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POWER TRANSITION AND POST-AUTHORITARIAN REFORMS IN KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN: A COMPARATIVE POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the institutional nature of the post-authoritarian power transition in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and the substantive logic of the announced political reforms from the perspective of comparative politics. In the post-personalist period, the reforms initiated by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Shavkat Mirziyoyev have been presented in official discourse as renewal and political modernization. However, evaluating these reforms solely at the level of declared normative commitments is insufficient. This article examines the reforms in a comprehensive manner through the evolution of political discourse, legal and institutional restructuring, and changes in actual governance practices.

The theoretical framework of the analysis draws on the concepts of authoritarian adaptation and elite reproduction. The study demonstrates that the substance of the power transition has been oriented more toward the reconfiguration of regime stability than toward democratic institutionalization.

In this context, the notion of "reform" functions not as a mechanism for expanding structural pluralism but as an instrument for reaffirming elite agreements and redistributing power resources. This process reveals an internal contradiction between the rhetoric of liberalization and the practice of centralized control.

We interpret this dynamic as an institutionalized form of "managed liberalization": while the discourse of change becomes a tool of legitimation, the structural constraints on political competition remain intact. The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of regime transformation in Central Asia and refines the conceptual framework for analyzing authoritarian transitions.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, power transition, post-authoritarianism, political reforms, comparative politics.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАН МЕН ӨЗБЕКСТАНДАҒЫ БИЛІК ТРАНЗИТІ ЖӘНЕ ПОСТ-АВТОРИТАРЛЫҚ РЕФОРМАЛАР: САЛЫСТЫРМАЛЫ САЯСИ ТАЛДАУ

Аңдатпа

Бұл зерттеу мақсаты Қазақстан мен Өзбекстандағы поставторитарлық кезеңдегі билік транзитінің институционалдық табиғатын және жарияланған саяси реформалардың мазмұндық логикасын салыстырмалы саясаттану тұрғысынан талдайды. Персоналистік билік үлгісінен кейінгі кезеңде Қасым-Жомарт Тоқаев пен Шавкат Мирзиёев бастамашылық еткен реформалар ресми дискурста жаңғыру және саяси модернизация ретінде ұсынылды. Дегенмен, аталған реформаларды тек жарияланған нормативтік ұстанымдар деңгейінде бағалау жеткіліксіз. Осы мақалада реформалар саяси дискурс эволюциясы, құқықтық-институционалдық қайта құрылымдау және нақты басқару практикасының өзгерісі арқылы кешенді түрде қарастырылады.

Теориялық тұрғыдан талдау авторитарлық бейімделу және элиталық репродукция концепцияларына сүйенеді. Зерттеу билік транзитінің мазмұны демократиялық институционализациядан гөрі режимдік тұрақтылықты қайта конфигурациялауға бағытталғанын көрсетеді.

«Реформа» ұғымы бұл контексте құрылымдық плюрализмді кеңейту құралы емес, элиталық келісімдерді қайта бекіту және билік ресурстарын қайта бөлу механизмі ретінде көрінеді. Мұндай үдеріс либерализация риторикасы мен орталықтандырылған бақылау практикасы арасындағы ішкі қайшылықты айқындайды.

Біз бұл динамиканы «басқарылатын либерализацияның» институционалданған формасы ретінде түсіндіреміз: өзгеріс дискурсы легитимация құралына айналғанымен, саяси бәсекелестіктің құрылымдық шектеулері сақталады. Зерттеу Орталық Азиядағы режим трансформациясын неғұрлым нюансты пайымдауға және авторитарлық транзиттерді талдаудың концептуалдық шеңберін нақтылауға мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, билік транзиті, поставторитаризм, саяси реформалар, салыстырмалы саясаттану.

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ТРАНЗИТ ВЛАСТИ И ПОСТ-АВТОРИТАРНЫЕ РЕФОРМЫ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ И УЗБЕКИСТАНЕ: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ

Аннотация

Цель исследования – проанализировать институциональную природу транзита власти в пост-авторитарный период в Казахстане и Узбекистане, а также содержательную логику объявленных политических реформ с точки зрения сравнительной политологии. В постперсоналистский период реформы, инициированные Касым-Жомартом Токаевым и Шавкатом Мирзиёевым, в официальном дискурсе были представлены как обновление и политическая модернизация. Однако оценка этих реформ исключительно на уровне заявленных нормативных установок является недостаточной. В данной статье реформы рассматриваются комплексно – через эволюцию политического дискурса, правовую и институциональную реструктуризацию, а также изменения в реальных практиках управления.

Теоретически анализ опирается на концепции авторитарной адаптации и элитной репродукции. Исследование показывает, что содержание транзита власти в большей степени направлено на реконфигурацию режимной стабильности, чем на демократическую институционализацию.

Основные результаты. Понятие «реформа» в данном контексте выступает не как инструмент расширения структурного плюрализма, а как механизм закрепления элитных соглашений и перераспределения ресурсов власти. Подобный процесс выявляет внутреннее противоречие между риторикой либерализации и практиками централизованного контроля.

Мы интерпретируем эту динамику как институционализированную форму «управляемой либерализации»: дискурс изменений становится инструментом легитимации, тогда как структурные ограничения политической конкуренции сохраняются. Исследование способствует более нюансированному пониманию трансформации режимов в Центральной Азии и уточнению концептуальных рамок анализа авторитарных транзитов.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан, Узбекистан, транзит власти, пост-авторитаризм, политические реформы, сравнительная политология.

INTRODUCTION

After gaining independence, the states of Central Asia consolidated a model of authoritarian governance characterized by a stable concentration of power in the hands of a single leader, weak political competition, and limited civic participation. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the first presidents – Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov, who led their countries continuously from the early 1990s – constructed an institutional architecture of power that depended heavily on their personal authority and political influence. Legislative bodies, the judiciary, and other key institutions functioned under the dominance of the executive branch, ensuring regime stability while simultaneously constraining opportunities for political liberalization and democratic transformation.

This model of long-term personalist rule, often perceived by external observers as a guarantor of stability, predictability, and gradual economic development, reached its structural and political limits by the late 2010s. In Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev unexpectedly resigned in 2019 while

retaining significant influence within the political system through both formal and informal mechanisms. In Uzbekistan, the death of Islam Karimov in 2016 acted as a catalyst for a forced leadership transition and initiated cautious yet notable reforms. These developments marked the first instances of supreme power transfer in the histories of these states and opened a new phase of political development that can be described as a post-authoritarian period with elements of institutional transformation and adaptation of pre-existing governance mechanisms.

Examining the characteristics of these power transitions is crucial for understanding the trajectories of political development across the broader Central Asian region. During the rule of Nazarbayev and Karimov, both countries were widely classified as "consolidated authoritarian regimes" [1, p. 114], where leadership succession constitutes a potentially unstable and risky process capable of reshaping elite balances, redistributing resources, and affecting the resilience of state institutions. Despite expectations of liberalization and democratic reform, such transitions are frequently accompanied by the persistence of core elements of the previous system, including control over political opposition, mass media, and civil society, as well as restrictions on genuine political competition.

Against this backdrop, the article poses the following research question: to what extent have the reforms initiated after leadership change transformed the political systems of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and to what degree have they facilitated or, conversely, hindered the preservation of the authoritarian model of governance? Additionally, the study considers whether these reforms contributed to genuine institutional strengthening or remained largely declarative in nature. The aim of the research is to identify similarities and differences in the content, depth, and direction of post-authoritarian reforms in the two countries, as well as to assess their impact on the evolution of political regimes and the prospects for further political change.

The study is based on a comparative analytical approach, involving the examination of historical contexts, mechanisms of power transfer, and subsequent reform trajectories in both cases. Particular attention is paid to both shared patterns and country-specific factors shaping political dynamics, including the role of political elites, institutional legacies, international influences, and domestic societal pressures. Differences in reform strategies, the pace of change, and the degree of institutionalization are also taken into account.

The structure of the article is as follows: the first section outlines the theoretical approaches to the study of authoritarian transformations and the characteristics of personalist regimes. This is followed by separate analyses of the processes of power transition and reform in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The final section provides a comparative analysis, presents the main findings, and discusses the theoretical and practical significance of the study, as well as potential directions for future research in this field.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In theories of political transition from authoritarian regimes, there exists a hypothesis that the transfer of power may create opportunities for positive change, particularly in the direction of democratization and the expansion of civil liberties [2, p. 68]. This idea has long occupied a central place in transitology, assuming that leadership change can trigger processes of institutional liberalization and a gradual shift toward a more open political order. However, the post-Soviet experience has clearly demonstrated that this hypothesis is not universal and is not consistently confirmed in practice. In many cases, a change in leadership does not lead to systemic democratic transformation but rather results in the modification of an existing governance model.

Political scientist Thomas Carothers, in his critique of the classical transition paradigm, argued that in a number of authoritarian states the so-called "transition to democracy paradigm" failed to materialize. This implies that the departure of an autocratic leader does not automatically lead to the emergence of democratic institutions and practices. On the contrary, many countries exhibit a persistence of established political mechanisms, albeit in somewhat modified forms. In reality, the transfer of power often represents a process of internal regime adaptation to new conditions, involving a redistribution of influence among elite groups rather than a fundamental revision of the principles

underlying the political system. As a result, the evolution of political regimes frequently demonstrates a strong tendency toward authoritarian continuity.

In the scholarly literature, the political regimes of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are commonly characterized as neopatrimonial or personalist systems. A defining feature of such regimes is the high degree of power personalization, whereby formal institutions play a secondary role compared to informal governance practices. Informal networks, patron-client relations, and systems of political loyalty become the primary mechanisms through which resources are distributed and decisions are made. State policy is largely shaped by the personal authority of the president, as well as by the balance of interests among elite groups clustered around him.

Within a neopatrimonial framework, institutions such as parliaments, judicial systems, and political parties formally continue to function and retain the outward appearance of an institutionalized state structure. However, their autonomy is significantly constrained, while the real levers of power are concentrated in the hands of the head of state and his close circle [3, p. 127]. This creates a dual system in which formal rules coexist with informal decision-making mechanisms, the latter often proving more decisive in practice.

In authoritarian personalist regimes, the issue of leadership succession occupies a particularly critical position and is widely regarded as one of the most vulnerable stages in the lifecycle of the regime. The departure of a leader – especially if it occurs unexpectedly or without a clearly institutionalized succession mechanism – can pose a serious challenge to the entire political system. Key difficulties include ensuring the legitimacy of the new leader, preventing intra-elite conflict, and maintaining the stability of state institutions. The absence of well-established procedures for leadership change increases the risks of political instability and elite fragmentation.

From a theoretical perspective, a transfer of power has the potential to transform the nature of a regime, including the possibility of a transition toward more democratic forms of governance. However, empirical research indicates that such outcomes are relatively rare. For instance, an extensive study by Barbara Geddes and her colleagues found that in the second half of the twentieth century, only 45% of cases involving the departure of an authoritarian leader resulted in regime change, and even in those instances, the outcome was most often the replacement of one form of autocracy with another [4, p. 307]. This finding underscores the resilience of authoritarian systems and their capacity to adapt to change without fundamentally altering their core characteristics.

Thus, in most cases, leadership change does not transform the type of political regime but merely replaces the individual at its apex. This phenomenon is commonly interpreted as a manifestation of institutional inertia and the durability of authoritarian structures. The persistence of key elements of the system – such as control over political opposition, restrictions on media freedom, and the weakness of civil society – enables the regime to continue functioning even after the departure of its founding leader.

In analyzing the impact of power transitions on authoritarian systems, the legitimation strategies employed by new leaders play a crucial role. In order to consolidate their authority, they may initiate reforms aimed at signaling renewal and improving the effectiveness of governance. Such reforms may include limited political liberalization, administrative restructuring, or economic adjustments. However, in many cases, the primary objective of these measures is not a fundamental transformation of the system but rather its preservation through adaptation to new political and social conditions.

As political scientist Slavomír Horák has noted, although processes of succession and post-succession change in authoritarian regimes remain underexplored in academic research, this period is critical in determining the future trajectory of the political order [5, p. 89]. It is during this stage that it becomes clear whether the existing system will persist or undergo gradual transformation. Consequently, the analysis of transitional periods provides valuable insights into the internal logic and resilience of authoritarian governance.

The cases of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan vividly illustrate this dilemma. In both instances, the transfer of power was accompanied by reformist initiatives aimed at modernizing the political system and enhancing its effectiveness. New leaders declared their intention to soften certain elements of the

previous authoritarian order, expand opportunities for public participation, and increase the openness of state institutions. At the same time, however, they sought to strengthen their own positions and consolidate key levers of power in their hands.

Therefore, the processes of power transition in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan reveal a complex interplay between change and continuity. On the one hand, there are observable efforts toward reform and adaptation to new conditions; on the other, the fundamental logic of authoritarian governance remains largely intact. This makes these cases particularly significant for comparative analysis and contributes to a deeper understanding of political transformations in the post-Soviet space.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Under Nursultan Nazarbayev's rule from 1990 to 2019, Kazakhstan was described as one of the most stable authoritarian regimes in Central Asia. Nazarbayev established the dominance of presidential power, brought the executive branch fully under his control, and did not allow the parliament or judiciary to slip out of his influence. In 2010, Nazarbayev was officially given the title of "Leader of the Nation" (*Elbasy*), which granted him and his family lifelong immunity from criminal prosecution. On March 19, 2019, Nazarbayev unexpectedly announced that he would resign. This move was unprecedented in post-Soviet Central Asia – a long-ruling authoritarian leader voluntarily left office [6, p.219]. However, Nazarbayev's decision was part of a carefully prepared transition strategy. Even after stepping down from the presidency, he retained several levers of state power: as the Chairman of the Security Council, the leader of the ruling Nur Otan (now *Amanat*) party, and a member of the Constitutional Council, Nazarbayev continued to wield informal influence over political decisions. Under the Constitution, when Nazarbayev stepped down his presidential powers were assumed by Senate Chairman Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. In June 2019, an early presidential election was held in which Tokayev won with over 70% of the vote.

After taking office, Tokayev announced that he would maintain Nazarbayev's policy course, but also carry out some reforms. He promoted the concept of a "listening state," promising to strengthen dialogue between the government and society [7, p.214]. The National Council of Public Trust, established in 2019, began work as a consultative body engaging various social groups in dialogue. In his first years, Tokayev took steps aimed at slightly softening the political system: easing the law on peaceful assemblies, lowering the requirements for registering political parties, and launching initiatives to increase the government's accountability in addressing social issues. In 2020, a new law on protests was adopted, making the previous advance permission process somewhat more lenient; additionally, provisions like "slander" were removed from the criminal code and moved to the category of administrative offenses. In the January 2021 parliamentary elections, Nur Otan party once again won an overwhelming victory, and not a single opposition party managed to enter parliament. This outcome demonstrated that the political arena was still completely under the control of the authorities at that time.

Overall, Tokayev's first package of reforms (2019–2021) sought to introduce certain institutional changes while maintaining the presidential form of rule. However, these changes were carried out very cautiously and did not significantly affect the core of the power structure. Nazarbayev's shadow remained clearly present during these years: his eldest daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva served as Senate Chair from 2019 to 2020, and many members of the former regime's elite continued in their positions in the upper echelons of the state apparatus. No ban on opposition movements was lifted, and the situation for freedom of speech did not substantially improve. These factors show the limited nature of Tokayev's initial changes and that the fundamental basis of the authoritarian model inherited from the Nazarbayev era remained intact [8, p.138].

The biggest test of Kazakhstan's power transition came in January 2022. A public protest that began in Mangystau Province against a rise in liquefied gas prices spread across the entire country within days, escalating into widespread unrest. During the January events, according to official data, at least 238 people were killed and thousands were injured. Protesters set fire to a number of government buildings and armed clashes took place. Using this crisis, Tokayev took decisive steps to

consolidate all power in his hands. He requested military assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), bringing a temporary foreign peacekeeping force into the country. Most importantly, during those days he removed Nazarbayev – who was serving as lifetime chairman of the Security Council – from that position and took over the chairmanship himself [9, p.332]. Thus, in the public eye, the balance of power between the two leaders, Tokayev and Nazarbayev, was permanently resolved in Tokayev's favor. Soon after the January events, Tokayev began gradually purging Nazarbayev's close circle from power. Several of Nazarbayev's relatives and trusted associates were dismissed from high offices, and corruption charges were brought against some of them. For example, the former chairman of the National Security Committee, Karim Massimov, was arrested on charges of treason. According to expert assessments, the January events launched the second phase of the transition process in Kazakhstan: during this stage, Tokayev significantly strengthened his personal rule and was able to greatly weaken the influence of the former elite.

The January events clearly demonstrated the public's demand for change, prompting Tokayev to pledge extensive political reforms in 2022 [10, p.197]. In his address to the nation on March 16, 2022, the President announced the concept of a "New Kazakhstan" and proposed a package of constitutional reforms aimed at modernizing the political system. In a nationwide referendum held in June, significant amendments to the Constitution were approved: the president's term was now limited to a single seven-year term; the provisions concerning the First President – *Elbasy* were removed from the Basic Law, abolishing the special privileges granted to Nazarbayev and his family. At the same time, some presidential powers were formally reallocated to the Parliament and local *maslikhats* – for example, the right of *maslikhat* deputies to approve the appointment of regional *akims* (governors) was introduced. On paper, these changes were intended to move the political system away from a super-presidential model and improve the balance among branches of power. In November of that year, to solidify his authority under the new political circumstances, Tokayev called an early presidential election and was re-elected to a new seven-year term as allowed by the Constitution.

In March 2023, elections to the Mazhilis (lower house of Parliament) were held under a mixed majoritarian-proportional system. For the first time in many years, the parliament's composition included representatives of a formally opposition-oriented party – the Nationwide Social Democratic Party (NSDP) – as well as a handful of independent candidates. This development created the impression that elements of competition had entered the political system after a long hiatus. However, in general, genuine opposition remains outside of the system. Newly registered parties such as *Respublica* may take a critical view on certain issues, but they do not espouse a fundamentally oppositional agenda toward the government. The election campaigns were conducted, as before, under conditions of extensive use of administrative resources, and no truly dangerous competition to the authorities was permitted. For instance, in the 2023 Mazhilis elections, not a single independent candidate critical of the government won a seat, and virtually all of the new parties adopted positions supportive of the president's policies. International observers noted that despite some individual elements of competition, the overall political environment was still not on a level playing field for a fair contest.

One of the principles Tokayev proclaimed for a "Justice Kazakhstan" (*Ädiletti Qazaqstan*) was reducing social inequality and transforming the oligarchic economic system. After the January events, the president openly criticized the concentration of the country's wealth in the hands of a few families and declared the need for "de-oligarchization" of the economy. The authorities took some steps in this direction, but the economic structure did not undergo any fundamental changes. The long-standing oligarchic model – whereby major assets remain in the grip of a few groups and those groups' interests dominate resource allocation – still persists [11, p.74]. The state continues, as before, to entrust the leadership of major enterprises and national companies to individuals close to the power structure, and the government's campaign to "return illegally withdrawn assets to the state" largely boiled down to reclaiming some funds previously held by former officials. For instance, by mid-2023 the prosecutor's office reported about $1.9 billion in assets had been returned, but it remains unclear how exactly this money will be used for the public good. Analysts note that without dismantling the

structural oligopolies in the economy, the ideal of a "Just Kazakhstan" cannot be realized. The lack of truly structural economic reforms continues to impede the fair distribution of public resources.

Thus, although the power transition and post-authoritarian reforms in Kazakhstan initially slightly relaxed the political system, they did not lead to fundamental political liberalization. The changes implemented under Tokayev's leadership have been evolutionary in nature and largely limited to adapting the former authoritarian system to new conditions. As a result of the constitutional reforms, Nazarbayev's personal privileges and titles were removed, but the vertical concentration of power in the presidential institution remained in place. Even though the role of Parliament and other institutions has somewhat increased, it is difficult to say that decision-making processes now involve broad popular participation. By mid-2023, the observed trend was Tokayev fully consolidating his personal rule and shaping a new image for the regime. He dismantled the "Leader of the Nation" cult that was a legacy of the Nazarbayev era and sought to establish new bases of legitimacy for himself. However, the values of justice, equality, and transparency proclaimed under the "New Kazakhstan" slogan have yet to be fully realized. Instead, a transformed authoritarianism – a governance model that outwardly adopts democratic rhetoric but in practice retains a monopoly on power – has proven to be alive and well. There are even predictions that in the coming years the authorities might introduce further convenient changes to the Constitution to strengthen their position [11, p.153]. In sum, the changes in Kazakhstan in recent years can be characterized not as a full-fledged political liberalization, but rather as a managed, intra-regime modernization of the system of power.

Power Transition and Post-Authoritarian Reforms in Uzbekistan. Islam Karimov ruled Uzbekistan continuously from 1989 until 2016, making him one of the longest-ruling autocrats in the post-Soviet space. Under Karimov's rule, Uzbekistan became one of the most repressive states in the world: political opposition was completely eliminated, the mass media and civil society were kept under strict censorship, thousands of people were imprisoned for political reasons, and torture by law enforcement agencies became systematic (Russell 2018). The economy was also run in an extremely closed manner, with strict restrictions on converting the national currency (the *som*), and each year the population was conscripted into mass forced labor during the cotton harvest [12, p.153].

In September 2016, the 78-year-old Islam Karimov died of a stroke. This news was officially announced with a delay, giving the elite little time to prepare for a power transition. According to the Constitution, the Senate Chairman should have assumed the interim duties of head of state, but Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev – the figure with the greatest political weight at that moment – took power instead. Senate Chairman Nigmatulla Yuldoshev voluntarily declined to serve as acting president, and parliament confirmed Mirziyoyev as interim president [13, p.208]. Observers suggest that Mirziyoyev consolidated power in his own hands by reaching an understanding with Rustam Inoyatov, the powerful head of the National Security Service, and Rustam Azimov, an influential figure in finance. In the snap presidential election on December 4, 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev won with 88% of the vote. Four candidates took part in that election, but no genuine opposition candidate was registered and administrative resources were extensively used. Nevertheless, the power transition was peaceful – Uzbekistan did not experience the open elite conflicts or mass unrest seen in some other post-Soviet countries. Thus, a new post-Karimov period began in the country's history.

Mirziyoyev's initial reforms and the "thaw" period: After assuming the presidency, Shavkat Mirziyoyev embarked on a broad program of reforms aimed at pulling the country out of the stagnation that had persisted for many years. In February 2017, he announced the "2017–2021 National Action Strategy," which identified improving public administration, establishing the rule of law, liberalizing the economy, and protecting citizens' interests in the social sphere as priority areas [14, p.94]. The first concrete steps saw economic liberalization measures being implemented: longstanding burdens on the public, such as strict currency restrictions, were lifted, and in September 2017 the *som* was allowed to be freely converted. Numerous bureaucratic barriers to entrepreneurial activity were eliminated, and tax policy was revised to be more business-friendly. New incentives were introduced to attract foreign investment and expand external trade relations. The Mirziyoyev government renewed engagement with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and

the Asian Development Bank, obtaining support for structural reforms. During this period, Uzbek society – long kept closed – began to sense the first signs of openness: for example, some internet resources that had previously been inaccessible were unblocked, and censorship was slightly relaxed.

Signs of liberalization were evident in both social and political life. Starting at the end of 2016 and over the next few years, the authorities released dozens of political prisoners. According to Human Rights Watch, between September 2016 and mid-2018 at least around 30 people jailed on political grounds were freed. Among those released were prominent journalists Muhammad Bekjanov and Yusuf Ruzimuradov, human rights defenders Azam Farmonov and Akzam Turgunov, and a former opposition politician, Samandar Qoqonov (Human Rights Watch 2017). These moves demonstrated the new government's effort to soften its repressive policies. Another change that received broad approval was the restriction of forced labor, especially the previously widespread practice of mobilizing citizens for the cotton harvest. In 2017, the government announced a ban on forcing university students, schoolteachers, and medical staff to participate in the annual cotton-picking campaign. In subsequent harvest seasons, this ban was largely observed, and the formerly mass mobilization was significantly reduced [15, p.107]. The Mirziyoyev administration also established Presidential Public Reception Centers across the country to facilitate feedback from the populace. These offices allowed ordinary citizens to directly convey local problems to the presidential administration for prompt resolution. This kind of initiative did not exist in the Karimov era, and it was regarded as a symbolic step by the new leadership to present itself as a government "listening to the people's voice".

Opening in foreign policy: Uzbekistan abandoned its former isolationist policy and began to conduct active diplomacy at the regional and global levels. Mirziyoyev moved to resolve previously intractable border issues with neighboring Central Asian countries: border checkpoints with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were reopened, and visa regimes were eased. Constructive dialogue was established on regional water resources and energy issues, reducing years of mutual distrust. In 2018, Tashkent hosted an informal consultative meeting of Central Asian heads of state – a sign of renewed regional cooperation that would have been unthinkable in the Karimov era. Uzbekistan also strengthened its relations with major powers such as the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China. During Mirziyoyev's official visits to the U.S. and Europe in 2018, Western countries declared their support for Uzbekistan's reforms. That same year, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights sent a special rapporteur to Uzbekistan, and for the first time in many years the country's human rights situation was assessed at an international level. These moves improved Uzbekistan's international image and allowed it to be seen not as a formerly closed system but as a country under a new leader with a reformist agenda.

Limits of political liberalization and authoritarian continuity: Despite the hope that Mirziyoyev's changes initially inspired, the task of fundamentally democratizing the political system proceeded slowly and remained limited. In the early years of the new president's rule, the atmosphere of fear and pressure did seem to ease somewhat, but the main underpinnings of power remained intact [16, p.298]. In 2017–2018, Mirziyoyev ousted Rustam Inoyatov, the once all-powerful head of the National Security Service, and reorganized this security structure. This move was an important victory for consolidating the president's personal authority, because the security apparatus, which had enjoyed extraordinary power under the previous regime, was now directly answerable to the new leader. However, these changes did not automatically translate into the emergence of independent political institutions. There was no progress in allowing new opposition political parties to form or in officially registering parties that had been banned. The parties that were officially registered remained, as before, loyal to the regime and unable to voice criticism (for example, the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, "Adolat", "Milliy Tiklanish", etc.). In 2019, attempts to re-register the opposition-leaning *Erk* party or to form a new party called "People's Unity" by activists encountered hidden resistance from the authorities – there were reports that the signature collection and registration processes were intentionally impeded.

These incidents demonstrate that the new government's restrictions on freedom of speech remain extensive and that the authoritarian leadership is still intolerant of criticism. Under Mirziyoyev's rule, the political opposition has not gained any opportunity to participate in governance. All players in the parliament and official politics have remained representatives of the same ruling circle. Administrative resources and the power structures continue, as before, to keep political life fully under control. Thus, the reforms undertaken have been implemented only in areas that do not threaten the regime's stability. The regime has preserved its fundamental "red lines" and has not allowed political competition to emerge [17, p.149].

Power consolidation and recent events: In October 2021, a presidential election opened the way for Mirziyoyev's second term. Officially, he won over 80% of the vote. However, OSCE observers criticized this election as a campaign devoid of genuine competition and characterized by excessive use of administrative resources. Even so, Mirziyoyev's domestic legitimacy was strengthened and the process of power centralization continued. At the start of his second term, the president advanced the idea of "New Uzbekistan" and rolled out a new Development Strategy for 2022–2026. This document aimed to continue the path of the earlier reforms (World Bank 2024). Not long thereafter, however, the regime faced a new serious test. In July 2022, mass protests suddenly erupted in the western autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan. Local people in Nukus and other areas took to the streets for several days, protesting against proposed constitutional amendments. In particular, the government's plan to remove Karakalpakstan's sovereign status and its right to secede from Uzbekistan by referendum sparked enormous opposition. The protests were put down by force, with official reports stating that 21 people were killed and more than 270 injured [16, p.541]. This incident became the bloodiest conflict in post-Karimov Uzbekistan. Initially, the authorities temporarily withdrew the contentious constitutional provisions, but before long, on April 30, 2023, a new nationwide referendum on changing the Constitution was held. This time, the provision regarding Karakalpakstan's status was left unaltered; instead, the presidential term was extended from 5 to 7 years, and Mirziyoyev's previous two terms were "reset." In other words, the updated Constitution allowed him to stand in an early presidential election in July 2023 and run for another term. Mirziyoyev duly won again (with 87% of the vote), effectively extending his potential tenure in power to 2040. Analysts interpreted these events as revealing the true nature of the regime: the turmoil in Karakalpakstan and the subsequent constitutional changes showed that Uzbekistan's regime ultimately retained its authoritarian character [17, p.314]. Although Mirziyoyev has continued to pursue certain reforms in response to public demands, it became clear that he does not aim to share political power or open the way for genuine pluralism.

The power transition and reform process also altered the **intra-elite balance** of power. Mirziyoyev's consolidation of authority sidelined some former associates and led to the emergence of new influential groups. In late 2022, a former Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration, Komil Allamjonov, was the target of an assassination attempt by unknown assailants, leaving him seriously injured and causing a major public outcry. The investigation indicated that suspects in the attack had links to the president's son-in-law, Otabek Umarov, who had headed a security service, suggesting an "intra-family conflict" within the regime. Additionally, Mirziyoyev's eldest daughter, Saida Mirziyoyeva, rapidly rose through the state hierarchy in 2022–2023, moving from Deputy Director of the Agency for Information and Public Communications to Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration. In July 2023, she was appointed as the head of the Presidential Administration, effectively becoming the second most powerful person in the country. Saida Mirziyoyeva's ascent to the upper echelons of power prompted varied reactions – some analysts viewed it as the president's strategy to bring his family closer to power, even possibly grooming her as a future "successor". However, observers caution that in authoritarian regimes succession is a volatile matter: they point to the fates of Gulnara Karimova (Karimov's daughter) or Dariga Nazarbayeva (Nazarbayev's daughter) as examples where a once-probable successor can completely fall from political grace. In any case, it appears that Uzbekistan's current leadership remains authoritarian in nature, opting only to adapt itself to changing circumstances [18, p.118].

The power transition and post-authoritarian reforms in Uzbekistan can be evaluated as having a dual character. On one hand, the changes implemented since Mirziyoyev took office represent a considerable advance in scope and momentum compared to the Karimov era. Economic liberalization, the reduction of petty corruption in daily life, the introduction of currency convertibility, the creation of channels for citizens to lodge complaints with state agencies, as well as Uzbekistan's emergence from international isolation in pursuit of open partnerships, all brought tangible positive changes for ordinary people. On the other hand, the influence of these reforms on democratizing the political system has remained very limited. No separation of powers or genuine checks-and-balances mechanisms have been introduced; opposition forces have not been allowed to participate in the political process; and the issues of rule of law and judicial independence have not been fully resolved. Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the elite around him have firmly kept the levers of state power in their own hands. Formally, the leader changed, but the core of the regime – an authoritarian style of governance, political monopoly, and the lack of accountability of the authorities to society – did not undergo a fundamental transformation [14, p.223]. This phenomenon can be understood as the adaptation of an authoritarian regime: the outward appearance has changed, but the inner essence remains the same. While the "partial reforms" pursued by Mirziyoyev satisfied some of the public's demands, they have been insufficient to set Uzbekistan's political system on a truly democratic path. In the coming years, whichever development path the country chooses – whether the deepening of reforms or, conversely, a strengthening of its authoritarian character – will undoubtedly have a significant impact on Uzbekistan's internal stability and its role in the region.

Transition scenarios: planned vs. abrupt change. The power transitions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan began under different scenarios, yet their ultimate outcomes were similar. In Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned voluntarily in 2019 and handed power to Senate Chairman Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. This planned, peaceful handover was primarily aimed at ensuring continuity of the regime. In fact, Tokayev was pre-selected as Nazarbayev's trusted associate to become the new president, with the expectation that no fundamental changes to the system would occur. For example, analysts point out that Tokayev's rise to power represented a transition designed by Nazarbayev to bring about "as little real change as possible". Uzbekistan, by contrast, was forced to undergo a sudden and unplanned transition in 2016 when President Islam Karimov died. Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed power according to constitutional procedure, but the absence of the former leader allowed Mirziyoyev to more swiftly consolidate his own position. Within a short time, he established himself as an independent leader and concentrated political power in his hands. Despite these differences, the key result in both countries was the same: the stability and continuity of the regime were not disrupted. In both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the new leaders preserved the foundations of the previous authoritarian order, meaning the transition ultimately ensured an evolutionary transfer of power and the system's continued vitality [19, p.121]. Such a managed succession was even regarded as a model for other post-Soviet states – some researchers noted that the "new model of authoritarian succession" initiated by Nazarbayev could potentially be replicated elsewhere.

Influence of the former leader and elite continuity. The extent of the former leader's influence on the post-transition political order differed in the two countries. In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev continued to exert informal influence on the political process for several years after stepping down, creating a kind of tandem at the apex of power. Although Tokayev held the presidency, on important strategic decisions he was compelled to consult Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev's status as *Elbasy* (enshrined in the Constitution) and his right to chair the Security Council for life made him a shadow power center until 2022. This situation constrained Tokayev's initial legitimacy and caused him to be perceived for some time as a "transitional president." In Uzbekistan, by contrast, Karimov's complete

departure from the scene allowed Mirziyoyev to take full control. Free from the former leader's shadow, the new president rebuilt the power vertical and took active steps to install his own team. For instance, in 2017–2018 Mirziyoyev completely overhauled the leadership of the security forces, dismissing the National Security Service chief from the Karimov era [20, p.187]. This change was carried out to cement Mirziyoyev's personal rule. However, in both countries the new rulers initially avoided direct confrontation with the old elite, choosing a strategy of compromise. In Kazakhstan, the Nazarbayev family and allied oligarchic groups retained their influence in the early phase of the transition; only after the January 2022 events did Tokayev begin gradually sidelining them. In Uzbekistan, likewise, some members of Karimov's administrative apparatus kept their positions and adapted to the new leadership. Under Mirziyoyev, certain deputy prime ministers and key ministers remained in place, meaning elite continuity was not immediately broken. Only in the security sector and regional administration did Mirziyoyev conduct a personnel "cleansing" to appoint new loyal figures. Overall, the new leaders did not engage in a power struggle with the old guard at the outset, but instead consolidated their rule through compromise. Only once power was fully in their hands did they proceed to hold some figures of the former regime accountable or remove them from the political stage. This approach is viewed as a typical method to preserve regime stability during a power transition [21, p.201].

Direction and pace of post-transition reforms. There were notable differences in the content and priorities of the reforms declared by the new leaders of the two countries. In the post-Nazarbayev period, Kazakhstan largely turned toward institutional and political reforms. From 2019 onward, Tokayev launched initiatives to gradually change the political system: he established the National Council of Public Trust, promised to ease requirements for registering political parties, and introduced the notion of a parliamentary opposition. The 2022 constitutional reform limited some presidential powers and announced a number of democratic changes (for example, restricting the presidency to a single term, introducing a mixed electoral system for the Mazhilis, etc.). However, these changes were mostly implemented in a top-down manner and were not driven by active demands from civil society or the opposition. The reforms were carried out in stages and slowly: mild liberalization steps in 2019–2021, constitutional amendments in 2022, and a review of the electoral system in 2023. According to analysts, the primary aim of Tokayev's initiatives was to make the political institutions appear somewhat more open and thus to reinforce his own legitimacy as leader. Branded under the "New Kazakhstan" slogan, these reforms in reality were directed more at generating public hope and a positive outlook than at fundamentally redistributing power [22, p.114].

In Uzbekistan, the initial post-transition reforms were mainly focused on the economic and administrative spheres. Immediately upon taking office in 2017, Mirziyoyev swiftly implemented broad measures such as liberalizing the currency market, providing tax breaks, supporting entrepreneurship, and streamlining the civil service. These actions had an effect akin to "shock therapy" on the economy and were met with positive reactions from the international community. As the economy opened up, Uzbekistan experienced several consecutive years of rapid GDP growth and a modest improvement in living standards: the poverty rate fell and small businesses proliferated. For example, according to World Bank data, the share of Uzbekistan's population living below the national poverty line dropped from roughly 36% in 2015 to about 17% in 2022, and by 2023 this figure had decreased further to around 11%. At the same time, some restrictions on daily life were relaxed: the old requirement to obtain a special permit (the so-called "exit visa") to travel abroad was abolished, internet access was expanded, and negative practices like forced labor were banned. However, in terms of political reform, Mirziyoyev acted with extreme caution. Constitutional changes in 2017 and 2019 were enacted, but mostly amounted to declarative pledges to enhance parliament's role. No structural changes to foster genuine political competition were carried out: no opposition

parties were registered, and presidential and parliamentary elections continued to be held under the ruling party's full control. Observers note that Mirziyoyev's reforms were aimed primarily at improving the population's economic situation to strengthen his own standing, with political liberalization relegated to a secondary priority [17, p.204]. This was a pragmatic step arising from the urgent need to address the severe socio-economic problems inherited from Karimov's rule.

The true nature of managed reforms. A significant portion of the reforms publicized in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in reality served the goal of preserving the regime. That is, while the changes outwardly resembled moves toward democratization, their underlying character was merely the adaptation of authoritarian rule [19, p.196]. In Kazakhstan, several of Tokayev's much-touted political innovations – limiting the president to a single 7-year term, introducing a mixed electoral system for the Mazhilis, easing the registration of parties – on paper should have opened up the political system. In practice, these measures provided the new ruling elite with an opportunity to buy time and further consolidate their power. For instance, the change to limit presidential terms enabled Tokayev to hold an early election in 2022 and "reset" his time in office to start afresh. And while switching the Mazhilis elections to a mixed system allowed for a degree of apparent competition between pro-government parties, it ultimately did not create conditions for any truly opposition forces to gain seats. Opposition organizations were still not allowed to contest, and the major media remained under state influence; as a result, the latest parliamentary elections were dubbed "elections without a choice" [21, p.95].

In Uzbekistan, although the economic reforms brought certain successes, the monopoly on political power remained intact. In his initial years, Mirziyoyev ensured economic growth and increased public tolerance of the government by improving living conditions. This economic progress strengthened the regime's legitimacy and boosted the president's personal prestige. However, the empowered regime did not permit any opposition alternatives: in the 2021 presidential election, no genuine opposition candidate was allowed to run, and newly formed independent parties failed to clear the registration hurdles. Under the banner of "New Uzbekistan," Mirziyoyev's government also pledged to engage in public dialogue and improve governance, but it was clear that the ultimate objective was to maintain popular support while prolonging his rule [17, p.223]. As a result, through the 2023 constitutional referendum, he "reset" his presidential term count, effectively legalizing an extension of his tenure to potentially remain in power until 2040. Hence, the majority of the proclaimed reforms were not a genuine turn toward democracy, but rather an imitative transformation of power. Numerous examples from authoritarian modernization illustrate this pattern: the leadership implements superficial changes and adapts its practices to meet the times, but genuine political competition and civil liberties are not institutionally secured [19, p.106].

Centralization of power and regime consolidation. After the transitions, the political systems of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan did not stray from their authoritarian nature. In Kazakhstan, during the first three years it might have appeared that power was split between two centers – those of Nazarbayev and Tokayev – but after the January 2022 events the situation changed fundamentally. In the wake of that upheaval and bloodshed, Tokayev moved to permanently sideline the former president: Nazarbayev was stripped of his status as lifetime Security Council chairman, and his family members were removed from high offices [22, p.187]. Consequently, from 2022 onward all real power in Kazakhstan became concentrated in Tokayev's hands. Although the constitutional reform claimed to have abolished the "super-presidential" model, in practice the presidential administration and executive branch remain as dominant as before. Parliament and the judiciary do not wield independent influence; they cannot stand against decisions from the President's administration.

In Uzbekistan, Mirziyoyev likewise intensified centralization immediately upon taking office. Through legal amendments he formally bolstered the role of the Oliy Majlis (parliament) and the

Cabinet of Ministers, but in truth he preserved a system where he himself makes all key decisions. In the political life of the country, no institutions remain to voice alternative views: independent media outlets are scarce, all five registered political parties support the president, and genuine opposition movements are prohibited. The 2023 constitutional changes enabled Mirziyoyev to extend his hold on power potentially until 2040.

DISCUSSION

The transfer of power did indeed raise certain hopeful expectations among the public in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The new leaders framed their agendas with slogans like "New Kazakhstan" and "New Uzbekistan," promising to build a just society in the future [21, p.132]. Tokayev gave attention to social issues, implementing measures such as raising wages and pensions and supporting large families and the poor. Mirziyoyev opened borders with neighboring countries and worked to strengthen friendly relations in the region; as a result, inter-regional trade and labor migration in Central Asia increased. These developments did have a positive effect on people's quality of life to some degree. For instance, in Uzbekistan, economic growth has been around 5–7% annually since 2017, and official figures indicate that unemployment has slightly declined. Such technocratic reforms were greeted with cautious approval by external partners in Washington and Brussels. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, during his 2023 visit to Tashkent, praised Mirziyoyev's reforms while emphasizing the importance of fully implementing them. He encouraged the Uzbek leadership to grant greater freedoms to civil society and to allow the political opposition to participate. The European Union also indicated its support for the reform efforts in Central Asia, expressing particular interest in aiding Kazakhstan's socio-economic reforms through investment cooperation. At the same time, Western officials urged the new leaders to fulfill the public's hopes and to carry out their announced changes in practice. Underlying this stance is a call for the reforms to deliver concrete results rather than remain merely declarative. Although the new leaders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan presented themselves to foreign observers as relatively more liberal and reform-oriented, it was evident in the end that preserving their grip on power was their overriding concern [23, p.73].

The dual nature of authoritarian transition. The experiences of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan showcase two contradictory aspects of leadership change in authoritarian systems. On the one hand, the replacement of a leader can generate certain innovations and hopes for relaxation: the arrival of a new figure creates an opportunity to revisit obsolete policies and to reshape engagement with society. For instance, when Mirziyoyev came to power, Uzbek society experienced something of a "thaw" – the country, long sealed off, opened its doors, critical opinions appeared in the press, and the public's fear of the government diminished. Tokayev similarly initially put forward the concept of a "listening state," declaring that the government would heed the people's voice. All this reflects the positive potential of a transition period: the system tries to break out of rigid stagnation and shows a willingness to adapt. On the other hand, a power transition can serve as a means for an authoritarian regime to extend its own lifespan. The new leader preserves the core foundations of the old authoritarian order while merely refreshing its façade, and he carries out reforms chiefly to legitimize his rule. This is precisely what happened in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Upon taking power, Tokayev and Mirziyoyev did introduce some changes in rhetoric and made minor policy adjustments, but the monopolistic nature of authority did not change. As time went on, these leaders also proceeded to cement their personal power in much the same way as the autocratic leaders before them. As Freedom House analysts highlighted, after the transitions these countries still rank among the most closed regimes in the post-Soviet region.

In sum, the power transitions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are clear examples of evolutionary authoritarianism. The system undergoes a degree of renewal from within, but its fundamental nature remains unchanged. Such a scenario is highly likely to be repeated in other Central Asian countries (for example, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) in the future. When a leader changes in an authoritarian regime, the dual dynamics described above come into play: the public is given a bit of hope and the outward image of the regime is revamped, but the underlying power structure and its built-in resistance to democratization persist. Therefore, the question of whether a power transition will result in a genuine democratic breakthrough is met with skepticism in light of these two cases. The ability of an authoritarian system to reform itself is limited, and the experiences of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan clearly show that changes are often largely symbolic or imitative.

It should also be noted that the resilience of such regimes is largely ensured by control over key institutions – including the security apparatus, the judiciary, and the media. Even in conditions of partial liberalization, these elements remain under strict state supervision, which limits the depth of reforms. Moreover, the absence of genuine political competition and independent checks and balances hinders the development of truly accountable governance. As a result, reforms are often selective in nature and aimed at strengthening regime legitimacy rather than achieving systemic democratic transformation.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the power transitions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have clearly demonstrated the dual nature of leadership change in authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, the departure of long-serving rulers raised hopes for political renewal; the new presidents initially promised reforms and undertook certain liberalizing steps. On the other hand, the findings of this study show that these changes did not fundamentally democratize the nature of the political systems. Instead, the new elites focused on ensuring continuity of power and maintained their dominance by adapting the autocratic structure. The classical “transition paradigm” assumption that the end of an autocrat’s rule automatically leads to democracy was not borne out in these two countries [24, p.68]. For example, Tokayev – chosen as Nazarbayev’s successor – pursued a strategy of preserving political stability and, even as the new president, took on the task of delivering “as little real change as possible”. Similarly, after taking over from Karimov, Mirziyoyev initially eased the climate of fear in society and initiated a number of changes, but then concentrated the reins of power in his hands and worked to preserve the core of the old regime. Thus, although these transitions might have appeared to be periods of positive reforms, in reality their ultimate outcome was the preservation of the power structure in its previous form and its adaptation to new conditions.

The content of the post-authoritarian reforms in both countries also did not go beyond the bounds of “managed liberalization.” In Kazakhstan, Tokayev’s announced “New Kazakhstan” program was, according to some observers, essentially a re-entrenchment of the old ruling elite under a new packaging. The 2022 constitutional changes and political innovations did cut back some of the symbolic attributes of presidential power, but in practice the monopoly on power remained and the authoritarian nature of the regime did not change. In Uzbekistan, Mirziyoyev carried out extensive economic and administrative reforms, adapting the system into a “softened” authoritarianism. However, this “opening” policy did not open the door to genuine political competition and pluralism – experts dubbed Mirziyoyev’s approach an “authoritarian upgrading” [26, p.128]. In other words, while the new president put great effort into modernizing the economy and improving the country’s international image, he refrained from liberalizing the power structure. As a result, neither country achieved even a transitional status toward democracy; rather, they are exemplifying a model of “adapted” authoritarianism. According to Freedom House evaluations, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

remain consolidated authoritarian regimes even after the power transitions, with the lowest scores on democratic indicators. The January 2022 events (in Kazakhstan) and the 2022 Karakalpakstan unrest (in Uzbekistan) revealed the true face of the new leaders: when proposed changes threatened the regime itself, the authorities were ready to meet public demands with force. These events underscored the limited nature of the announced reforms and the conditionality of the "new era" slogans [27, p.56].

In conclusion, the power shifts in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan can be characterized not as a turn toward democratization, but as a tactic of authoritarian regime adaptation. The change of leaders brought some rhetorical renewal and minor policy adjustments, but their net result was the preservation of the power structure in its former state and its adjustment to new circumstances. This can be described as the dual nature of an authoritarian transition: on the one hand, it softens the system through reforms and refreshes its legitimacy, but on the other hand, it prolongs the life of the old order and reproduces political monopoly. These two cases in Central Asia demonstrate that a power transition is not an automatic shift to democracy; rather, the regime can undergo renewal from within. Similar scenarios are likely to occur when other authoritarian leaders in the region eventually step down: that is, "top-down" partial reforms may give an appearance of change, while in reality the elite's model of rule remains preserved. Therefore, as the experiences of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan show, an authoritarian system's capacity for self-reform is limited, and political liberalization tends to remain largely imitative. The findings of this comparative analysis, we believe, contribute to a reevaluation of transition theory and provide important lessons for understanding the evolution of regimes in Central Asia.

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