



# Social capital in Central Asia: how civil society shapes democracy in the region?

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**ABSTRACT.** *Networks and mutual trust have long been integral to the traditions of Central Asian peoples. The collective cultural practices among nomadic populations have historically served as crucial tools for their survival. Social capital has influenced various aspects of Central Asian society since the Soviet era. Despite the Sovietization of local communities, traditional social actors continued to exist. Since gaining independence in 1991, institutions of social capital have played an important role in shaping the governance processes of Central Asian states. Social capital embodies the concept of "rule from below", which is a fundamental component of democratization. However, in Central Asia, while social capital institutions are pre-democratic, they still uphold democratic values. Informal communication, evident in various forms across the region, remains one of the primary sources of social capital. These forms can serve as carriers of democratic values. However, it is also essential to recognize the existence of negative social capital, which can adversely affect individuals or specific social strata. This paper aims to emphasize the role of traditional civil society, which constitutes social capital, in fostering democratic values in these countries. Additionally, it will highlight the significance of informal social and historical practices as elements of neo-institutionalism in Central Asia. This study will utilize a literature review methodology complemented by the author's analytical approach to address research gaps and provide evidence-based insights.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Central Asia, civil society, democratization, social capital, socio-cultural institutions*

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of democratic governance, it is crucial to assess the role of traditional civil society in Central Asia. Serving as a bridge between the state and society, civil society plays a pivotal role in political processes by providing constructive opposition and fostering social movements, thereby contributing to the development of democratic practices. Additionally, it is imperative to explore how traditional civil society can adjust to changing realities while effectively fulfilling its intended functions in the region's sociopolitical landscape. Central Asian social capital is essentially constituted of traditional institutions and social practices. Therefore, it is imperative to define these terms in the Central Asian context.

Social Capital is “the networks, norms, relationships, values and informal sanctions that shape the quantity and cooperative quality of a society’s social interactions” (Aldridge et al., 2002). According to the OECD, social capital is the network with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups (OECD, 2020). Social capital is built on a concrete network of relationships among individuals. Additionally, for these relationships to be effective, they should be characterized by trust, mutual support, and positive feelings. While social capital shares similarities with civil society regarding voluntary associations, it also encompasses crucial elements like personal trust (Paxton, 1999). Central Asian social capital can be defined as the interplay of traditional groups and clans that helped mobilize society through interpersonal communications, trust, support, and informally set norms. Trust is one of the most important characteristics of Central Asian social capital. Traditional groups/ clans are the essence of Central Asia's social capital. Therefore, the definition of Social Capital put forward by Putnam, “the features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”, is closest to the Central Asian social capital (Putnam, 1993). However, the level of trust and the role it has played in shaping the society of five Central Asian countries vary temporally and spatially. For instance, according to Roger Sapsford and others, trust levels were higher in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan in 2001. However, trust in Kyrgyzstan declined due to political turmoil in 2010, while it stayed the same in Kazakhstan. This shift in trust is attributed to changes in both countries' economic and political conditions (Sapsford et al., 2015).

There has been constant change over the century in the working of traditional groups of Central Asia. Despite their varied contributions to the social capital, the social fabric of pre-Soviet and Soviet local societies has been carried forward to post-Soviet societies (Roy, 2002; Toktomushev, 2023). Pre-soviet clans of Central Asia- ‘mahallas’, ‘awlads’, ‘qawms’, ‘ashars’, ‘gashtaks’ or courts of ‘aksakals- adapted themselves into new Soviet social, political, and economic realities. According to Oliver Roy, these clans operated at three levels: first, to facilitate mutual support among citizens (such as through rotating groups that collect and distribute interest-free loans); second, to shield individuals from the intrusions of an authoritarian state; and third, to integrate individuals into the state apparatus via patron-client relationships. Therefore, this social capital could be considered the most fundamental unit of the governance system from the grassroots level. However, Central Asian republics are not conventionally democratic systems, yet they have democratic values that vary in all five republics. Due to their history and culture, the political reforms in Central Asia have been different. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Central Asian states began reforming their political systems to align with democratic principles. However, they rejected some Western ideals that conflicted with their cultural traditions, leading them to pursue a unique approach to democracy that blends these standards with their societal norms, adhering to more collectivist values as compared to Western individualistic values (Kukeyeva & Shkapyak, 2013; Kudebayeva et al., 2022).

Another important point to note is that civil society in Central Asia differs from the conventional Western model, which is predominantly composed of NGOs, pressure groups, and similar entities. In Central Asia, civil society primarily consists of traditional institutions and practices, which will be described in the later section. Accordingly, this paper, while discussing social capital in Central Asia and its impact on democratic governance, assumes these traditional groups to be the primary forces within civil society, albeit with a minor role played by NGOs and civil-political groups in influencing governance.

**Sociocultural institutions:** Civil society institutions in Central Asia, which constitute the social capital, are those socio-cultural institutions that have their origin in several traditional practices. For instance, Mahallas are traditional self-governing bodies that were recognized by the Uzbek constitution post-independence. The Uzbek government recognizes Mahalla as a vital element of civil society, with its participation in various areas of public life regulated by numerous laws and regulations, aligning with the concept of transitioning "from a strong state to a strong civil society" (Uzbek Embassy in India 2017). Various tasks attributed to these Mahallas are- engaging in law-making, crime prevention, legal awareness (especially among youth and women), supporting vulnerable populations, promoting healthy lifestyles, organizing youth activities, and protecting the environment- all of which activities can be integral to democracy, as they reflect the principles of participatory governance, social justice, and community empowerment in a democratic framework.

The traditional groups in Central Asia that constitute social capital make up collective identities. Post-independence, traditional networks of solidarity and clientelism served as a safety net during periods of increasing poverty and the state's inability to meet the population's basic needs. One example is the informal gap system, where groups, often composed of women, pooled funds to provide interest-free loans to members, who were then responsible for repayment (Roy, 2022).

Several studies have been done on social capital and how it shapes or impacts democracy in a country. There are two perspectives regarding the role of social capital based on trust, associational factors, and developmental goals – positive and negative. However, relatively little work has been done on the comparative analysis of social capital across the five Central Asian countries and its relationship to democratization. Therefore, this study aims to address the temporal and spatial deficiencies in the democratic processes in Central Asia.

By the impact of social capital on democratization, this research refers to how traditional groups, which mainly form civil society in Central Asia, influence the processes and various elements of democracy- positively or negatively.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper's methodology is based on analyzing existing studies on civil societies across five Central Asian countries. The available literature on civil culture, which forms the

foundation of social capital, primarily employs qualitative approaches with a focus on explanatory methods. To explore the causation and correlation between civil society as the independent variable and democracy as the dependent variable, a comparative approach has been utilized to highlight the differing roles of civil society in these countries. The use of case study methodologies in the existing literature has been a key reference point for this paper, particularly in examining topics such as 'civil society in post-Soviet Central Asia' and the concept of 'negative social capital'. The reviewed works highlight diverse data collection techniques, including surveys, archival research, interviews, and observations, often integrated within single studies, which supports the empirical element of this paper. This multifaceted approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being examined while identifying existing gaps in research. The study seeks to fill the gaps in the literature on the interrelationship between social capital and democratization within the Central Asian context. Therefore, intermediary variables such as clans, negative social capital, and traditional practices have been considered to support the causation and correlation between independent and dependent variables. The analyzed literature has also made use of historical methods to explore the history (pre-Soviet to Soviet) of traditional groups in Central Asia to discuss contemporary social capital, which draws its legacy from countries' old traditions and practices within Central Asian communities. However, to address the gaps, empirical research is essential. The findings of ethnographic research by prominent scholars conducted through surveys or interviews have been widely used for gaining a nuanced understanding of the effects of traditional groups within institutions like Mahallas, Ashar, and Ru-ba-ru on the political processes of their respective countries.

It is crucial to describe the different groups and practices that have existed since Soviet times- with some even predating that era- within contemporary civil society. This description will help illuminate the functioning of these groups over time, providing an analysis of their roles in the political systems and governance of their respective countries. The role of such practices and groups has been mentioned as part of the literature review, along with the impact of such roles on the democratization process of these countries, as part of the subjective analysis provided in the 'discussion' section of this research.

## RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The practices and institutions that constitute social capital vary significantly across countries. In this research, all five countries of Central Asia are considered, recognizing the substantial similarities among these "five Stans." This approach acknowledges ongoing scholarly debates regarding the lack of regionalism in the region (Bohr, 2003; Allison, 2008; Rosset & Svarin, 2014). However, it is important to note that despite the presence of regional conflicts and the absence of any cooperative mechanisms like regional organization among the five, the similar cultures of these five countries cannot be denied. All countries speak Turkic languages except Tajikistan, which has Persian as its official language. These share commonalities in nomadic heritage, cultural traditions,

Islam, Turkic linguistic roots, and historical influences from the Silk Road and Soviet rule while retaining distinct cultural and political identities.

**Civil society in pre-Soviet Central Asia:** Civil society in pre-Soviet times reflects the traditional practices and institutions integral to these societies. The various institutions discussed in a later section of this paper existed in Central Asia long before the Soviet era, forming a part of Islamic community traditions. For instance, historically, mahallas were independent social institutions rooted in family ties and Islamic customs, serving as a bridge between the private and public spheres and fulfilling local self-governance roles. Therefore, these communities formed the social capital in Central Asia.

**Civil Society in Soviet Central Asia:** Community practices in Central Asia could be considered informal civil society initiatives that differed from Western civil societies (Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). The civic culture of Central Asia during the Soviet era lost its significance. Centralization and practices like collectivization (Kolkhoz) attacked the traditional groups of the Soviet republics, which significantly impacted the functioning of communities as social capital (Roy, 2000). Nevertheless, practices like Kolkhoz characterized the social fabric of Central Asian societies. Sovietism can be credited with shaping the anthropological reality of social life in the former Soviet Union beyond the ideological curtain. Neighborhoods such as mahallas were institutionalized by the Soviet system through the establishment of local bodies under the authority of city districts (Makarova, 1999; Roy, 2000). Guzar served as a communal meeting space for engagement and information sharing within mahallas, which the Soviet government exploited by controlling these spaces, transforming teahouses into "red corners," and promoting pro-Soviet activities within informal networks like gap (Abramson, 2006; Dadabaev, 2013; Toktomushev, 2023). Soviet atomization hampered social capital in Central Asia. Despite the Soviet attempt to extinguish traditional groups, clans played an important role as political actors. For example, collectivization led them to remain leaders of the newly state-run farms (Collins, 2002; Roy, 2002). Despite the lack of conventional market-driven entrepreneurial practices during the Soviet period, informal economic activities within social capital communities like Ashar and Kotel could still be considered forms of entrepreneurship. Local Central Asian communities managed to balance Sovietism (Russification) and localism by adapting to new "Soviet nationalities" while promoting their folklore. While remaining loyal to Moscow, they escaped direct Soviet encroachment until 1983. After 1983, accusations by the Soviet Communist Party against local elites for corruption led to clashes between local communities and Moscow. However, the Sovietized traditional civic bodies continued to exist throughout this period.

Nevertheless, sociocultural institutions like mahallas in Uzbekistan underwent significant transformations during the Soviet era, influenced by the interplay of cultural identity and collective memory. It is evident that the social capital of Central Asian societies experienced substantial changes, as reflected in the historical memory of sociocultural institutions that were Sovietized in an effort to formalize them. Consequently, these institutions lost much of their cultural essence and informal nature.

Post-Soviet Central Asia: Anna Matveeva, in her work, emphasized that during Soviet times, civil society in Central Asia was suppressed mainly, with the state controlling public opinion while leaving the private sphere relatively untouched. Traditional groups like families and kinship networks persisted but lacked political roles. After the Soviet collapse, alienation and cynicism, products of the era, hindered collective action and voluntary associations, while conspiracy theories and sensationalist media gained traction (Matveeva 1999). Therefore, traditional groups did not adequately represent social capital in the post-independence period. Post-independence, the role of traditional groups became more complex, often characterized by one elite group being politically influential. This situation resulted in conflicts among various social groups. The concentration of power within one cohesive group led to significant ethnic tensions in Tajikistan in 1992 (Roy, 2002). As previously described, existing social organizations were integrated into the state apparatus to promote Communist ideology among specific social groups (Toktomushev, 2023). In 1993, President Karimov issued a decree granting mahallas certain social control powers, such as the authority to issue wedding certificates. He even introduced a "President's contest for the best daughter-in-law," which rewarded those who demonstrated obedience to their mothers-in-law. Through this process of state intervention, the social capital of Central Asia gained political recognition and saw the manipulation of traditional institutions by political entities to enhance the state's legitimacy (Dadabaev, 2013). Meanwhile, the revival of traditional practices occurred simultaneously with these developments (Roy, 2002).

Traditional groups and Social Capital: In the Central Asian context, it is imperative to highlight the pre-Soviet social groups that were formed based on shared interests rather than solely on clan ties. Cultural concepts such as informal social clubs and community support initiatives are widespread across various ethnic groups. They are not limited to specific communities and are rooted in pre-Soviet networks. Some pre-Soviet solidarity networks were indeed based on shared interests, extending beyond family connections. For example, Central Asian merchants' guilds played a crucial role in the region's economic growth during the Silk Road trade. However, these professional associations are less researched and are not often linked with the social capital of Central Asian countries (Barisitz, 2017; Usmanov and Naidenova, 2019).

Many cultural affiliations are shared across the region rather than restricted to specific ethnic groups. For instance, while Uzbeks refer to informal gathering clubs as gaps, in Tajikistan, they are known as gashtak, and in Kyrgyzstan, they are called sherine. These gatherings foster a sense of community, with members rotating hosting duties and providing entertainment for one another. Additionally, the concepts of ashar, khashar, or hashar involve collaborative efforts among neighbors, where community members come together to assist with projects benefiting everyone, such as building irrigation canals or helping a neighbor construct a new home (Toktomushev, 2023). Furthermore, it is essential to mention the self-governing pre-Soviet traditional institutions that connected the private sphere to the public sphere, illustrating how these social structures contributed to community cohesion and resilience. While highlighting the

roles of traditional groups, it is imperative to mention the historic women's traditional groups. Kavioni were the elderly women who played a key role in passing information to community members.

Mahalla- Mahallas have historically been one of the few traditional structures in Uzbekistan that can unite people of different ethnic and religious groups. During the Soviet era, mahallas emerged as important communities of self-governance that were based on shared residence, as these became the source of information sharing and engagement (Dadabaev, 2013; Kandiyoti, 2007; Rasanayagam, 2002; Troschke, 2012).

For centuries, the chaikhona (teahouse), masjid (mosque), and souk (market) have been central to local discussions on self-governance in Central Asia's Muslim-majority societies, with mahalla serving as the organizing social structure. Unlike other Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan's mahallas operate primarily under customary laws known as *adat* rather than Islamic Shariat. This emphasis on tradition sets Turkmen society apart, especially from the Uzbek mahallas that adhere to Shariat law. *Adat* encompasses community values and norms, addressing social customs, family matters, and issues related to land and livestock management. As a legal framework, *adat* evolves, reflecting shifts in social norms, pressures, and economic conditions (Denison, 2006).

Asar- Social groups like Asar/Hashar/Ashar became significantly important in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Asar is an old Kazakh tradition that has survived and is still popular. "Asar" means collective labor aid, usually provided for building a house or other tasks of a labor-intensive nature that requires a lot of manpower and interfamilial cooperation (Kenzheahmetuly, 2007). To address the challenges arising from unstable economic conditions, people in post-communist countries after 1991 largely depended on informal networks instead of official state support (Rose et al., 1997).

Kotel- is the organised collective accumulation and circulation of money. This practice of informal rotating saving and credit became widespread in Kazakhstan during the Soviet period. Both Kotel and Asar operate on principles of deep solidarity and mutual trust within the community. In contemporary Kazakhstan, nurturing social capital through regular gatherings is considered a vital social norm, almost an informal duty. A significant expectation exists to accept invitations, reflecting a commitment to respect and strengthen communal bonds, which are essential for a vibrant civil society. This emphasis on social interaction not only reinforces relationships but also enhances collective decision-making and democratic participation.

Chaikhon/Chaikhona- Chaikhon, a traditional tea stall in Tajikistan, serves as a community gathering place where people discuss national politics. During the Soviet era, these venues were repurposed as "Red Chaikhon" to promote communist ideology. This practice fostered political discourse, which continues today, enabling community members to engage in discussions and make collective decisions about governmental

policies. Thus, chaikhon exemplifies the role of informal spaces in nurturing democratic values and civic engagement (Scott, 2009).

## DISCUSSION

**Democracy and Governance:** While discussing democracy in the Central Asian context, it is imperative to highlight the condition or availability of such a notion in these five societies. None of the five countries is de facto democratic. However, all five countries' constitutions mention adherence to the values of democracy. However, the Freedom House ranks these five states among the least democratic countries depending on the nature of elections and media freedom. Following independence from the Soviet Union, Central Asian states began reforming their political systems, blending universal democratic principles with their own cultural and historical traditions. Fatima Kukeyeva and Oxana Shkapyak argued that by rejecting aspects of Western democracy that conflicted with local norms, these Central Asian countries are forging unique democratic models tailored to their societal and political contexts (Kukeyeva & Shkapyak 2013). It is important to note that the social realities of these countries differ from Western pre-decided vectors for democracy. In this context, traditional civil institutions have a significant role to play in the democratization of these societies.

It is undeniable that most of these countries have been having a wave of democratization in the last few years, which can be substantiated by different facts in the case of different countries. The level of democratic spirit varies significantly based on time and space in these societies. Kazakhstan's constitution officially mentions being a democratic republic, yet lack of transparency and other issues hinder this. Despite this, as argued by Mukesh Kumar Mishra, "the country has a strong basis on which it could move forward to democratization" (Mishra, 2009). For instance, in 2021, the Council of Public Trust was a key initiative in Kazakhstan's democratization, facilitating dialogue among civil society, political parties, and the public to develop inclusive policy recommendations. It enhances participatory governance and fosters trust between citizens and the state.

Kyrgyzstan has been the oasis of democracy since independence. Despite the current changes in the political structure after the regime change in 2021, the culture of contestation and dissent has not disappeared where the masses are able to influence the governance. Here, the relationship between traditions and democracy is rather complex. According to Azamat Temirkoulov, the traditional civil society operates through a mix of informal pressure mechanisms and formalized traditional institutions. While these institutions are leveraged to support democratic consolidation, they are also used to control public opinion (Temirkoulov 2005).

Since the adoption of the Strategy of Actions in 2016 by Shavakat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has prioritized strengthening civil society by enhancing NGO capacities, institutional frameworks, and public engagement mechanisms in governance (Eldor 2021). As the available literature highlights, the role of mahallas and similar practices is predominant



in Uzbek society, emphasizing the growing importance of sociocultural communities in Uzbekistan's governance.

Julie Fisher's long-drawn research opines that Tajikistan's civil society has weakened over the last decade; however, at the grassroots level, traditional local organizations and internet-based initiatives reveal a more nuanced relationship between community participation, civil society networks, democratization, and development (Fisher 2023). The importance of Mahallas in Tajikistan's context is undeniable, as they bring grassroots democratic value to the country despite political repression. They facilitate public deliberation, promote voluntary community work, and support projects such as infrastructure development. With elected leaders and absolute authority, Mahallas also contribute to local governance, providing a space for civic participation and social justice based on traditional Islamic values. Their resilience and adaptability make them key actors in the ongoing development of Tajik civil society.

Turkmenistan's civil society has comparatively less influence on political matters and is more tightly controlled than in other Central Asian countries. Its traditional institutions differ from the other four, as they are based on customary laws rather than Sharia, which is more prevalent in the others. Consequently, social capital plays a minimal role in shaping Turkmenistan's political discourse.

Social capital serves as a barometer of democracy, as it helps gauge the extent of direct or indirect and active or passive participation of people in the democratic process. Therefore, social capital is linked to democracy in this sense. The relationship between social capital and democracy has attracted significant scholarly attention. The available literature attempts to explain the importance of trust, norms, and social participation, which lead to different types of groupings within society. Scholars like Putnam and Fukuyama argue that connections between different groups can create positive social benefits that support democracy, improve government performance, and encourage tolerance and inclusiveness (Putnam, 1995; Fukuyama, 2001). In contrast, some scholars believe that strong ties within a single group can negatively affect democracy (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005). Therefore, there are debates about the different forms of social capital that impact a country's democracy. In the Central Asian context, the unavailability of democracy as a form of government makes it a different case than other Asian countries like Taiwan and Singapore. The transition from communist to capitalist societies makes these five countries distinct from other South Asian countries. Depending on this, the connection between traditional groups like mahallas and enhancing democratic traditions varies. For instance, scholars like Putnam and Ellickson exclude mahallas from social capital that facilitates democracy, viewing them as primary and non-voluntary associations (Putnam, 1992; Ellickson, 1998). They believe that bonding traditional associations like mahalla or ashar do not facilitate democracy, unlike bridging social capital, which refers to inter-group bonding. Pamela Paxton argues that social capital influences democracy in two key ways. First, it can foster democratic development in a non-democratic country by empowering citizens

and creating a space for organized opposition. Second, in an existing democracy, strong associations encourage tolerance, promote compromise, enhance political participation, and nurture leadership, all of which strengthen democratic health (Paxton, 2002). In this sense, the Central Asian case exists somewhere between the two aforementioned categories.

In the case of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, *asar/hasar* demonstrates the legacy of nomadic cooperative practices. It fosters strong solidarity and unity across class, gender, and ethnicity, reinforcing democratic values (Kenzheahmetuly, 2007). According to Kathleen Collins, clans are social (non-state-created) groups with a corporate character that shapes individuals' behavior through informally set norms, rules, and practices. Affective ties of kinship are its essence (Collins, 2004). However, clan structures show notable variation; for instance, clans in Bukhara and Samarkand are often ethnically diverse. These distinctions are influenced more by geographic and socioeconomic conditions than ethnonational affiliations (Collins, 2003). Therefore, the traditional associations among Central Asian clans are not only intra-ethnic, as evident in Collins's work but also inter-ethnic, which helps develop strong ties among people. Civil society serves as a platform for diverse interests, with organizations advocating for members such as women, students, farmers, and professionals by engaging with parliament and government ministries. *Kotel* exemplifies such an organization, facilitating financial circulation among its members while deepening social connections within the group (Darmenova & Koo, 2021). By fostering these relationships, *Kotel* enhances social capital and supports democratic engagement.

However, traditional groups in Central Asia, like any other NGO, have cohesion and an elected representative, facilitating communication between people and the state. In post-Soviet society, they bridge the gap between two institutions of government, if not with other communities. This is how they play an important role in the governance system by working with the government hand in hand. Non-voluntary organizations like these traditional groups might have other negative externalities that arise during their functioning, which will be explained later. However, the role and movement of traditional social capital in Central Asia are undoubtedly significant. There is a form of direct-action democracy in Uzbekistan. The *Mahalla* contrasts with Western political models centred on parliamentary debate and individual rights. While it may be more effective for the Uzbek community, it lacks the essential checks and balances typical of Western governance, a feature often missing in Central Asian countries. Emphasizing community and shared responsibility, the *Mahalla* is a conduit for the *Mirziyoyev* government to engage directly with communities, facilitating a reciprocal relationship that promotes change (Ben Aris, 2021).

Civil Society and NGOs. The concept of civil society in Central Asia diverges significantly from conventional definitions. It is essential to note that NGOs are not the only key entities constituting civil society in this region; traditional groups also play a crucial role. Empirical research has extensively examined the functioning of NGOs and

various societal groups, including Women's Councils. These councils are instrumental in fundraising efforts and facilitate the circulation of resources, especially in the absence of government financial support (Toktomushev, 2023). Anna-Lena Honig's work on the civil society in all five Central Asian Republics suggests that Civil societies in the Central Asian states are more diverse than the prevailing political systems suggest, and these remain active even in non-democratic settings (Honig, 2024). One of the most notable studies is Toktomushev's case study, "Life in Kyrgyzstan." He emphasizes that many NGOs do not automatically indicate shared values or collective action for the common good. Instead, he advocates for focusing on organic forms of community life that have endured and adapted to new economic, social, and cultural realities (Toktomushev, 2023). The challenges faced by democratic reforms in Kyrgyzstan during the 1990s can largely be traced to a limited understanding of civil society, which overlooked the significance of "community civil society" entities such as women's councils at present. Recognizing the role of these traditional groups is vital for appreciating the diverse dynamics that shape civil society in Central Asia (Collier, 2002; Buxton, 2005; Toktomushev, 2023). Understanding this broader landscape is crucial for fostering genuine democratic engagement in the region.

Negative Social Capital and its impact on the democratic culture. Looking at the darker side of social capital, its associations might not always lead to positive outcomes. It is imperative to highlight the role of negative social capital in influencing a country's democratic processes. While trustworthiness and social affinity can reduce transaction costs, they can also lead to exploitation. Certain functions and roles, which are part of the norms attributed to respective traditional groups and civil society in Central Asia, contribute to negative social capital. These negatively impact society and governance overall. For instance, Uyat (shame) serves as a powerful mechanism in Kazakhstani society, nudging individuals to follow social norms and participate in collective actions (Koo, 2017). However, "shame" carries a negative connotation, as it can adversely affect specific segments of society by making adherence to rules compulsory in the name of Uyat, particularly concerning women and other inferior individuals. Another example is the role attributed to mahallas by Karimov, which includes issuing marriage certificates and rewarding women for being the "best" daughter-in-law (Karimov, 1998). Consequently, women often find themselves on the receiving end of severe patriarchy enforced through traditional civil society practices, restricting their agency and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Due to this, women in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have had greater chances to engage in newly established community groups compared to traditional community institutions. In contrast, in Tajikistan, women often lead many traditional organizations. In Tajikistan, there are legal protections specifically for women, such as improved access to credit and government-managed maternity leave benefits, which can offer women greater economic opportunities than those in Uzbekistan (World Bank, 2021). Some observers, like Fatima Akhmedova, claim that in Tajikistan, women's roles are underestimated by political leaders due to Islamic influence, which contributes to negative social capital (F. Akhmedova, 1999).

## RESULTS

The main goal of this paper is to highlight how social capital fosters democratic values in otherwise authoritarian Central Asian regimes. This study is particularly significant in the context of a global transition, where civil society engagement has increased over the last decade, enabling civil society to influence political systems. It is evident from the available literature that Central Asian civil society differs markedly from Western definitions, making it essential to emphasize this uniqueness. Although these countries are classified as non-democratic, they still exhibit democratic practices such as free elections, equal representation, and respect for human rights. Except for Uzbekistan, where the political transition toward a democratic framework is relatively recent, other countries in the region have gradually opened their systems since the post-Soviet era.

Scholarly works suggest that the low levels of trust in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have diminished democratization levels in these countries compared to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (Kuldebayeva, 2021). I contend that while “trust” and “democracy” are correlated, the question of whether a causal relationship exists is still contested. The traditional groups of Central Asia, which predate the Soviet era, serve as foundational associations for contemporary civil society institutions in the region. These groups differ from modern NGOs and do not fit neatly into the conventional definition of civil society, particularly in countries like Kyrgyzstan, where there is a lack of robust associational life. Nevertheless, trust levels in Kyrgyz society remain relatively high.

The first step of my paper outlines the transition of pre-Soviet traditional groups, such as Mahallas, into the Soviet context. Despite adapting to Soviet norms of nationality, these groups managed to maintain localism and elements of trust among their members. However, they were unable to exert significant political influence. Post-Soviet groups, which carry heritage from pre-Soviet times, have often been transformed into modern civil society groups that inherit Soviet legacies. Thus, these groups represent a blend of organic traditional values and cultures alongside Soviet influences. Consequently, civil society in Central Asia cannot be categorized solely by NGOs and conventional civil society. The second step focuses on the formation of not only “clan-based” groups but also those founded on “shared interests.” The final steps of this study demonstrate that social capital in Central Asia, despite some negative connotations associated with being coercive and traditional, serves as a fundamental pillar of democratic values in these states. Traditional groups in Central Asia, although characterized by strong intra-personal affinities rather than inter-personal connections, play a crucial role in the governance of their respective countries. These groups are essential to the civil society, social fabric, and civic culture of Central Asia. It is clear from the literature review that for over 15 years, no scholarly research has thoroughly examined the role of clans in the political transitions of Central Asia. Kathleen Collins’ work 2004 analyzes how clans, by promoting formal institutions, attempted to inhibit the agendas of both authoritarian and democratic regimes, thereby preventing their consolidation and leading to decreased regime durability (Collins, 2004). This hypothesis remains relevant today, albeit in

a different context. Recent significant political transitions in all five countries, along with the roles played by clans, societal groups within these clans, or other civil society organizations, have been altering the durability of political systems in the contemporary landscape. As stated by Charles E. Ziegler, “Despite the limited space for civil society and the extensive obstacles that NGOs face in Central Asia, including cooptation and repression, there is potential for transformation in the governance process from below” (Ziegler, 2015).

The recent regime changes and the transition of political systems necessitate further empirical research to engage with locals in their natural settings. Nevertheless, the age-old traditional groups will continue to play a crucial role in the political systems and governance of Central Asian republics, shaping their futures and influencing democratic practices as these societies evolve.

## CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that social capital in Central Asia plays a key role in introducing democratic values into political processes, even though these countries are far from achieving full democracy. Communities built on traditional values of cooperation, bonding, and communication are central to the political structures of the region. While these institutions were influenced by Soviet rule, they survived and continued to shape governance in meaningful ways. After independence, many of these traditional structures were formalized by governments and integrated into political systems. These groups have adapted to new realities and constitute a distinct form of civil society in Central Asia, differing from the Western concept of civil society yet fostering democratic principles in their unique context. While these traditional groups may occasionally have negative societal impacts, their presence underscores the existence of a unique civil society model in the region. In contrast, the role of modern civil society, represented by NGOs, is often constrained due to controlled environments and restrictive laws, such as foreign agent regulations, which conflict with democratic ideals. Thus, it is crucial to emphasize the significance of traditional sociocultural institutions and practices when discussing civil society in Central Asia, as they remain integral to fostering democratic values in these societies.

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