

ARTICLE

# Elections and Immigration Policy in Autocracy: Evidence from Russia and Kazakhstan

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## Abstract

Why do some authoritarian states adopt more restrictive immigration policies than others? Much of the existing literature focuses on the politics of immigration in democracies, despite the presence of large-scale immigration to autocracies. In this article, I argue that the level of electoral competition can be a key factor in immigration policymaking in electoral autocracies. Autocrats who face high levels of electoral competition tend to impose immigration restrictions as a way of mobilizing anti-outgroup sentiment and boosting their own popularity. I test this hypothesis by conducting comparative case studies on Russia and Kazakhstan, both of which are major migrant-receiving autocracies. Based on the analysis of original data gathered from 11 months of fieldwork in the two countries, I find that the relatively high level of electoral competition in Russia in the 2010s facilitated increased immigration restrictions, while Kazakhstan depoliticized labour immigrants and enacted a de facto open immigration policy in the absence of electoral competition.

**Keywords:** immigration policy; authoritarian regimes; elections; Russia; Kazakhstan

The question of why some authoritarian states adopt more restrictive immigration policies than others has become increasingly salient in today's world of human displacement and the growth of migrants moving within and between countries. In 2020, authoritarian regimes ruled half of the top 20 immigrant-receiving countries in the world.<sup>1</sup> Patterns of immigration restrictions in autocracies pose a puzzle: although many authoritarian countries are similar in terms of socioeconomic conditions, they vary significantly in the immigration policies they apply. Nonetheless, relatively little is known about the determinants of immigration policies in authoritarian settings, as the comparative scholarship on immigration politics has focused primarily on Western liberal democracies (Boucher and Gest 2018: 22–24). This is an important research gap, given the significant effects of immigration on the politics and economies of many autocracies and the implications of immigration regulations for migrants and migration flows (Massey 1999; Norman 2021).

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In this article, I argue that the level of electoral competition can be a key factor in explaining immigration policy in electoral authoritarian regimes. I maintain that authoritarian regimes with high levels of electoral competition tend to impose restrictions on immigration as a way of boosting their popularity. When there is high electoral competition, autocrats are tempted to adopt anti-immigration policies because the mobilization of anti-outgroup sentiment can reinforce the unity of the ingroup and form a popular base of support for the ruling regime. These effects begin prior to an election, but continue afterwards as a way of demobilizing potential threats that might arise subsequently. Thus, electoral competition can lead to immigration restrictions in electoral authoritarian regimes.

The article tests this argument by conducting comparative case studies on labour immigration policy in two authoritarian states, Russia and Kazakhstan. I have chosen them for two reasons. First, they are the most popular migration destinations within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region and are major immigrant-receiving autocracies. Nevertheless, both have been underexplored in the comparative immigration literature. Second, while the countries are similar in many ways, such as their economy, demographic situation, weak organized interests, and levels of xenophobia, they have shown a puzzling difference in labour immigration policies. Russia has politicized immigration and imposed tight immigration restrictions since the beginning of the 2010s. In contrast, Kazakhstan has turned a blind eye towards immigration, adopting relatively open immigration policies. The analysis in this article shows that variation in the levels of electoral competition has facilitated such different policies. When Vladimir Putin ran for president again in 2011–2012, his ruling regime faced domestic dissent and consequently lost a share of the votes. To mobilize popular support, Putin utilized anti-immigrant rhetoric and enacted immigration restrictions before and after the elections. In Kazakhstan, due to the high level of popular support for the regime and the absence of electoral competition, the ruling regime did not resort to an anti-immigrant policy and rhetoric.

The findings in this article are important in two respects. First, they fill a major gap in the comparative immigration literature by providing a systematic and comparative analysis of the determinants of immigration policy in autocracies. Despite a growing body of literature on immigration in autocracies, the determinants of immigration policy in authoritarian settings have been relatively understudied from a comparative perspective, aside from a few exceptions (Abdelaaty 2021; Breunig et al. 2012; Mirilovic 2010; Natter 2018; Norman 2021; Shin 2017). This article conducts a comparative analysis of the determinants of immigration policies in Russia and Kazakhstan, using a wide array of original sources gathered during fieldwork in both countries between 2015 and 2017. The data include government documents, media reports, migration statistics and 98 interviews with local scholars, government officials, rights groups, business associations and migrants.

Second, underscoring the roles of electoral factors, this research sheds new light on a theoretical framework for immigration policymaking in authoritarian states. Assuming that autocrats are insulated from popular pressures, the extant theoretical work on authoritarian immigration policy has tended to neglect the role of electoral factors while highlighting those of others such as economic conditions, bureaucratic politics and international pressures (Breunig et al. 2012; Mirilovic 2010;

Natter 2018; Norman 2021; Schenk 2018; Shin 2017). This is a surprising oversight, given the growing evidence of the importance of elections for policy in autocracies (Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2006; Miller 2015). This article shows that electoral factors do matter for immigration policy in authoritarian settings, yet through a different mechanism from democracies. Previous studies on democratic states show that elections affect immigration policy through the political equation of partisanship, the size of immigrants' co-ethnic voters and the preferences of swing voters (Abou-Chadi 2016; Akkerman 2015; Money 1999; Wong 2015). In authoritarian settings, the roles of such factors are nearly absent, as elections are neither free nor fair. Nonetheless, electoral factors influence immigration policy through a distinct mechanism – autocrats striving to maintain overwhelming popularity. This article does not contend that electoral factors alone can explain immigration policies in autocracies. The findings, however, provide building blocks for models of immigration policy in authoritarian states.

### Existing literature

Previous studies on immigration policy have focused primarily on Western liberal democracies and emphasized the roles of national identity and xenophobia (Brubaker 1992; Zolberg 2006), economic conditions (Meyers 2004), welfare benefits (Hanson et al. 2007), organized interests (Freeman 1995; Peters 2017), political parties (Perlmutter 1996; Wong 2015) and liberal institutions and rights-based politics (Ellermann 2009; Joppke 1998). Despite their seminal contributions and insight, these studies seem limited in explaining immigration policy in autocracies. Immigration policies often change over a short period of time (Shin 2017), whereas conceptions of national identity are rather sticky. Under similar economic conditions, immigration policies vary dramatically, and authoritarian states provide little welfare benefit to immigrants (Mirilovic 2010: 274–275). In autocracies, business interests and labour unions are not independent, influential actors in the same way as their counterparts in democracies are (Duvanova 2013; Kim and Gandhi 2010). Political parties are too weak to exercise agenda power or pass a bill (Gandhi 2008). Similarly, state bureaucracies and courts are neither independent nor influential actors.

Making a departure from the focus of existing studies on Western democracies, some scholars have conducted studies on immigration policies in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Asia (Abdelaaty 2021; González-Murphy and Koslowski 2011; Kalicki 2019; Paoletti 2011; Sadiq 2009; Thiollet 2022). A considerable body of literature on immigration policy in Russia and Kazakhstan also offers insights into migration governance (Abashin 2017; Buckley 2017; Denisenko 2017; Dyatlov 2009; Glathe 2020; Gulina 2019; Heusala 2018; Ivakhnyuk 2009; Joo 2022; Kingsbury 2017; Kubal 2019; Laruelle 2013; Light 2016; Malakhov 2014; Mukomel' 2005; Oka 2013; Ryazantsev 2007; Sadovskaya 2014; Schenk 2018; Shevel 2011; Turaeva and Urinboyev 2021; Zayonchkovskaya et al. 2011; Zeveleva 2014). Yet, as Adrian Shin (2017: 1) points out, few attempts have been made to investigate the determinants of immigration policy in autocracies in a comparative perspective and to provide an analytical framework applicable to other countries.

A series of recent studies have highlighted the impact of regime types on policy-making and theorized about immigration policies in authoritarian states separately (Adamson and Tsourapas 2020; Breunig et al. 2012; Mirilovic 2010; Natter 2018; Norman 2021; Shin 2017). These studies point out that institutional settings shape the politics of immigration in autocracies differently from those in democracies: policy-making is insulated from pressures imposed by anti-immigrant citizens and other domestic actors, such as political parties and business interests. Thus, in explaining variation in immigration policies among authoritarian states, Nikolai Mirilovic (2010), Christian Breunig et al. (2012) and Shin (2017) underscore the roles of economic factors such as economic growth and natural resources, while other scholars emphasized bureaucratic politics and international pressures (Natter 2018; Norman 2021; Schenk 2018). By taking distinct institutional settings into account, this strand of research has advanced our understanding of migration politics.

Nonetheless, assuming that autocrats are free from popular pressures, these recent studies have tended to dismiss the roles of elections in immigration policy. This is a surprising oversight, given the growing evidence of the significance of elections in authoritarian settings: the burgeoning literature on authoritarian politics demonstrates that in order to satisfy citizens and ensure the survival of regimes, autocrats pay attention to public opinion and elections and modify policies around elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Magaloni 2006; Miller 2015). Yet, existing studies on authoritarian immigration policy have not fully examined electoral factors. In the next section, building on the theoretical insights of the literature on authoritarian politics as well as the extant framework on authoritarian immigration policy, I develop a theory of authoritarian immigration policy that considers the roles of electoral factors.

### **Elections and immigration policy under authoritarianism**

Electoral autocracies have been the most dominant type of contemporary dictatorship (Bernhard et al. 2020: 466): two-thirds of post-Cold War autocracies hold multiparty elections for the legislature (Miller 2020). Although the ruling regimes have resources such as repression, patronage and electoral fraud to win elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009), their share of votes and popularity are variable, and elections sometimes produce surprising results (Miller 2015). Yet, for regime survival, autocrats need sweeping victories. Small margins could signal a regime's weakness and trigger popular demand for democratization (Simpser 2013: 5). Thus, autocrats strive to maintain high popularity and to produce landslide elections to create what Beatriz Magaloni (2006: 15) calls 'an image of invincibility'. Such an impression shows elites and citizens that the ruling regime is unconquerable, which discourages potential challengers (Magaloni 2006; Simpser 2013).

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

When there is high electoral competition, autocrats in immigrant-receiving countries have an incentive to adopt anti-immigration policies. First, immigration can be a source of grievance among the electorate. For instance, Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) increased immigrant restrictions after it lost four seats to the political opposition in the 2011 general election (Watts 2015). Experts have pointed out that this was due to the PAP's poor electoral performance in the districts where low-income Singaporeans voted for other parties because of an immigration issue (Visconti 2013; Watts 2015). The ruling regime tightened immigration policies to appeal to these anti-immigrant voters.

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

Nevertheless, an anti-immigration policy can also incur economic and political costs for autocrats. Economically, using cheap foreign labour is beneficial for members of a ruling coalition who own businesses (Mirilovic 2010; Shin 2017). In terms of the political costs, instigating anti-immigrant sentiments can pose a threat to the ruling regime. The rise of ethnic nationalism can aggravate inter-ethnic relations and imperil stability. More importantly, heightened nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments can generate sources of popular discontent with the existing regime. If some ingroup members have harboured grievances against the existing institution, an outgroup conflict can provide an opportunity for the discontented members (McLaughlin and Pearlman 2012). Ingroup members, who are able to take a more radical stance on nationalist and migration issues, can challenge the rule of the incumbents (Mansfield and Snyder 2007).

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

**Hypothesis 1:** *In the run-up to elections, authoritarian regimes are more likely to politicize immigration issues and adopt restrictive immigration policies than at other times.*

Second, I assume a post-electoral mechanism, in which elections influence migration policies in the following periods. Elections enable citizens to signal dissatisfaction with the ruling regime and thus provide the incumbents information about citizens' preferences and their popularity (Malesky and Schuler 2011; Miller 2015). The period after elections can pose a danger to autocrats: research shows that elections and electoral fraud have provided a focal point for electoral revolutions in which the incumbents were overthrown (Beissinger 2007; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2015). If the incumbents performed poorly in the previous election, they need to shore up their popularity using various measures, including anti-migration policy. Thus, I hypothesize as follows:

**Hypothesis 2:** *The lower the ruling regime's share of votes in previous elections, the more politicized immigration issues are, and the stricter immigration policies are.*

## Data and methods

To test the hypotheses, I conduct comparative case studies with process tracing (Bennett and Checkel 2015; Collier 2011; Gerring 2007), focusing on policies on immigration of low-skilled workers in Russia and Kazakhstan in the 2010s. This is the period during which both Russia and Kazakhstan became popular migration destinations, and labour migration emerged as an important issue instead of the 'forced migration' of former Soviet citizens in the 1990s and 2000s. Russia and Kazakhstan provide a rare opportunity to test the hypotheses rigorously. Although both are electoral autocracies, their levels of electoral competition are different. In measuring the degree of electoral competition, I focus on the ruling regime's share of votes. Russia is a more competitive electoral authoritarianism, in which Vladimir Putin and his United Russia (UR) party are subjected to some significant electoral pressure by within-system and extra-systemic opposition groups. By contrast, Kazakhstan has been closer to a non-competitive form of authoritarianism that has, until recently, been dominated by Nursultan Nazarbayev and his Nur Otan political party. Yet, Russia and Kazakhstan share many factors related to immigration policies: the state of the economy, resource-exporting economies, weak organized interests, the levels of xenophobia, state capacities, the promotion of ethnic return migration and border control environments.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, they reveal significant variation in immigration policies in the 2010s.

The analysis in this article is based on original data gathered during 11 months of fieldwork in both countries between 2015 and 2017: government documents, media reports and 98 semi-structured interviews with local scholars, NGOs, business associations, government officials and migrants.<sup>3</sup> Given the limited access to interviews, as noted by other scholars of Eurasian politics (Goode 2010; Schenk 2018), and for practical considerations, I used snowball and convenience sampling strategies (Kapiszewski et al. 2015). The list of the interviewees is provided in the Online Appendix. Considering the politically repressive environment, I have anonymized all of the interviewees. To mitigate potential biases in interview evidence, I have also triangulated with other qualitative evidence, such as government documents and media reports (Yin 2014).

## The puzzle of labour immigration policy in Russia and Kazakhstan

As Russia and Kazakhstan recovered from the chaos after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they became a magnet for immigrants. While the two countries promoted the return of foreign co-ethnics,<sup>4</sup> their labour demand and high wages attracted migrant workers. Russia and Kazakhstan have received labour migrants from various countries, including China, Vietnam and Turkey, yet low-skill migrants from the neighbouring CIS states constitute the largest immigrant group in both countries. The visa-free agreements among the member states of the CIS contributed to the great flow of undocumented migration. According to experts' estimates, the number of undocumented migrants in Russia ranges between 3 million and 5 million (equivalent to 2–3% of Russia's population), while that in Kazakhstan ranges between 300,000 and 1,000,000 (1–5% of Kazakhstan's population) (President of the Russian Federation 2012a; Sadovskaya 2014). In Russia, migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus have been targets of xenophobic attacks and hate crimes (Buckley 2017). Some migrants from Central Asia opted for Kazakhstan because of its geographical, racial and cultural proximity and perceptions of it being a safer country compared to Russia, although research shows that migrants suffer from abuse and discrimination (FIDH 2016; Laruelle 2013; Saidazimova 2007). Considering the scale and political importance of these low-skill migrants from the CIS, this article focuses on the policies regulating them in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Russia and Kazakhstan have implemented very different immigration policies (see Table 1). First, Russia's admission policy focuses on low-skill immigration from the CIS, whereas Kazakhstan has neglected the issue and not introduced formal regulation. The development of a migration policy in Russia has centred on the question of how to regulate low-skill immigration from neighbouring CIS states. In 2015, Russia introduced a new policy that mandates CIS migrants must obtain work permits (*patent*) by paying fees to regional governments and passing the exam for Russian language, history and law. By contrast, Kazakhstan does not provide official routes through which low-skill migrants can work in the country. Apart from the small number of quotas set for seasonal workers (normally ranging between 2,000 and 3,000 a year) and permits for migrants who are hired for non-commercial activities, Kazakhstan does not set any regulations for low-skill migrants employed by enterprises (FIDH 2016: 27). As such, high-skilled and skilled migrants from China and Turkey account for the majority of legal immigrants in Kazakhstan, while most CIS migrants lack a legal status (Davé 2014).

**Table 1.** Immigration Policy in Russia and Kazakhstan in the 2010s

		Russia	Kazakhstan
Admission	High-skilled	Adopted in 2010	Adopted in 2001
	Low-skilled	Restrictive policy	No policy
Enforcement	Expulsion	Wide conditions for expulsion	Narrow conditions for expulsion
	Re-entry ban	Up to ten years	Up to five years



Second, Russia has enacted harsher enforcement policies towards undocumented immigrants than Kazakhstan has. Since 2013, Russia has significantly broadened the definition of deportable offences and legal bases for re-entry bans (Schenk 2018: 110–112; Troitskii 2016: 7–9). As a result, the number of foreign citizens who were expelled and barred from entering Russia increased sharply after 2013 (Troitskii 2016). Compared to Russia, Kazakhstani law stipulates narrower criteria for who can be deported and banned from re-entry (Respubliki Kazakhstan 2011, 2019). The combination of a *de jure* non-admission policy and a lax enforcement policy has made Kazakhstan a receptive country for immigrants (Davé 2014; Interviewees 33–37, 41–42), while Russia has implemented tight immigration restrictions in both admission and enforcement policies.

### The case of Russia

The incumbent regime in Russia enjoys considerable popular support. Despite widespread fraud and manipulation in elections, the Putin regime's high public approval ratings and share of votes are not entirely fake (Frye et al. 2017). The ruling regime has endeavoured to sustain popular support. For instance, the Russian government closely tracks public opinion to take action and change policies, if necessary (Interviewee 87). Popularity is important for the Putin regime because it is the source of his power (Greene and Robertson 2019). High public support serves as a 'political resource': being the most popular leader in the country helps Putin muster support from the ruling elites and pre-empt potential challengers (Greene and Robertson 2019: 7–8). According to Henry Hale (2015), since Eurasian politics are organized around patronal networks, a top leader's public popularity affects elite expectations about the leader's durability, support for the system and, further, the survival of the regime.

Against this background, the 2011–2012 election results and post-election protests came as a severe shock to the ruling regime. In September 2011, Vladimir Putin, then prime minister, and Dmitry Medvedev, then president, declared that Putin would run in the presidential election in March 2012, and that they would essentially switch roles. This decision fuelled public anger. In Lilia Shevtsova's (2012: 23) words, the fact that 'their country's highest offices were being treated like someone's personal playthings' was 'a slap in the face and a blow to national dignity' for Russian citizens. Moreover, the financial crisis and falling oil prices stunted high economic growth, which prompted popular support for the Putin regime (Treisman 2011). Although the Russian government recovered from the crisis with relative success and speed (Robinson 2013), the economic slowdown lowered public approval of the incumbents (Gel'man 2015: 112–113; Zimmerman 2014: 275–276).

Consequently, the ruling regime in Russia performed poorly in the 2011–2012 elections. In the December 2011 parliamentary election, the dominant party, United Russia, obtained 49.3% of the vote and 238 out of 450 parliamentary seats (Gel'man 2015: 119). Yet, several alternative sources estimated that its actual vote share was much lower than the official one, and political opposition parties and many citizens questioned the veracity of the results announced by the government (Zimmerman 2014: 268). With slogans like 'fair elections' and 'Putin, go



away!', citizens took to the streets in Moscow, St Petersburg and some small cities. A few months later, in the March 2012 presidential election, Putin also received fewer votes than in previous elections.

The 2011–2012 elections were unprecedented in three respects. First, it was the lowest share of votes the ruling regime had ever received under Putin's government (see Table 2). If Putin had faced a runoff, he would have defeated the other candidate. Nonetheless, experts point out that contesting a second round would have made him appear weak and that could have led to a 'fundamental system shift' in Russian politics (Lipman and Petrov 2012; Zimmerman 2014: 287). Accordingly, the Putin regime took more aggressive measures in the presidential elections to avoid any question of a runoff (Gel'man 2015). Second, with the estimated number of protesters varying from 25,000 to 100,000, the December 2011 mass gathering in Moscow was the largest public protest movement in post-Soviet Russia's history (Gel'man 2015: 106). Third, it was the first time the two major political opponents of the ruling regime, the nationalists and the liberal democrats, were united in calling for the resignation of the incumbent government (Pain 2016: 53). The protest leaders who demanded 'fair elections' also constituted the heads of the nationalist wing (Pain 2016: 54). The most ardent and influential critic of Putin, Alexei Navalny, regularly attended the Russian March, a nationalist demonstration, and called for controls on illegal immigration and a visa regime with Central Asia (Laruelle 2014).

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

Putin began his anti-immigrant project in the run-up to the presidential election scheduled for March 2012. In January 2012 he published a series of articles in major newspapers, declaring the direction of his government as part of the election

**Table 2.** The Ruling Regime's Vote Shares in Russia (%)

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

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

campaign. In one of these articles, ‘Russia: The National Issue’, Putin touched on the topics of migration and inter-ethnic relations (Putin 2012). Previously, the Russian authorities tended to avoid ethnic nationalism, which promotes ethnic Russians as the core of the state (Kolsto 2016). In his article, Putin broke with the past and put more weight on ethnic nationalism by using the expression ‘*russkii* statehood’ and announcing that ethnic Russians were a ‘state-forming’ nation (Kolsto 2016: 39). In his article, he also promised to solve ‘the migration problem’ by improving the admission policy, as well as toughening punishment for violations, and implementing law enforcement.

Putin fulfilled his promises and plans as soon as he entered the presidency. When he took office in May 2012, he issued a series of presidential decrees regarding various political and social issues, the so-called ‘May decree’ (*maiskii ukaz*). In one of the decrees, ‘On providing inter-ethnic harmony’, he ordered the introduction of language, history and law exams for immigrants and tougher control of illegal migration (TASS 2016). Putin also directed changes in migration policies in the annual presidential addresses. An analysis of presidential addresses between 2000 and 2018 shows that the Russian president placed greater emphasis on migration issues in the 2011–2013 addresses.<sup>5</sup> In the 2012 address, Putin emphasized the severity of illegal immigration and promised to strengthen control over it (President of the Russian Federation 2012b). In the 2013 address, Putin argued that ‘the lack of proper order in foreign labour migration’ creates labour market distortions, provokes ethnic conflicts and leads to higher crime rates (President of the Russian Federation 2013). Laying out a detailed plan for the work-permit system for immigrants, he also underscored the need to impose more restrictions on foreign citizens:

We need to solve problems with foreigners who come to Russia from visa-free regime countries and stay in Russia for a long period of time without definite purpose ... The period of their stay in Russia must be limited, and entry to Russia must be banned for foreign nationals who violate the law. ... the ban will range from three to ten years. (President of the Russian Federation 2013)

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

Following the migration policy changes directed in the presidential decrees and addresses, the Duma (Lower House) approved laws that tightened both admission and enforcement policies. In November 2011, just a month before the parliamentary election in December, UR parliamentarians proposed a bill that mandated migrants who worked in the housing, utilities, trade and social service sectors to pass a Russian-language exam (Kozenko 2011). Yet, even before this bill was approved, in October 2012, UR members introduced another bill in the Duma

that required all migrant workers, except highly skilled ones, to take the obligatory language, history and law exam (RAPSI 2012). Commenting on this bill, Dmitry Viatkin, one of the bill's initiators, stated that 'the goals of this bill are absolutely obvious, which originate from the president's decree' (State Duma 2013).

The Duma passed the bill, and President Putin signed it into law. Accordingly, since 2015 all labour migrants, except high-skilled workers and migrants from Belarus and Kazakhstan, have to pass a test on the Russian language, history and law (RIA Novosti 2013). Regarding this policy, an expert who previously gave a consultation to the government on migration policies emphasized the roles of public opinion and the president's efforts to boost popularity: 'I think that these laws are passed under the influence of public opinion ... it [the language, history and law exam] was not discussed with experts. It is because experts strongly criticized similar attempts in 2010 and 2011' (Interviewee 72). Another migration expert also made a similar comment: 'This was a desire to indulge in xenophobic sentiment that exists in Russian society, and to present a package of measures that seems commonsensical, like providing immigrant adaptation' (Interviewee 61). These interviews suggest that the ruling regime introduced immigrant restrictions to strengthen its popularity by appealing to anti-immigrant sentiment.

The Russian authorities also toughened enforcement and criminal penalties for undocumented migrants. The Duma passed a series of amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences, which widened conditions for the deportation and re-entry ban of immigrants. Some laws were initiated directly by the president (laws on the rubber apartments)<sup>6</sup> and by the administration (law on the blacklisting of migrants). As previously mentioned, these amendments led to a sharp increase in the number of expelled immigrants (Troitskii 2016). Russian experts linked these changes to President Putin's initiative. A researcher pointed out, 'After the president signed a presidential decree in May 2012 that emphasized war on illegal migration, the Duma adopted all these measures. Other experts, including myself, think that these laws are too strict ... When these laws were adopted, the authorities did not discuss them with experts at all' (Interviewee 72).

However, Russian immigration policy underwent another reversal as the regime faced no competition because of electoral rule changes and Putin's soaring popularity, due especially to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Hutcheson and McAllister 2018). The Crimea rally had 'game-changing implications' for Russian domestic politics: Putin's ratings remained above 80% between March 2014 and April 2018, and he and UR fared better in the 2016–2018 elections (Hale 2018: 370; see Table 2). The ruling regime no longer needed to gain popularity using migration issues, and this change had a significant impact on the politics of immigration. In my interviews conducted between 2016 and 2017, many Russian experts suggested migration was no longer 'an agenda of the day' (*povestka dnia*) as Crimea had galvanized the political system (Interviewee 29). Russian media and the authorities politicized less about migration, and popular xenophobia declined (Kingsbury 2017). Migration policies reflected such changes. For instance, in December 2016, the Duma abolished the 2012 amendment that stipulated migrants' immediate deportation from important regions (*Sputnik Tajikistan* 2016). This reversal clearly shows how electoral competition can significantly influence immigration policy.

## The case of Kazakhstan

Until recently, Kazakhstan's political scene was dominated by one leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev. President Nazarbayev had ruled the country since before the collapse of the Soviet Union and stepped down only in March 2019. Just like other dictators in Eurasia, sustaining high public popularity was important for him (Hale 2015). According to Edward Schatz (2009), for Nazarbayev to sustain a soft authoritarian rule, mobilizing a core of committed supporters was crucial. Nazarbayev had succeeded in this task: experts argued that he enjoyed soaring popularity and would have easily won free and fair elections (Hale 2015: 249; Schatz and Maltseva 2012: 60). He was credited with Kazakhstan's economic growth, ethnic peace and geopolitical stability, and he remained very popular, notwithstanding the situation (Busygina 2019; Schatz 2009). For instance, even when the 2008 financial crisis and falling oil prices hit Kazakhstan severely, his popularity continued after a brief dip (Schatz and Maltseva 2012). Thus, a leading expert in Kazakhstani politics pointed out that elections in Kazakhstan were just 'rituals', and the ruling regime was uninterested in the election results or approval ratings (Interviewee 82).

Nazarbayev and the ruling party Nur Otan have been unchallenged in all elections. Table 3 shows their high share of the votes in the legislative (Lower House, Majilis) and presidential elections, and the absence of electoral competition. Since 2004, political opposition parties have won only one seat in legislative elections (Pannier 2016). In the 2007 legislative election, Nur Otan received 88% of the vote, but won all 98 available seats because other parties could not meet the threshold of 7% to win a seat. The complete dominance of the Nur Otan party and Nazarbayev in the elections contrasts with the electoral performance of the ruling regime in Russia.

With the high level of popular support for the ruling regime and the absence of electoral competition, the Kazakh authorities have not needed to play the migration card. Despite Kazakhstan's much-touted inter-ethnic accord, research shows that xenophobia and nationalist sentiment are present in the country. When Kazakhstan was still part of the Soviet Union, ethnic tension existed in the country (Beissinger 2002: 73–74). Survey results show that Kazakhs harbour animosity towards other ethnic groups and immigrants, and inter-ethnic frictions continue to break out.<sup>7</sup> Yet, following Kazakhstan's independence, Nazarbayev has adopted a 'subtle and sensitive approach to nationality issues' without instigating Kazakh

**Table 3.** The Ruling Regime's Vote Shares in Kazakhstan (%)

	Legislative election	Presidential election
2004–2005	72.0*	91.1
2007	88.4	–
2011–2012	80.9	95.5
2015–2016	82.2	97.7

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

nationalism (Suny 1999: 175). Although the government promoted ‘Kazakhization’ processes through the language policy and repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs, the Kazakh authorities have not fully tilted towards ethnic nationalism (Cummings 2005; Sharipova et al. 2017). Many factors account for such a policy: the significant size of non-Kazakh ethnic groups at the time of independence, ‘the fuzzy boundaries’ between Kazakh and Russian culture, and the dominance of the Russian language (Cummings 2005: 78; Sharipova et al. 2017).

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

Consequently, the ruling regime in Kazakhstan has not instigated anti-immigrant sentiment or politicized immigration from Central Asia. The Nazarbayev regime has been adept at framing issues on the political agenda (Schatz 2009; Schatz and Maltseva 2012), and the president’s speeches served as one important tool. Thus, to examine politicization of immigration issues, I analyse the president’s annual addresses between 1997 and 2018.<sup>8</sup> The results reveal depoliticization of immigration from Central Asia by the regime. The president touched on the topics of immigration control only in 2006 and 2012, with neutral descriptions, while placing greater emphasis on emigration, high-skill immigration and *oralman* (Kazakh repatriates). In the 2006 address, Nazarbayev described immigration as a strategy to develop a modern social policy and proposed the legalization of undocumented migrants (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2006). In the same address, the president also emphasized the need to attract high-skill migrants and to integrate *oralman* into society. In 2012, similar to the 2006 address, he placed more emphasis on the need to reduce emigration while briefly discussing undocumented immigration control:

In Kazakhstan, we face migration pressure in certain regions of the country where illegal immigrants destabilize local labour markets.

We also should realize that we are very likely to deal with a reverse process – outflow of our labour force. We are a young nation. ... This provides us with a great opportunity to capitalize on our human potential and rightfully position ourselves in the world. (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2012)

Other government documents also demonstrate the depoliticization of undocumented migration by the ruling regime. In presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, politicians rarely discussed migration control or ethnic issues, while highlighting inter-ethnic harmony (Oka 2009). At the Akorda website, using the keywords migrant (*migrant*) and migration (*migratsiia*) in Russian, I searched and analysed Nazarbayev’s public speeches and reports of government meetings

(Security Council, Ministry and Nur Otan party).<sup>9</sup> The results show that in meetings, the president and officials focus on *oralman*, high-skill immigration and internal migration. Immigration control has attracted attention occasionally in relation to terrorism and extremism, yet it has always received a lower priority.

The president's neglect of migration has had significant implications for migration policy. To quote Dosym Satpaev, a leading expert in Kazakhstan politics, Kazakhstan has 'an expert presidential system, where the president has greater control of all political levers, and all political players' (interview cited in Isaacs 2011: 79). The president has most formal authority over every policy, while the legislature has no political opposition or power to check the president (Cook 2007: 202–203). Thus, policies reflect the ideas of the president and the officials he selects (Darden 2009: 207–208). Migration policy has not been an exception. One example is an amnesty for undocumented immigrants declared in 2006. Following the aforementioned president's address in 2006, Kazakhstan legalized the status of 164,000 undocumented immigrants. Local migration experts have indicated that the presidential administration and his ministries have played an important role in migration policymaking processes, while parliamentarians have seldom proposed bills, and businesses have exerted little influence on policymaking, notwithstanding their attempts to do so (Interviewees 65, 11, 30 and 74).<sup>10</sup>

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

When I was in the working group for the Security Council in 2015, the Council was not interested in illegal migration at all. They were more interested in internal migration from south to north ... The government did not acknowledge the existence of unregistered migrants from Central Asia. For instance, in a TV show, migration police officers said that migrants are in Kazakhstan for private reasons, not for work. (Interviewee 11)

Other migration experts and political analysts shared this view (Davé 2014; Interviewee 51). One sociologist pointed out, 'It is not even a denial, but they [the government] just do not look at them [inter-ethnic conflicts]. And they do not want to change it' (Interviewee 98). Officials tend to focus on interracial tension between Russians and Kazakhs, but most conflicts occur between Kazakhs and other marginal ethnic groups in the countryside due to acute economic competition for resources (Interviewee 98). Officially, Kazakhstan is free of inter-ethnic problems. When ethnic violence breaks out, the authorities emphasize that it occurs at the domestic level (*bytovom urovne*), not because of structural factors or government policies (Shirokov 2016). Even for local governments in immigrant-receiving regions, migration control is of little importance. In the city council election in Almaty, a popular migrant destination, none of 36 elected deputies touched upon migration in their election programmes.<sup>11</sup>

Ignoring the issue results in the absence of immigration policies. The Kazakhstani government has rarely modified immigration policies for low-skill immigrants. The current low-skill immigration policy keeps most migrants out of



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

## Conclusion

This research provides a new aspect on theoretical frameworks for immigration policy in autocracy, which until now have neglected electoral factors. By comparing labour immigration policies in Russia and Kazakhstan in the 2010s, I show that electoral competition can be a key factor facilitating immigration restrictions, even in an authoritarian context. In that regard, as Katharina Natter (2018) and Caress Schenk (2018) argue, the politics of immigration does not vary strikingly between democracy and autocracy. Showing that electoral competition shapes conditions under which autocrats utilize public anti-immigrant sentiment, the findings of this article also resonate with supply-side explanations of the success of the far right in democracies (Golder 2016; Mudde 2010). This research, however, provides nuanced insights by suggesting a different mechanism through which the same electoral factors play a role, depending on regime types: electoral factors affect immigration policy because autocrats endeavour to sustain popularity, not because the influence of far-right parties, swing voters or immigrant voters matters for politicians, as they do in a democracy.

Considering Russia and Kazakhstan are unique in certain ways, the generalizability of this research is limited. Russia, Kazakhstan and their immigrant-sending states share Soviet legacies, and political opposition consists of nationalists, not moderates. Nonetheless, given the significance of public popularity for autocrats and the mobilization effect of anti-immigrant sentiment, the findings can be relevant to other immigrant-receiving autocracies. To validate the applicability of this theory rigorously, future studies can explore cases in which the ruling regime faces political opponents who are moderates or have pro-immigration interests. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, this article serves as an important starting point for building immigration policy theory in authoritarian regimes.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.47>.



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## Notes

- 1 In 2020, in terms of foreign-born population, the top 20 immigrant-receiving countries included Saudi Arabia, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Thailand, Malaysia, Jordan, Pakistan and Kuwait (Migration Policy Institute 2020). Nonetheless, note that the calculation of foreign-born population tends to overestimate the scale of international migration in post-socialist states such as Russia and Kazakhstan due to border changes. On the potential bias of migration measurement, see Gorodzeisky and Leykin 2022.
- 2 I discuss these alternative explanations in detail in the Online Appendix.
- 3 IRB approval was obtained for this study on 25 May 2016 (Protocol# 7740).
- 4 While Kazakhstan promoted the return of ethnic Kazakhs, Russia's conception of the so-called 'compatriots' changed over time. For Russia and Kazakhstan's ethnic return migration policy, see Zeveleva 2014.
- 5 The Kremlin website, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru).
- 6 According to Russian law, foreign citizens must register if they stay in Russia longer than a week. 'Rubber apartments' denote a situation in which hundreds of foreign migrants are registered in the same apartment to obtain registration documents.
- 7 More details on public opinion and ethnic violence are provided in the Online Appendix.
- 8 The Akorda (the presidential administration) website, [www.akorda.kz](http://www.akorda.kz). I analysed documents both in Russian and in English-language translations.
- 9 I accessed the Akorda website on 8 February 2019, and the keyword search yielded 32 documents.
- 10 In interviews with the author, government officials noted that businesses continually proposed lifting restrictions on low-skilled immigration. For more details on the roles of business interests, see the Online Appendix.
- 11 Almaty City Council website, [www.mga.kz](http://www.mga.kz).

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