2020q, 2020r). However, such reports are scarce and suggest that neither China nor other regional (or international) actors are regarded as critical for solving the political conflict.

These narrative structures illustrate key features of autocracy commercialisation by embedding stability, sovereignty and lawful governance as discursive priorities. The protests are framed as challenges to political order, and reformist movements are depicted as sources of chaos rather than legitimate political alternatives. This narrative delegitimises opposition forces while reinforcing the credibility of Kyrgyzstan's incumbents, positioning autocracy as a pragmatic and desirable defence against instability. While China's narratives do not explicitly reference fears of democratic contagion, their constant emphasis on institutional stability and sovereignty reflects a broader concern with regional volatility commonly associated with democratic transitions. The analysis therefore aligns with Proposition 2's Defensive logic, in which autocracy is not explicitly promoted as a model, but is normalised as a stabilising response to perceived disorder.

By foregrounding Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty and downplaying its own role, China avoids overt prescriptions and reinforces the view that political conflict should be

resolved domestically. The emphasis on internal stability and non-interference reflects a concern with democratic contagion as a structural disruption, rather than transnational mobilisation. In this context, autocracy is not promoted but presented as the default condition for restoring order.

In sum, the analysis of the 2020 Kyrgyzstan protests reveals two recurring narrative structures. The first delegitimises the protests by framing them as politically motivated and destabilising; the second reinforces Kyrgyz sovereignty and legal process while maintaining a position of limited external involvement. These structures thus align with Proposition 2's Defensive logic and illustrate how autocracy commercialisation functions discursively through recurring emphasis on incumbency, order, and non-interference. Rather than articulating a coordinated narrative campaign, the documents reflect structured narrative regularities that delegitimise reform and reinforce the desirability of autocratic governance in times of crisis.

China's narratives about the 2022 Kazakh 'bloody January'

The analysis of China's response to the January 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan also reveals two interconnected narratives. The first narrative frames the unrest as externally driven and linked to terrorism, highlighting its violent and destabilising impact. The second narrative emphasises the stabilising roles of regional actors, including China and Russia, within multilateral frameworks. Together, these narratives support Proposition 3, reflecting an Affirmative logic in which autocracy is discursively normalised as a source of continuity and stability.

The documents primarily discuss the protests by interpreting their origins and effects and evaluating the responses of Kazakh political authorities. The protests are portrayed as externally motivated – a framing that appears in more than half of the texts examined. Chinese narratives link the protests to an attempt at colour revolutions by unknown foreign forces (MFA PRC, 2022b, 2022c; *People's Daily*, 2022a, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e, 2022i; Xinhua, 2022a, 2022c, 2022e, 2022g, 2022i, 2022k). This framing draws on existing regional narratives that discredit external democratisation efforts as foreign interference.

The notion that the unrest is 'externally driven' frequently appears alongside assertions of 'terrorism'. Chinese discourse points to terrorists trained outside Kazakhstan as being responsible for the agitations. This description of the protests echoes Kazakh official narratives and presents the unrest as a transnational security issue involving actors from Kazakhstan and Russia (Xinhua, 2022c). When using this narrative, Chinese texts often cite statements by Kazakh and Russian leaders, as well as Russia-led multilateral institutions such as the CSTO and CIS (*People's Daily*, 2022a, 2022d; Xinhua, 2022c, 2022e, 2022i). Beyond external motivation, the protests are also portrayed as violent and socially harmful. Chinese sources highlight casualties among law enforcement and bystanders, as well as the physical damage in Almaty, including attacks on *Amanat* offices (*People's Daily*, 2022a; Xinhua, 2022d, 2022f).[16] These portrayals frame the unrest as a threat to national unity, further delegitimising protest as a legitimate form of political expression.

Although Chinese sources describe the unrest in some detail, they provide little information about how it was resolved. Only one passage mentions a compromise reached through dialogue between protesters and the Kazakh political élite, 'including solutions on the pressing socio-economic issues' that had triggered the unrest (*People's Daily*, 2022a). The CSTO military intervention is also mentioned but framed as support for Kazakhstan's sovereignty (*People's Daily*, 2022d; Xinhua, 2022c, 2022 g). Chinese narratives focus less on internal resolution mechanisms and more on the stabilising role of regional multilateral institutions.

Despite China's well-known principle of non-interference, only a few documents present the protests as Kazakhstan's internal affairs, and only a few depict national actors as managing the situation (MFA PRC, 2022a, 2022e; Xinhua, 2022k). Instead, regional cooperative frameworks such as the CSTO and the SCO are prominent in how Chinese sources envision insecurity being resolved. These regional mechanisms are not presented as displacing Kazakh authority, but as affirming it, framing President Tokayev's leadership as legitimate and stabilising in the face of externally driven unrest.

Russia and China are both portrayed as involved external actors, consistent with their respective leadership of the CSTO and SCO. However, there is a notable asymmetry in how the two are described: Russia's role (via CSTO) is tied to greater involvement and direct intervention, while China's role (via the SCO) is framed in terms of principles and mandate – for example, 'the consistent purpose and task of the SCO [is] to maintain the security and stability of the member states and the region' (Xinhua, 2022j, 2022k).

The documents also suggest space for China-Russia cooperation, primarily through their support for the CSTO and the SCO (Xinhua, 2022i). While Kazakhstan's political authorities are mentioned frequently, they are primarily identified as 'strong' and 'acting responsibly', contributing to a discursive legitimisation of Tokayev's leadership (*People's Daily*, 2022g; Xinhua, 2022j). Chinese sources underscore Beijing's 'trust' in Kazakhstan's leaders (MFA PRC, 2022d; Xinhua, 2022b; *People's Daily*, 2022h), yet the wider discursive framing places Kazakhstan's stability in a regional context. The unrest is presented not as a product of domestic grievances but as part of a broader regional pattern of destabilisation (*People's Daily*, 2022d, 2022e, 2022f; Xinhua, 2022c, 2022h).

China's role is expressed through rhetorical commitments to 'full support' for Kazakhstan's political authorities (MFA PRC, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). The relationship is repeatedly described as 'special', underpinned by identity-based affinities (e.g. the 'brotherhood' or the status as 'neighbours') and a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' (MFA PRC, 2022a, 2022b, 2022d; *People's Daily*, 2022b, 2022c).[17] China also defines the limits of its involvement as a security actor, stating that 'although China does not need and has no intention to act like the CSTO to deploy peacekeeping forces there, China has the capability to offer economic and other support' (*People's Daily*, 2022a). This is further linked to 'cooperation . . . in law enforcement and security [and] anti-interference' (Xinhua, 2022a). These statements, drawn largely from MFA statements, reveal variation in China's discursive positioning across document types.

When China references its own interests, this is typically in terms of development and investment, where stability is a prerequisite (Xinhua, 2022a). For instance, 'Kazakhstan will fully guarantee the safety of foreign institutions and personnel as well as foreign investment and continue to fulfil international obligations and agreements', and 'to

ensure the safety and smooth operation of major Sino-Kazakh cooperation projects, we believe that Kazakhstan will effectively guarantee the safety of Chinese institutions and personnel in Kazakhstan' (MFA PRC, 2022b; Xinhua, 2022c). The issue of Xinjiang is absent from most documents, with the exception of one comment by a non-official source: a Chinese analyst saying that China needs to 'keep an eye on the Kazakh situation to prevent spillover of the unrest to impact Xinjiang's stability' (*People's Daily*, 2022a).

The recurring narrative structures identified in China's response to the 2022 Kazakhstan protests reflect broader logics of autocracy commercialisation. In particular, they align with Proposition 3's Affirmative logic, in which autocracy is legitimised by reinforcing incumbent stability and portraying reform as unnecessary or disruptive. While China avoids overt promotion of an autocratic model, it consistently affirms the legitimacy of Kazakhstan's leadership and presents continuity (not reform) as the appropriate reform to political unrest. Reformist alternatives are marginalised, and autocracy is discursively validated as a pragmatic, order-maintaining, and development-enabling model. These patterns reflect a narrative preference for preserving the status quo, sustained through repeated reference to values of order, prosperity and regional security.

Conclusion

This article has shown how China's narratives reflect differing patterns of discursive legitimation across Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, aligning with distinct motivational logics within the framework of autocracy commercialisation. These inferred motivations are expressed through narrative structures that reinforce incumbent legitimacy and marginalise opposition, corresponding to Defensive and Affirmative logics, respectively.

In Kyrgyzstan, China's narratives delegitimise reformist actors and portray incumbents as guarantors of political order, supporting Proposition 2 (Defensive logic). Although China does not explicitly frame the protests as a democratic contagion threat, the recurring emphasis on stability, sovereignty, and lawful governance suggests a broader concern with regional volatility associated with democratic transitions. The protests are framed as emerging from dissatisfaction with parliamentary elections, thereby portraying them as domestic disturbances unconnected to external interference. This framing delegitimises political grievances and implicitly critiques participatory democracy, suggesting that electoral processes can lead to disorder. Incumbents are positioned as defenders of institutional integrity, while protesters are depicted as opportunistic actors unwilling to accept legitimate electoral outcomes. Contrary to expectations, China's narratives do not reflect a fear of vulnerability (Proposition 4, Corrective logic), but rather a more general concern with democratic spillovers and regional instability.

In Kazakhstan, China's narratives express support for incumbents while simultaneously emphasising the stabilising role of regional multilateral frameworks, particularly the CSTO and SCO. This framing supports Proposition 3 (Affirmative logic), in which political continuity is discursively legitimised through the reinforcement of external support structures, rather than the direct celebration of national governance. The protests are framed as externally driven, linked to terrorism and colour revolutions, and portrayed as threats to national sovereignty. This narrative displaces blame from the Kazakh

Table 2. China's narratives of autocracy commercialisation.

Case	Narrative structure	Motivational logic
Kyrgyzstan	Narratives delegitimise reformist actors as destabilising, portray incumbents as guarantors of political order, and emphasise sovereignty and lawful governance as stabilising forces	Perceived risk of democratic contagion *(Defensive logic)*
Kazakhstan	Narratives affirm incumbent performance on stability and prosperity, portray reform as unnecessary or risky, and reinforce stability through regional multilateral cooperation	Interest in preserving status quo benefits *(Affirmative logic)*

authorities and marginalises the legitimacy of socio-economic grievances. The emphasis on violence and harm further delegitimises protesters, while incumbents are described as 'strong' and 'responsible', validating their leadership and reinforcing their authority. These narrative structures reflect China's inferred preference for continuity and stability, especially given its substantial economic and strategic interests in Kazakhstan.

The comparative analysis suggests that differences in protest framing – internal and procedurally rooted in Kyrgyzstan, external and destabilising in Kazakhstan – correspond to distinct narrative logics within the framework of autocracy commercialisation. These variations illustrate how discursive strategies are contextually activated, reflecting how autocratic narratives respond to local governance dynamics and audience-specific risks. China's differing responses underscore the versatility of autocracy commercialisation as a framework for understanding how autocracy is normalised through narrative practices. In Kyrgyzstan, the framing is cautious and rhetorical, oriented around preserving stability. In Kazakhstan, it foregrounds external threats and regional security cooperation, reinforcing continuity through multilateral discourse. These findings underscore how autocratic commercialisers participate in narrative environments that stabilise meaning and render autocracy a viable governance solution. Table 2 summarises how the observed narratives align with the motivational logics outlined in the theoretical framework. This alignment is interpretive in nature, grounded in patterns of recurrence and coherence across narrative structures.

This study makes three contributions to the literature on autocracy promotion in IR. First, it moves beyond the assumption that intentionality is central to autocratisation, offering a framework that explains how autocracy can be unintentionally normalised through narrative structures. Second, it provides a cohesive framework for understanding how diverse motivational logics are linked through narrative-based practices, facilitating the normalisation of autocracy across political contexts. Finally, it clarifies that autocracy commercialisation should not necessarily be understood as the export of a fixed ideology, but rather the circulation of narrative 'products' that are context-sensitive, adaptable, and framed to resonate with local political environments. By conceptualising autocracy as a flexible narrative process, the study thus reframes how autocratic governance is normalised beyond traditional models of state-driven promotion.

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Notes

1. Autocracy promotion refers to the active encouragement or support of authoritarian regimes, whereas offsetting democracy may involve undermining democratic systems without promoting autocracy explicitly. While the processes differ, both can lead to similar outcomes in weakening democratic institutions (Börzel, 2015).
2. The concept of Autocratic Gravity Centres, for instance, refers to external actors that possess the willingness, along with both material and immaterial capacities, to disseminate autocratic ideas, norms, and institutional elements while seeking to dominate their geographical vicinity (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2016).
3. Motivations are understood here as inferred orientations that help interpret how actors frame governance challenges, not as observable intentions or causal drivers.
4. The expression 'market-like environment' is used to describe a discursive space structured according to the neoliberal logics of flexibility, circulation, and competition (Harvey, 2005). In this space, narratives function like products: they gain traction by means of their responsiveness to local governance demands. For example, as Dima Kortukov (2020) shows, Russia has marketed its 'sovereign democracy' model as a context-sensitive alternative to liberal democracy, appealing to regimes seeking order and autonomy rather than liberal reform.
5. Previous studies have shown that China regards Kyrgyzstan as the Central Asian republic most prone to 'colour revolutions', given its history of political unrest, including the Tulip Revolution, which resulted in regime change in 2005 (Godehardt, 2014).
6. Mixed units of analysis were used to account for the varying syntactic structures across the three languages of the analysed texts.
7. The coding scheme is available in the Appendix.
8. Russian-language sources were analysed in close-text translation, meaning the translations closely adhered to the original text's wording and structure, sometimes at the detriment of fluency. English and Chinese sources were analysed in their original languages.
9. The author is grateful to Eva Seiwert for the support with the development of the coding scheme.

10. Krippendorff's alpha was employed as the measure of intercoder reliability as it is considered more robust in accounting for the likelihood that coders may agree by chance, providing a more accurate assessment of agreement than other methods such as Cohen's kappa or percentage agreement. On this discussion, see Kostas Gemenis (2015).
11. A few sentences hint at external involvement, though no direct references are made. PRC MFA Spokesperson Hua Chunying emphasised China's opposition to external interference while stressing its 'firm support for Kyrgyzstan's policies and measures to safeguard its independence, sovereignty, and security' and respect for the Kyrgyz people's development path 'in line with their national conditions' (MFA PRC, 2020b, 2020d).
12. For instance, at the 14 October 2020 MFA regular press conference, spokesperson Zhao Lijian remarked, 'As the legal president of Kyrgyzstan, Jeenbekov should play a more active role in stabilising the situation' [Original: '热恩别科夫作为吉合法总统应为稳定局势发挥更积极作用'] (MFA PRC, 2020a). Interestingly, the English language readout states, 'Mr. Jeenbekov is entitled to play a more active role in stabilising the situation' (MFA PRC, 2020c).
13. For context, see, among other works, Clarke (2022).
14. Original: '中方愿为此提供力所能及的帮助和支持'.
15. Similarly, a Xinhua report on Uzbekistan's concern over the unrest stated, 'Uzbekistan, as the closest neighbor and strategic partner of Kyrgyzstan, hopes for a peaceful settlement of the tense situation in accordance with the norms of the country's constitution and the national legislation' (Xinhua, 2020s).
16. Amanat is a political party in Kazakhstan that emerged from the rebranding of the ruling party Nur Otan in 2022. It continues to represent pro-government interests and functions as a pillar of Kazakhstan's political establishment.
17. Different versions of the expression: 'As a brotherly neighbour and permanent comprehensive strategic partner' [Original: '作为兄弟邻邦和永久全面战略伙伴'] (MFA PRC, 2022a).

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Appendix

Coding scheme

Coding category	Definition
100 Quelling unrest/achieve security and stability	
100.1 Dialogue and consultation	This code refers to units of analysis stating that dialogue and consultations among the parties involved in the protests are beneficial tools to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
100.2 Legislative measures	This code refers to units of analysis stating that a legal approach should be used to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
100.3 Regional actors	This code refers to units of analysis indicating/proposing/referring to the involvement of regional actors to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
100.3.1 Collective Security Treaty Organisation	This code refers to units of analysis indicating/proposing/referring to the involvement of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
100.3.2 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	This code refers to units of analysis indicating/proposing/referring to the involvement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
100.4 External actors	This code refers to units of analysis indicating/proposing/referring to the involvement of external actors to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
100.4.1 Russia	This code refers to units of analysis indicating/proposing/referring to some kind of Russia's involvement to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
100.4.2 China and Russia	This code refers to units of analysis indicating/proposing/referring to some joint involvement from Russia and China to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
100.4.3 China	This code refers to units of analysis indicating/proposing/referring to some involvement from China to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
100.5 National actors	This code refers to units of analysis indicating/proposing/referring to the involvement of national actors to quell unrest/achieve security and stability.
200 Bilateral ties	
200.1 Equal	This code refers to units of analysis describing relations between China and Kazakhstan/China and Kyrgyzstan/China and Central Asian countries where China is presented as an equal partner to the other countries involved.
200.2 Imbalanced in China's favour	This code refers to units of analysis describing relations between China and Kazakhstan/China and Kyrgyzstan/China and Central Asian countries where relations are presented as imbalanced in China's favour.

(Continued)

Appendix. (Continued)

Coding category	Definition
200.3 Special	This code refers to units of analysis describing relations between China and Kazakhstan/China and Kyrgyzstan/China and Central Asian countries where relations with China are presented as special vis-à-vis other countries or world regions.
200.3.1 Identity	This code refers to units of analysis describing relations between China and Kazakhstan/China and Kyrgyzstan/China and Central Asian countries where relations with China are presented as special vis-à-vis other countries or world region because of an identity connection between China, Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan/Central Asian countries. For example, Mentions of neighbouring status; Presentation of China as a party directly affected by unrest/insecurity.
300 Depiction of unrest	
300.1 Externally driven	This code refers to units of analysis identifying external actors as being responsible of fomenting unrest.
300.2 Harmful	This code refers to units of analysis describing unrest as harmful to people, the economy, the state, the region.
300.3 Illegal	This code refers to units of analysis presenting unrest/protesters as violating the law.
300.4 Terrorism	This code refers to units of analysis presenting unrest/protesters as terrorism/terrorists.
300.5 Internal affairs	This code refers to units of analysis describing the handling of unrest as pertaining to the domain of the national authorities.
400. Depiction of national political élites and institutions	
400.1 Compassionate	This code refers to units of analysis where national political élites and institutions are shown expressing compassion towards victims of protesters or police violence.
400.2 Law-abiding	This code refers to units of analysis where national political élites and institutions are described as acting according to the law.
400.3 Responsible	This code refers to units of analysis where national political élites and institutions are described as acting responsibly in managing unrest.
400.4 Strong	This code refers to units of analysis where national political élites and institutions are described as being strong.
400.5 Irresponsible	This code refers to units of analysis where national political élites and institutions are described as being irresponsible.
400.6 Successful	This code refers to units of analysis where national political élites and institutions are described as being successful in quelling unrest and restore order.
400.7 China's confidence	This code refers to units of analysis where China expresses confidence in national political élites and institutions in their efforts to quell unrest.

(Continued)

Appendix. (Continued)

Coding category	Definition
500. China's support	
500.1 Full	This code refers to units of analysis where China expresses its full support to Kazakh and Kyrgyz national authorities and people.
500.2 With limits	This code refers to units of analysis where China indicates some limits to its support to Kazakh and Kyrgyz national authorities and people.
500.3 More than rhetorical	This code refers to units of analysis where China indicates that its (full/limited) support accounts for more than purely rhetorical statements of support (e.g., training of security officers, sending humanitarian aid).
500.4 Rhetorical	This code refers to units of analysis that indicate that China's (full/limited) support is purely limited to rhetorical support of the government/people, without tangible actions.
600. China's demands	
600.1 Direct interests	This code refers to units of analysis where China refers to the role of national authorities in Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan/Central Asian countries in safeguarding China's on-site projects and personnel and the Belt and Road Initiative.
600.2 Stability	This code refers to units of analysis where China expresses hopes for a return to stability and social order in Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan/Central Asian countries.
600.3 Xinjiang	This code refers to units of analysis where China refers to the stability and security of Xinjiang.
000. No meaningful category applies	This code refers to units of analysis not covered by other categories and/or devoid of any meaning.