

ARTICLE

# The 2022 protests in Karakalpakstan. From lost autonomy to regional identity consolidation?

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## Abstract

The eruption of protests within consolidated authoritarian regimes is an infrequent event seen by many scholars as resulting from the separatist intentions of a regional elite enabled by autonomy. In this article, by analysing the July 2022 protest events in Karakalpakstan we challenge this assumed link and instead propose that the emergence of large-scale protests formed as a grassroots reaction to the symbolic loss of the region's nominal autonomy, state repression, and the detention of popular activists. Based on semi-structured interviews in Karakalpakstan, research findings reveal a moderate and mostly non-separatist approach to the Karakalpak question and a high interconnection with Uzbekistan. The existence of an authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan and its repression mechanisms can provide a straightforward explanation of non-resistant character of Karakalpak population. However, the research showed the strong notion of Karakalpak identity, not being transformed into political demands if Uzbekistan does not harm it.

**Keywords:** Karakalpakstan; protest; regional identity; lost autonomy; separatism; state repression; authoritarian regime; Uzbekistan

## Introduction

At the end of June 2022, Uzbekistan's state authorities announced substantial changes to the country's constitution. It included points that factually deprived Karakalpakstan, the country's westernmost region, of its nominal autonomy. The demonstrations in the region that followed the announcement became a sporadic occasion of political protest unfolding in a consolidated authoritarian regime. While dictatorships generate high levels of resentment among individuals of both ethnic majorities and minorities, outright political protests are rare, particularly due to the regime's repression against movement's organizational capacity (Reny 2021) and (in)discriminate violence against participants (Edel and Josua 2018; Turner 2023). In reaction, Uzbekistan's authorities restricted internet use, cut off the region from the rest of the country, censored media reporting about the protests, and used lethal force against the demonstrators, leaving several people dead. The consolidation of the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan since 1990s was paralleled by the regime's increasing effort to legitimize the restriction of political and civil rights (e.g. Anceschi 2010; March 2003; Ubaydullaeva 2023). As Omelicheva (2016) notes, the regime promoted the ideology

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of national unity and independence and presented itself as the sole guardian of this ideology. The opposition to the regime, including autonomy-seeking Karakalpak activists, were deliberately depicted as separatists, extremists, and terrorists (Lemon and Antonov 2020; Lewis 2015).

Indeed, for a long time, Karakalpakstan was considered a potential, though latent, threat to the stability of Uzbekistan and the entire Central Asian region. This was partly due to the sense of Karakalpak regional nationalism, the appraisal of political devolution, and the legacy of separatism in the 1990s (Hanks 2000; Schaefer and Whitney 2015; Szayna and Oliker 2003). Nevertheless, instead of taking this *separatist* reasoning of the protest emergence for granted, we aim to critically investigate the causes of the July 2022 events in Karakalpakstan in order to find out to what extent has Uzbekistan instrumentally exploited this notion. In other words, we ask whether the protests could be considered a part of the deeper ethnic minority uprising instigated by separatist intentions, or whether it was rather an *ad hoc* spontaneous reaction to grievances triggered by the Uzbekistan's constitutional changes and detention of Karakalpak activists short of separatist desires? As the issue of Karakalpakstan's autonomy abolition was part of the proposed constitutional changes, and the initial repression against the protesters sparked further tensions, we examine the alleged separatism–protests link against the backdrop of the autonomy appropriation by the region's elite and population as well as the central government's repressive policies against the region.

In this regard, our research complements the literature on the nature of protests in competitive authoritarian regimes, focused on (not only) post-Soviet space<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Anisin 2018; Arslanalp and Erkmen 2023; Dollbaum 2020; Lankina and Tertytchnaya 2020; Onuch and Sasse 2023; Pleines and Somfalvy 2023; Rosenfeld 2022; Rød 2019), by presenting evidence from the closed context of Uzbekistan. The article does not attempt to restore the complete picture of events; it introduces and discusses, based on in-depth field research in Karakalpakstan, the narratives of experts, insiders, protest participants, and a broader public that emerged around the events, including their causes and consequences on the ground. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature on how various modes of ethno-regional autonomy affect the accommodation (or lack thereof) of inter-group relations and coexistence (for Ajara, see Holland, Dahlman, and Browne 2020; for Gagauzia, see King 1997; Kosienkowski 2017; Horák 2019).

Despite the history of separatism, several factors contributed, according to our research, to the non-separatist nature of 2022 protest emergence in Karakalpakstan. These are, in particular, co-optation of the regional political elite to the central-state institutions, isolation of pro-independence Karakalpak diaspora, suppression of local activists and limits of their influence on Karakalpaks, region's diverse ethnic geography, its integration into Uzbekistan's social and economic life, absence of previous violent ethnic conflict with the state, and lack of external support for the development of separatist movement (see e.g. Nelson 2023). Given the substantial number of *separatist* movements in the world that did not happen (Kopeček 2019; Ter-Matevosyan and Currie 2019) or did not succeed (Lepič 2017), we suggest that these limiting factors, corroborated in Karakalpakstan and multi-scalar in their nature, should be systematically studied across cases to determine the general and case-specific hindering conditions of separatism more accurately (see also Cederman et al. 2018; Schulte 2018).

Consistent with the autonomy- and repression-related *grievances* literature (e.g. Ahram 2020; Germann and Sambanis 2021; Gurr 1993; Lindemann and Wimmer 2018; Saxton 2005; Siroky and Cuffe 2015), we argue that the loss of nominal autonomy and initial state repression against the protesters were in this particular case of Karakalpakstan the more probable factors behind the emergence and triggering of ethnic protests than the separatist *opportunity* argument instrumentally pursued by the state of Uzbekistan (Goldstone et al. 2010; Shaykhutdinov and Bragg 2011). Until the outbreak of demonstrations and riots in the summer of 2022, the region was relatively calm for many years. It was the constitutional amendment depriving Karakalpakstan of its nominal autonomy that was proclaimed by most of interlocutors as the reason for starting the unrest. This explanation is consistent with the arguments that lost autonomy, not its existence *per se*, escalates protest behaviour (cf. Cornell 2002). Furthermore, several authors (e.g. Atadzhanov 2022) and interlocutors pointed to the arrest of Dauletmurat Tajimuratov as a primary reason why people took

to the streets in large numbers. Tajimuratov actively protested against the constitutional amendments published a few days before (Ilkhamov 2022). His detention and further repressive acts by the state forces were a direct consequence of this activity, potentially leading to a spiralling of protests and repressions (see also Benson and Saxton 2010).

According to the scholarly literature, this spiralling can eventually result in the development of separatist movement and the pursuit of independence *ex post* by inciting identity shifts among the people and consolidating the movement's capacity for collective action (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010; Saxton and Benson 2008; Siroky and Cuffe 2015). Nevertheless, the protests, instead of expanding, faded away relatively quickly. This article's second aim is, therefore, to examine whether it can be attributed to the regime's repressive measures and how and to what extent the protestors' demands were met. We examine this puzzle again using the narratives of experts, insiders, and direct participants of the protests and interpreting it with regards to the sticks and carrots theory of authoritarian regime's response to popular demands (Svolik 2012). After the initial reaction consisting of indiscriminate violence, the regime's sticks quickly shifted to the targeted repression against a small number of activists and the diaspora groups, building upon and deepening the relational distance between them and the people. Concerning the carrots, the renewal of Karakalpakstan's nominal autonomy was immediately announced and a discourse developed that blamed the unpopular regional political elite for the autonomy abolition. For now, these steps have ameliorated and contained ethnic conflict (cf. Leuschner and Hellmeier 2024).

It does not mean, however, that the protests have fizzled out. As Dollbaum (2020) notes, even if protests do not lead to immediate regime collapse, they connect leading activists with the grassroots and contribute to the movement's political socialisation and organisational alignment. Moreover, Lindstrom and Moore (1995) claimed that ethnopolitical mobilisation and protests saturate a group's delimitation and cohesion, boosting the peculiarity of regional ethnic and sub-ethnic identity. Eventually, therefore, we attempt to evaluate the possibility of Karakalpak national identity and political movement's consolidation resulting from the way they experienced the protest events. If successful, it can create a greater propensity for future mobilisation, protests, and eventually separatism in Karakalpakstan.

### Causes and consequences of ethno-regional protests in authoritarian regimes

The last two decades have experienced an increase in the number of public protests unfolding in the closed contexts of consolidated authoritarian regimes (Carothers and Press 2020). This trend could be observed in both Central Asia (e.g. Achilov 2017; Libman and Davidzon 2023; Radnitz 2012; Sullivan 2019; Williams 2015) and beyond (e.g. Leuschner and Hellmeier 2024; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023; Stapnes, Carlquist, and Horst 2022). In most cases, however, the protests originated in the state's central areas and aimed at regime's democratic reforms in general. Peripheral protests against authoritarian centre, organized by politically marginalized ethnic minority communities, were a markedly rarer event (Fumagalli 2007; Yeh 2009), even though the peripheral position and exclusion in democratic states increases the likelihood of protest emergence (Brown 2009; Cederman et al. 2018). In the scholarly literature, protests are conceptualized as a continuum of political mobilization strategies and declarations of disagreement, ranging from a contentious rhetoric to peaceful gatherings and eventually a violent insurrection and rebellion (Cebotari and Vink 2013). Yet in closed-context autocracies, protests are usually not an early indicator of instability (Yiftachel 1997). They are eventual outbursts of accumulated anger and frustration (Olzak 1998; Ong and Han 2019). As such, the events combine gatherings, unrest, and rebellion activities (see Gurr 1993). The causes and conditions under which protests in peripheral regions of authoritarian states take place may thus markedly differ from other occasions.

That being said, the generally high cost of ethno-regional protests in autocracies led scholars to assume that engaging in these activities results not only from long-term resentment but also solid national identification and the appreciation of separatism. Proponents of separatism, in this way of theorization, exploit the opportunity given by the existence of regional autonomy (Horowitz 2001;

Johnson 2022) and by an upheaval to the constitutional structure of the state, such as (de)centralization or regime change. Building on his research in the Caucasus, Cornell (2002; 2005) proposed the theory that the existence of autonomy from the Soviet era indicates a separatist problem. This assumption has been documented in the case of the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), an autonomous entity in today's Tajikistan (Rivals for Authority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan 2018). But Karakalpakstan has not evidenced similar developments (as well as Georgia's Ajara). Instead, we elaborate on several conditions that hindered separatism in this case – internal division and isolation of sporadic activists within a regional population, co-optation of regional political elite and economic dependence, and lack of external support for separatism.

First, as indicated by Benson and Saxton (2010), regional autonomy *per se* is not a sufficient condition for the development of separatism and rebellion, as it lacks the aspect of political agency. Similarly, the link between a sense of ethno-regional identity (that the autonomy may help to consolidate) and separatism is not perennial and should not be taken for granted (e.g. Sorens 2005). Groups are not homogeneous in their preferences (Brubaker 1995; Giuliano 2000; Lluch 2012). The idea of homogeneity is an ideological construct and often also instrumental calculation by political actors (Conversi 2014). Even in the cases of regional nationalism with a developed secessionist movement, not all *ascribed* members of the nation support the secessionist agenda (Lepič 2017), nor do all of them even identify as nationals in ethnic terms (Lowrance 2006). This results from the heterogeneous nature of region's ethnic geography as well as from fractionalization of the regionalist movement. In Karakalpakstan, the autochthonous Karakalpaks cohabit the region with people of Kazakh and Uzbek ethnic identities, which Uzbekistan uses as a source of containment (Dzhumashev and Loy 2012). The long-term effort of the regime is also to isolate sporadic pro-independence activists and obscure the anti-regime diaspora groups.

In terms of the regional political elite's intention, two scenarios with regard to separatism and protests may be distinguished (Benson and Saxton 2010; Saxton and Benson 2008; Siroky et al. 2020). In regions where autonomous powers for governing the territory are controlled by nationalists, the resources for the group's political mobilization are often exploited against the state. In this scenario, the underlying grievances are activated and instrumentally diffused in society using the region's institutions (Shaykhutdinov and Bragg 2011). Nevertheless, if not appropriated ideologically, the autonomy in a democratic political entity reduces the group's motivation for channelling its institutional resources for the pursuit of independence. Second scenario is particularly frequent in authoritarian regimes; ethno-regional autonomies serve the centralized state to demonstrate its willingness to provide an ethnic group with "autonomy". The regime does not let the co-opted political elite grow any autonomous powers, let alone thoughts of secessionism, and establishes strict control over the (nominally) autonomous region. Although unlikely that an organized pursuit of secession develops in the region under this scenario, it is not to say that grassroots separatism does not exist. We argue, however, that it does not result in a coordinated instrumental utilization of opportunities provided by the autonomy due to the lack of its organizational capacity and resources for collective action.

This precisely characterizes our understanding of the July 2022 protests in Karakalpakstan. We do not deny that a segment of society tends towards separatism, but it is simply too disaggregated and weak to instigate and coordinate a large-scale outbreak of protests. Separatist activists are isolated from Karakalpakstan's population as well as from political elite, which is essentially tied to, and cooperative with, the central government. The region is, in this regard, dependent on the centre in political and also economic terms.

The availability of support for region's intentions from external state actors may also instigate separatism and bring ethno-political conflict (Lindemann and Wimmer 2018; Tolstrup 2015). Conversely, the lack of external support contains the movement's prospects for achieving its secessionist goals (Nelson 2023). Previous research on Karakalpakstan (Horák 2014; 2018; Sadykov 2014; Schaefer and Whitney 2015) assumed that the Karakalpak question might indeed come to an

explosive point due to the influence of external forces. Notably, Russia was mentioned as an eventual player holding the Karakalpak card against Uzbekistan, especially after the Crimea and Donbas events in 2014 (Biersack and O’Lear 2014) and the activation of the Karakalpak diaspora in Russia and Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, after several months, the topic has faded from discourse, although the diaspora organisations have remained active (Lewis 2015). The July 2022 events in Karakalpakstan became another explosion of instability in Central Asia after the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022) and the Tajik-Kyrgyz war later that year. The long-term image of regional stability was seriously challenged during that year, and no external player intended to shatter it further.

In the previous discussion, we attempted to show that conditions that saturate the unfolding of separatism are not present in Karakalpakstan, indicating that the July 2022 protests were not caused by it. Instead, we propose that a direct connection between grassroots *grievances* and protests took place and that its underlying cause has been an outburst of proximate resentment brought mainly by the loss of the region’s nominal autonomy and the repression against local activists.

Many scholars and policy-makers see autonomy as a tool for accommodating regional nationalist and separatist demands (e.g. Hechter 2000). In this regard, Gurr (1993), Siroky and Cuffe (2015), Ahram (2020) and Germann and Sambanis (2021) argued that losing regional autonomy instigates growing minority discontent, which may result in protests. However, Karakalpakstan only have a nominal autonomy, a mere symbolic expression of region’s peculiarity, while the central state institutions have co-opted regional political cadres and control most of the region’s essential functions (for autonomy of Karakalpak regional political elite, see Kłyszcz 2023). It can be argued that the loss of such “autonomy” cannot cause large-scale ethno-regional protests since genuine autonomy has not materialized. Contrary to this assumption, we hold that it is not the actual loss of autonomous powers but the symbolic and perceptual act of state re-centralisation that generates in-group resentment, grassroots mobilization, and ethnic protest. The argument rests on the importance of relative (i.e. perceptual) deprivation for the emergence of minority grievances (Siroky et al. 2020) as well as symbolic recognition as a key to minority accommodation (Schulte 2018). As the case of Karakalpakstan shows, the existence of autonomy plays an important symbolic role capable of mobilising the population despite the authoritarian character of the regime. Although we agree with the understanding of autonomy as a spatial fix used by states to mitigate centre-periphery issues, it is clear that the appropriation of autonomy by the regional population is decisive and limits the range of top-down actions by the state.

Furthermore, a public expression of discontent in authoritarian regimes is regularly followed by repression, as autocrats tend to employ intimidation, large-scale detentions, and the killing of participants to suppress the dissenting minority. Such repression may in turn escalate protest behaviour, intensify ethnic conflict, and eventually even ignite separatism (Lindemann and Wimmer 2018; Saxton 2005). Arslanalp and Erkmen (2023) describe how Turkey’s repression against pro-Kurdish protests led to increasingly tight spatial control and the state’s involvement in everyday life, which then intensified anti-state grievances and incited further protest behaviour, with the outcome of socio-spatial securitisation and state autocratization. Likewise, in the democratic context of Northern Ireland, state repression against the civil-rights movement resulted in the deadly spiral of the Troubles (e.g. De Fazio 2009). In Karakalpakstan, Yılmaz (2022) considered the emergence of separatist movements in early post-Soviet period precisely as a reaction to the repressive character of Uzbekistan’s regime. Separatist movements that unfolded in Karakalpak society were established during the harshest oppression of Islom Karimov in the 2000s and 2010s. The death of Karimov and the slight easing of the oppressive atmosphere in Uzbekistan resulted in a significant decline in separatist moods in Karakalpakstan up to 2022.

In addition, there are more everyday and local manifestations of state-restrictive behaviour. Yiftachel (1997) hints at the gradual reconstruction of minority region’s endogenous space, or symbolic spatial nationalization (e.g. Björkdahl 2018), which triggers the state’s engagement in

discriminatory planning policies, politics of dependence, but also eventually the minority's ethnopolitical mobilization and hardening of its anti-state identity. To divide the ethnic group internally, the response can also include a soft strategy, partly meeting the demands of some protesters, particularly those that do not threaten the regime in general. In the Karakalpak case, the protests led to both harsh (and targeted) repression and conceding to the protester's principal demands. This evidence further distinguishes the cases of developed secessionist (or irredentist) movements and Karakalpakstan, as the partial satisfaction of the demands within the sticks and carrots theory (Svolik 2012) led to the abrupt in the classic protest-repression spiral. The long-term consequences are, however, not yet clear, as separatism may result from the experience of the protest and the interpersonal identity dynamics it brought.

## Data and methods

To answer our research questions above, we analysed data obtained through 12 in-depth semi-structured in-person expert interviews with activists, academicians, and politicians in several localities throughout Karakalpakstan during a several weeks' stay in January and February 2023 followed by further interviews, engaged observation and informal talks in February 2024. Although the interviews were focused on a broader range of Karakalpak ethnicity- and identity-related topics, the July 2022 protests resonated among the interlocutors as an important formative event.

Standard sampling method using gatekeepers and snowball procedures was used under the condition of strict anonymity. To make the interlocutors feel more comfortable talking about potentially sensitive issues, the handwritten notes were used exclusively. It means that due to the security reasons, we not only provide no details about interlocutors to maintain confidentiality and not endanger those living under the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan (for research in closed context, see Gentile 2013; Koch 2013). We also limit the display of direct quotations in the analysis, as these could contribute to identifying the (institutional affiliation of) interlocutors. In addition to these data, we conducted about 20 non-structured interviews in the cities of Nukus and Kungrat with a more random, and likewise strictly anonymized, sample of the population in bazaars, taxis, and other places, providing a bottom-up perspective of and reflection on the events. These reflections were less structured, albeit more straightforward and unforced. Most quotations used in the text come from these interviews to illustrate and liven up the arguments provided by rather scientific information coming from the expert interviews. The increasing cyclicality and repetitiveness of the responses after several interviews made us conclude that the space for further information within the selected sample was rather exhausted. All talks were held in the Russian language, still a wide-spread language in Karakalpakstan and, generally, in Uzbekistan.

We are fully aware that the field research in the closed authoritarian setting could partially distort the interlocutor's answers due to their self-censorship and subjectivity in order not to create any trouble with the state system. Nevertheless, the readiness to share the information within the interviews seemed to be more open compared to the written texts (including the academic ones), in which the topic of the 2022 events is mostly missing or, if mentioned, is presented in a way that reflects the official interpretations. Interconnected with the methodological framework of the research and informed by the theory, the interviews were coded using a deductive approach within which we focused on the context of the protest emergence, its fundamental and immediate causes, appropriation of the events and its mitigation by interlocutors, and the implications. Despite a possible level of censorship and self-censorship, this fieldwork provides an original and unique angle provided by experts, direct participants, and general public on interpreting the events in the region. In order to triangulate the evidences and mitigate the confirmation bias, data collection also included a thorough study of reports and articles on the topic in Uzbek, Russian, and Western analytical sources and media, including the opposition ones.

## National identity and autonomy. Is there real separatism in Karakalpakstan?

Karakalpakstan is a vast and remote area at the western edge of Uzbekistan. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of the area stretched between the historical region of Khorezm – including the almost deserted Ust-Yurt plateau – and the Aral Sea (now mostly dried up and turned into the Aralkum desert).

Challenging living conditions and scarce resources did not enable agriculture except for some parts irrigated by channels from the Amudarya River and the fishing industry from the river and the Aral Sea. The traditional life of most of the Karakalpak population was nomadic or semi-nomadic. Unlike the settled societies, where the vertical hierarchy of society became crucial and vertical pyramids of power were established, the nomadic societies did not create strict and firm hierarchies. Their societies were based on horizontal ties between decentralized ethnic and sub-ethnic groups. The verticality of power within the nomadic societies remained shallow, often temporary, and volatile (Masanov, Abylkhozhin, and Erofeeva 2007). Such a feeble verticality of power ensues from persisting tribal elements and identity in Karakalpak society. It has delayed and limited the top-down process of nation-building and, as a consequence, weakened the construction and diffusion of supra-local national identity (Lemercier-Quelquejey 1984; Hanks 2000; Schlyter 2005).

Despite the significance of tribality in Karakalpak society, the influence of pre-Russian settled agricultural societies, such as the Uzbeks in the Khorezm oasis (Bregel 1978; Sartori and Abdurasulov 2017) and later the Soviet systems of collectivization, forced local people to settle and create the Soviet political hierarchy typical for newly emerged entities (Martin 2001). This combination of Russian and Soviet settlement processes forced most Karakalpaks to cease their nomadic lifestyle, and many of them urbanized in major cities such as Nukus, Khojeili, Kungrat, and Chymbay.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Karakalpaks were considered by the Soviet state as one of the state-forming nations (Martin 2001, 461), hence receiving autonomy for the region. Although they did not get to the position to be proclaimed a fully-fledged Soviet Socialist Republic up to the 1980s-1990s, the autonomous status created one of the necessary conditions for the top-down nation-building and the gradual consolidation of Karakalpak identity. The region became an autonomous part of the Kazakh ASSR in 1924-1932, while its status as a political and national entity was upscaled to the ASSR level within the entire Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). However, when the Kazakh entity was upgraded to a level of the Soviet Republic, Karakalpakstan became an isolated part of RSFSR, a position that was rather uncomfortable for Soviet authorities to manage. For this reason, the Karakalpak entity was moved under the Uzbek SSR in 1936. This step determined the position of Karakalpak identity together with the Uzbek one (Pianciola 2020, Dzhumashev 2021).

Perestroika raised the question of increasing the status for Karakalpakstan. Similarly to other Soviet republics and other Soviet administrative entities (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics, Autonomous Republics, Autonomous Regions), the local elite, feeling a sense of culture-related resentment, appealed to the increasing status of the Karakalpak language and culture. Several organized groups, such as Halyk Mypy (The Will of Nation), were established within the *perestroika* process, cautiously promoting the idea of Karakalpakstan as another Soviet Socialist Republic in the context of Uzbekistan's proclamation of sovereignty. Based on this context, the Supreme Soviet of the Karakalpak ASSR adopted the declaration of sovereignty of the region in December 1990, creating the Karakalpakstan Soviet Socialist Republic. As in the cases of other Soviet Republics, Karakalpakstan elected a new head of state, Dauletbay Shamshetov, initially as the head of the Supreme Soviet and later, in November 1991, he became the first (and the only) president of Karakalpakstan. Theoretically, by proclaiming sovereignty, the region ceased to exist within the Uzbekistan territory, although the connection with the "maternal" country persisted. The final dissolution of the USSR left the region formally independent, abolishing the "Soviet" and "Socialist" from its name, although no country recognized its independent status. This short-lived *de facto* state with unclear legal status lasted until 1993 when the "agreed reunification" pact was signed between Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan, reunifying the two territories for the following 20 years.

Unlike other autonomous regions throughout the former Soviet Union that emerged into *de facto* states in the early 1990s (Nagorno Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia or South Ossetia), the demands for a complete separation from Uzbekistan were never strong enough in Karakalpakstan to replicate these entities. Moreover, there was no external power in whose interest the Karakalpakstan's independence proclamation and development would benefit. The lack of a clear majority of one ethnic group in the region, the internal heterogeneity of Karakalpak society and the deep integration of Karakalpaks into Uzbekistan's social and economic life have served to prevent the outbreak of pro-independence riots, even if several groups inside Karakalpakstan and within the diaspora would support such actions<sup>2</sup>. The absence of more unyielding and ambitious "national leaders" in Karakalpakstan enabled Tashkent to push the then-political elites under its control and accomplish the reunification process. As a result, a low level of parliamentary political culture in the republic led to the subordination of the regional administration to the central state powers. In other words, Jo'qorg'i Kengesi (parliament) members are ready to vote for anything from other state organs to the parliament (Kłyszcz 2023, 504).

At least some Karakalpak representatives, such as the leaders of the Halyk Mypy organization Marat Nurmukhamedov and Marat Aralbayev, pushed through the idea of Karakalpakstan's sovereignty. These provisions pertaining to the right of secession were set in the agreement between Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan and eventually in Uzbekistan's and Karakalpakstan's constitutions. Despite these initial activities, Halyk Mypy members were not strong enough to counterweight the pressure from Tashkent in the situation of the Karakalpak political elites co-opted to the central institutions and the diaspora and local activists isolated from the ordinary people.

### Karakalpakstan's statute of autonomy

According to the latter documents, the region holds the right to split from Uzbekistan based on a referendum (Article 74 of the Uzbekistan constitution and Article 1 of the Karakalpakstan constitution). Such provision is a unique case within all autonomies and *de facto* states of the former Soviet Union (ICELDS 2018). However, this right is challenged by another constitutional provision based on Article 3 of the Uzbekistan constitution, which proclaims Uzbekistan's territory as indivisible. Article 70 declares the sovereignty of Karakalpakstan, and Article 75 regulates the relations between Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan based on the agreements and treaties between the two entities. In this way, the autonomous status of Karakalpakstan was formally settled (Kłyszcz 2023, 510), though the procedure is intentionally ambiguous with regard to the pursuit of independence. Despite its formality and nominal character, no amendments to Uzbekistan's constitution in the post-Soviet period attempted nor even proposed withdrawing these provisions from the document.

Such an institutional setting fulfilled most requirements to maintain the Karakalpakstan entity. Marginal voices that continued to demand the region's independence went to illegal dissent, left the country, or were suppressed in the 1990s. Tens of thousands of other Karakalpaks moved abroad too, escaping the region's deteriorated economic and ecological conditions. The newly established diasporas in Kazakhstan, Moscow and Europe continued to promote Karakalpakstan's independence or, at least, the real fulfilment of the autonomy. Although many activists abroad have since resigned to achieving independence or even real autonomy (Pannier 2015), the issue re-emerged around 2013 when the Karakalpak-Uzbek reunification agreement expired. This movement also coincided with the Russian-backed separatism of Crimea and Donbas from Ukraine, though a causal connection is difficult to prove (Horák 2014).

The events mentioned above effectively divided and demeaned the opposition. Using increasingly repressive measures against the remainders of dissent as well as the ordinary population, gradually replacing the Karakalpak's regional representatives with people loyal to Tashkent and taking control over the region through the instalment of a loyal elite sent directly from Tashkent, Karimov's regime effectively swept away most of the calls for real and more extensive autonomy.



This process created a regional political elite loyal to the centre, a decisive factor for containing separatism. The agreement between Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan disappeared from the public discourse, and Tashkent did not allow any reference to it upon its expiration in 2013. It is a symptomatic fact that the document could not be found in any legal databases of Uzbekistan. The Karakalpak case represents, in this regard, a rare example of the relatively peaceful resolution of ethnic separatist tendencies in autonomous region of the former Soviet Union in the context of an authoritarian system. It is important to note that the actions of the Uzbekistan regime resulted in a significant number of casualties, but Karakalpakstan was spared the outbreak of a pernicious conflict. Other cases that similarly did not result in a full-scale violent conflict include Gagauzia in Moldova and partially Tatarstan in the Russian Federation.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev ordered the general changes to the Constitution of Uzbekistan in the late 2021 and the beginning of 2022 to cement the concept of “New Uzbekistan”, which allowed him to ballot after exhausting two subsequent presidential terms. The constitutional commission presented the results of its work in late June 2022, proposing a multitude of controversial changes and formulations (Tolipov 2022). The commission also modified the articles on Karakalpakstan’s autonomous status. Article 70 newly abolished the nominal autonomy of Karakalpakstan, while Article 74 voided the right to secession from Uzbekistan. In addition, the new constitution did not mention the resolution of potential problems between Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan based on the conciliation proceedings (Article 75). The changes also envisaged the full integration of Karakalpak laws into the Uzbek legal system (Article 72) (Gazeta.uz 2022).

### The outbreak of protests. Reasons and interpretations

The mostly spontaneous mass demonstrations filled the central streets of Nukus (mainly around the bazaar) with the appearance of several activists on July 1st, 2022. The protests emerged after the publication of about 200 changes and amendments in the Uzbekistan’s constitution, including the articles on Karakalpakstan (for a complete chronology of events, see Atadzhanov 2022).

We start with the question of why these changes and amendments were announced. Based on our insight interviews and secondary sources from Uzbekistan and from abroad, we can find several interpretations of the step. According to one political scientist and analyst in Tashkent, the commission’s work was intended to prove its high-level activity to legitimize its existence and indispensability and show the loyalty of its members to the president. Other interpretations emphasized that the changes dealing with Karakalpakstan were included directly by the Administration of President Mirziyoyev. Some analysts presumed that the changes were intended to prevent any potential separatism supported instrumentally from outside, as in the Donbas region in Ukraine (Baranovskaya, Ivanova, and Dik 2022). Regardless of the reason, the opening of the Karakalpak case became an apparent miscalculation of the Uzbek establishment. Such a legalistic and instrumental approach of the regime, on the contrary, turned out to be just the starting point of the protests outbreak. It raised a problem that had not existed in Karakalpakstan after the settlement of the issue in the 1990s (Sarukhanyan 2022).

In regard to the protest emergence, most of our interlocutors in Karakalpakstan considered the publication of constitutional changes as the principal reason for the outbreak of protests. At least part of the Karakalpak society became sensitive about the region’s formal statute changes, considering it the principal achievement for Karakalpak national issue despite its formality. This notion occurred despite the years of humiliation of Karakalpak activists inside Uzbekistan and abroad (most of them became unknown to the local population, including those who participated in the protests) as well as the constant and long-term subordination of Karakalpak political elites to Tashkent and the formality of Karakalpak autonomy. For most interlocutors, the symbolic power of the Karakalpak autonomy status as well as the aspects of cultural autonomy – the usage of Karakalpak language at schools of all types, preserving the Karakalpak language for mutual communication and the written documents (despite numerous changes of the script system in

the decades after the Uzbekistan independence) – in the way it had existed before the events were found as sufficient. Obviously, any downgrade of this statute could quickly become a reason for another wave of instability.

Most of the interlocutors, particularly from the intellectual elite, did not and even today after the events do not think about going beyond this point and demanding further (real) autonomy or even separation.

“It’s necessary to keep in mind the rights of the Karakalpaks, but the independence is hardly imaginable even among those who might support it. Moreover, I do not speak about the position of other ethnic groups [in Karakalpakstan, authors’ remark] – Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Turkmen” (interview in the academic sphere, January 2023).

The state reaction to the protest emergence became the standard for authoritarian regimes threatened by any challenge. Suppressing any eventual sign of riots was the first reaction from both the Karakalpak and central powers. The internet connection was cut, prominent leaders were detained, and repressive forces dispersed the demonstration with several deaths and many wounded. Particularly, direct participants in the events also did not think about eventual separation and, as claimed in the interviews, keeping the formal statute of the region towards Uzbekistan was the principal push factor of their presence in the streets in July 2022. In addition, initial arrests of several activists considered “those from our nation” were mentioned by interlocutors as another reason for going out for demonstrations. At the same time, several reflections showed a post-protest increase in the level of national consciousness and politicization of the issue. One respondent, a young taxi driver from Nukus, who was involved in events, remarked:

“Through the demonstrations, I realized what it means to be Karakalpak”.

Within several interviews in the academic field, the interlocutors pointed to the growing popularity of Karakalpak language after 2022 at the expense of Uzbek or Russian. However, this evidence is quite hard to measure without any proper opinion poll as the usage of the vernacular language is already widespread throughout the region among Karakalpaks and even other nations. As manifested in the follow-up interviews conducted in February 2024, the situation seems to be much less tense than the year before (and half year after the events).

The last group of interviewed voices, demanding real autonomy for Karakalpakstan up to the secession, was the least numerous, just in one out of 20 cases of unstructured interviews. As the interlocutors’ sample was rather qualitative than quantitative, it does not mean the percentage of separatism supporters is not in fact much higher than the sample could embrace. However, when asked about the sources of their separatist mood, the person presented it precisely as a consequence of direct participation in the 2022 events. Interestingly, most of the interlocutors did not mention the opposition leaders living in diaspora abroad and calling for Karakalpakstan’s independence as the source of their eventual separatist moods. It does show the low level of diaspora influence on the country in this particular issue.

### Conflict resolution. Creating the presidential image?

Based on most interviews in Karakalpakstan, the augmenting conflict was moderated by the state using a combination of repressive and soft measures, corresponding to the *sticks* and *carrots* theory of an authoritarian regime’s approach to the opposition (Svolik 2012, 9-10).

Soft measures (the carrots) consisted of the constitutional amendments’ abolition and the centre’s quick reaction, including President Mirziyoyev’s arrival in the region. Although some Karakalpak activists criticized the genuine intentions of the Uzbekistan leadership, the region eventually preserved its formal autonomy, and the president even raised his authority within the

Karakalpak population (as acknowledged by major part of our interlocutors). Hard measures (the sticks) included the detention of several prominent activists and suppression of demonstrations by force, though the regime carefully distinguished in its rhetoric and (partially) actions between “ordinary Karakalpaks” and “villainous activists”.

President Mirziyoyev landed in Nukus to help calm down the situation on July 3rd, when the regional capital was mostly back under the control of state powers (Atadzhanov 2022). The closer context of the harsh response of his predecessor in Andijon 2005, or the more recent reaction of the Tajik powers to the riots in Gorno-Badakhshan (Pamir), could serve as a bad example for him (Kari 2022). Becoming scared of the situation that could escalate into a more severe conflict should the mass protests (and their subsequent mass suppression) continue, he identified the principal root causes for the riots and quickly made concessions to the constitutional changes. As a result, the work on constitutional changes was interrupted, and the Karakalpak issue was erased. The transformation of Karakalpakstan’s status was marginal compared to the main aim of the constitutional changes – securing his position from a long-term perspective. The concession on this issue did not harm this main goal. On the contrary, presenting himself as a peace broker, he gained popularity in Karakalpakstan and the rest of Uzbekistan, as acknowledged in the interview with a political analyst from Tashkent (February 8, 2023).

Blaming the local deputies for non-communication with the population, the president made these people (often very unpopular and considered corrupt) responsible for the events (BBC O’zbek 2022). Consequently, he withdrew Murat Kamalov, the head of *Jo’qorg’i Kengesi* and the formal leader of Karakalpakstan, and other prominent people from the loyal autonomy leadership. In this way, Mirziyoyev could keep paternalistic face of a “good king surrounded by bad *boyars* on the ground”. This image was reflected in most interviews, even among those directly involved in the protests.

After calming the protests down, Karakalpakstan’s independence disappeared from the public’s demands, and most interlocutors labelled this option as “hypothetical” or “improbable”, often praising the president (even if subjectively) for his involvement in the issue. Although no reliable and independent-of-the-state opinion polls were conducted, the increased popularity of the president emerged from both the expert and random talks. “The president comes more often to the region opening new enterprises and raising new project”, as some of the interlocutors claimed repeatedly, although it is difficult to assess the extent of sincerity and self-censorship in their answers. Several voices promoting an independent Karakalpakstan are dispersed throughout the region, both inside and outside of Uzbekistan, and do not possess enough power to raise mass movements and accomplish this eventual goal. The protests did not connect the regional population with either the activists or the exiled pro-independence diaspora, and it was precisely this connection that the regime sought to prevent in its response to the events. In addition, the political, economic and humanitarian ties with Uzbekistan, the involvement of regional political elites into the Uzbekistan’s central establishment as well as the presence of large Uzbek and Kazakh communities that downgrade the share of the Karakalpak population in the region, are among the factors that contributed to the unpopularity of separatist ideas in the critical part of society.

The regime actively exploited and intensified these societal gaps by targeting repression against occasional activists and diaspora groups. The state narrative immediately introduced the interpretation that maligned the events to justify the repression. The official discourse spoke about “the criminal group of people” and attempted to downgrade the number of protesters (*Jo’qorg’i Kengesi* 2022). Labelling the leaders and protesters as “criminals” or “hooligans” was used to delegitimize, criminalize and marginalize the crowds and their goals. At the same time, official Uzbek and Karakalpak journals and newspapers praised the state care in developing and investing in Karakalpakstan (Narodnoe Slovo 2022a). Such news raises and underlines the intended idea of Karakalpakstan being an inseparable part of Uzbekistan.

Using the rhetoric of “the influence of foreign subversive forces influencing a naïve part of young people”, the regime tried to erase the notion of local population guilt (Iugai 2022; Narodnoe Slovo

2022b). Mirziyoyev directly admitted foreign influence in his statement on the event (Prezident.uz 2022). This “foreign footprint” was also reflected in the Russian media that hinted at the rhetoric of the “colour revolution fomenting” (Panfilova 2022). Such discourses explaining rather spontaneous events as ‘foreign-based’ became a “standard” part of authoritarian regime’s reactions as observed in other recent cases in authoritarian regimes such as Russia 2012, Belarus 2020, Kazakhstan 2022 and others (Koesel and Bunce 2012). In addition, the regime’s search for foreign organizers turned from pure rhetoric to adopted practical steps. Several diaspora leaders and representatives were put on the wanted list, mocked and finally sentenced in absence (Makhmudov 2022; Abidov 2023). The Karakalpak diaspora in Russia also came under threat of arrest and eventual extradition to Uzbekistan based on an “attempt to the constitutional order”. This accusation became another “standard tool” for discrediting opposition and challengers of power in authoritarian regimes (Narodnoe Slovo 2022b). The government applied the “sticks approach” to these outside figures.

In order to contextualize the response to the Karakalpak protests within the universe of cases from other authoritarian regimes, it is necessary to consider several specifics in the reaction of Uzbekistan. First of all, president Mirziyoyev was imagined as a man who quickly came to the region to inspect and solve the issue on the spot. He was labelled (in official press) as a supporter of democracy and dialogue, at least within the loyal population (Iugai 2022). Later, the president was portrayed as forgiving, pointing out that “Karakalpaks have a clear conscience” (Narodnoe Slovo 2022c). He has also been portrayed as an enthusiastic supporter of Karakalpakstan, boosting its social and economic development and demonstrating his personal interest in the region (Kun.uz, March 30, 2023).

At the same time, unlike, for example, the 2020 Belarus events (Green 2022; Rosenfeld 2022), the media coverage was limited in the initial part of protests, with detentions and threats to independent journalists, newspapers and web portals (Lillis 2022). Nevertheless, most journalists were quickly released, and several independent Uzbek newspapers and portals (especially Gazeta.uz) thoroughly investigated the events and even published their accounts without a ban or limits (Atadzhanov 2022).

Despite the state’s authoritarian nature and classical ideologization of the presidential role, the president’s imagined involvement helped calm the situation in Karakalpakstan, at least from the power’s in Uzbekistan point of view. We could speculate about the level of analysis in the presidential administration and to what extent the personal character of Mirziyoyev was involved. The example of his predecessor’s approach to, among others, the 2005 Andijon events served him as an analogue to the current events. Mirziyoyev did not want to use such a terrible example of solving the situation inside the country and creating an image of another bloody dictator for the outside world.

On the other hand, several leaders or alleged leaders of the demonstrations were arrested and entered court that was moved to Bukhara, officially due to the reconstruction of the Nukus facilities. However, the intention was to move it far away from Karakalpakstan. Although the trial was surprisingly openly (in the Uzbekistan context) translated online and covered extensively by the Uzbek media, its primary intention became preventing any other riots. Severe sentences for the alleged main organizers (such as the activist Dauletmurat Tajimuratov) were balanced by conditional sentences for other activists and people involved in the riots (such as the journalist Lolagul Qallixanova), although those who were released or received conditional sentences were threatened by the local organs and are already in the Uzbekistani databases (Eraliev 2023). As a consequence, the result of trials did not resonate strongly in Karakalpakstan society and did not provoke another wave of demonstrations demanding the eventual release of the leaders and claims for Karakalpak independence. As expressed by a local man in the Nukus’ bazaar:

“We do not need any more deaths or jailed people, we want to live in peace with Tashkent” (interview in Nukus, February 2024).

On the contrary, the detention of several policemen involved in suppressing the demonstrations satisfied even those who could be radicalized (Gazeta.uz, 2023). Though, in this case, the punishments were incomparable with those sentenced for participation in protests, their names (unlike the protesters) were not released, and these policemen became a part of the show trials, demonstrating the ability of the system to punish both sides and calm the situation.

The interviews in Nukus and, selectively, in other parts of Karakalpakstan did not unveil a substantial mood of separatism in the country. Most interlocutors accepted Karakalpakstan's status as a nominally autonomous part of Uzbekistan. The withdrawal of constitutional changes, including those crucial articles on Karakalpakstan, met most requirements, calmed down the situation, and did not let the violence and mutual accusations escalate. Most interlocutors, including those who directly participated in the protests, reflected on this issue. Although we might accept a particular role of self-censorship in their answers, another wave of separatism in Karakalpakstan is hardly expected (at least as of now) despite the existence of some groups favouring such a solution and possible increase in national identity fomentation and awareness of the independence option. Otherwise, even those opposing the regime in Uzbekistan claimed their satisfaction with the formal status of Karakalpakstan.

The opposition exponents abroad pointed to the insufficient autonomy of Karakalpaks (both formal and informal) a long-time before the events broke out. The *Alga Karakalpakstan* (Forward Karakalpakstan!) movement is considered one of the loudest advocates of Karakalpak sovereignty or even independence (Yakubov 2022). Therefore, their view on the topic is more radical than inside the country, demanding the transformation of the status of Karakalpakstan to complete independence, and their leaders underwent the “sticks” of the Uzbekistan system being sentenced to long jails in their absence (Abidov 2023).

Comparing other attempts to suppress the public riots in the post-Soviet area by the authoritarian regimes, the Uzbekistan authorities applied an ambiguous reaction (“sticks and carrots” approach). The former was used against the most visible showcases in the trials, including those representatives from the diaspora who were also dehumanized. In the latter case (the carrots), many detainees were finally released and the president himself was presented as a benign father of Karakalpakstan. Such an approach became unique as authoritarian regimes usually apply stronger and harsher measures in these cases. Moreover, it implicitly demonstrates that Uzbekistan is partially aware that there is no significant separatist movement in Karakalpakstan, and that a combination of isolation and defamation of several activists and diaspora organizations with the “carrot approach” for the rest of the population will suffice to achieve its main goal. The little resonance within the Karakalpak society after the events (trials, president coming to visit the region) demonstrates the unwillingness of the significant part of the population in the region to go against Tashkent. One respondent (author's interview with the shop owner in Nukus, February 2023) expressed this process of reluctance towards separatism in a metaphorical way:

“Who splits from other, looks like the wolf. We Karakalpaks do not want to be wolves”.

Another interlocutor from the Karakalpak academic circle (interview with the author, January 2023) also pointed out the unpreparedness of Karakalpakstan's separatism, claiming about the deep connections with Uzbekistan:

“If we separate ourselves from Tashkent, we will lose the long-term built-up connections with the rest of Uzbekistan. Can you imagine another border between Nukus and Urgench?”

## Conclusions

The combination of several factors stood behind the July 2022 protests in Karakalpakstan. This makes the case unique within the other cases of protests, riots or conflicts based on ethnic fundamentals in the post-Soviet Area. The principal immediate push factors for protest emergence, as identified by the interlocutors, were proximate grassroots grievances: firstly, the loss of Karakalpakstan's nominal autonomy by publishing the constitutional changes; and, secondly, the initial repression and detention of Karakalpak opposition activists. Even though the network of protesters mostly corresponded to the ethnic delimitation, the protests were not driven by ethnic malice (cf. Kelmendi and Skendaj 2023). It was the perception of unjust institutional treatment of Karakalpakstan's peculiarity by the Uzbek state power that pushed people spontaneously to the streets, as documented by both experts and direct participants of the events. This finding adds to the literature that even the loss of formal, nominal autonomy can lead to the popular resentment and the emergence of protests. It also demonstrates that in any explanation of protests in authoritarian regimes, the grassroots level motivations must be taken into account. Interpreting the events simply from a top-down perspective, as another "colour revolution", perennial separatism, or within the context of other events in and around Central Asia (war in Ukraine, January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, Tajik-Kyrgyz war) is problematic. It has to be considered a specific case where the immediate internal factors primarily shaped the outcome, albeit it is not exclusively isolated from the macroregional and world context. Contrary to the general expectation behind protest emergence in the section of the scholarly literature, the 2022 uprising in Karakalpakstan took place despite the limited organizational resources and unfavourable opportunity structure given by the co-optation of regional political elite and the closed context of authoritarian regime.

As indicated, the 2022 events in Karakalpakstan do not confirm the theory of ethnic separatism extending eventually to a conflict. It is not to say that separatist tendencies do not exist in Karakalpakstan at all, but the case demonstrates that even if having the theoretical preconditions for ethnic conflict (such as the existence of the nation with its autonomy), the ethnic-based protest need not be caused by organized separatism. The manner in which the territory is governed by central and regional powers in terms of autonomy provision, the interconnection (or lack thereof) of the regional population with sporadic pro-independence activists, and the (non-)activities of external powers proved to be the key conditions behind the hindering of separatist movement in Karakalpakstan. Again, this makes Karakalpakstan a specific case, though we can trace similarities with the development in Ajara or (partially) Gagauzia.

Moreover, such non-separatist, grassroots protests need not lead to the full-scale conflict unless being suppressed harshly and bloodily. The conflicts that had unfolded in the Caucasus suggest that repression can spiral up the violence and mutual gap between the minority and majority. The idea of ethnic nationalism, well-known from the other parts of the post-Soviet area (cf. Way and Tolvin 2023), does not possess strong enough support in Karakalpakstan to instigate large-scale instrumental protests and challenge the region's connection with Uzbekistan despite a certain background for regional nationalism and separatism. It may be maintained in the future should the Uzbek authoritarian regime refrain from harming it.

The wakening Karakalpak separatism was quickly suppressed by Karimov's regime at the beginning of the 1990s. In addition, unlike in other ethnic or sub-ethnic autonomous regions or de facto states in the post-Soviet area, the titular ethnic group does not constitute a majority on "its" territory. The constitutional rights of Karakalpakstan (despite its formality) have never been challenged in modern Uzbekistan's history and a marginal part of the population considered the demand for their real implementation. The problem emerged artificially and pointlessly due to the neglected approach among the constitutional commission and the Tashkent and Nukus parliaments. According to a political analyst with a good contact towards the constitutional committee, its members overplayed their effort to please the principal goal of the process – keeping the existing

president in power through the annulment of presidential terms (interview of author, Tashkent, February 2023). At the same time, the central and regional powers underestimated the role that the autonomous status played in the minds of the people in Karakalpakstan.

The immediate satisfaction of the demands from the protesters, i.e. the removal of the Karakalpak issue from the constitutional reforms, became an acceptable result for a generally calm resolution. Most of the voices from the ground did not go beyond these demands. The president's involvement played a substantial role in mitigating the issue. He preferred a moderate and peaceful resolution to a full-scale massacre adopted by his predecessor in the 2005 Andijon events. Although there were casualties among the protesters, this allowed him to underline the image of a democratic and amiable figure in both Karakalpakstan and the whole Uzbekistan. Sudden arrival in the region and announcement about the resolution of protest enabled him to keep authority and blame others in the system, including the local representatives, who were generally considered unpopular within the population. The unrest in Karakalpakstan could create a serious obstacle to his long-term goal – the extension of his presidential term that the constitutional reform would allow him (Avezov 2023; Eurasianet 2023). Combining repressive and incentive-accommodative approaches, i.e. “sticks” and “carrots”, confirms the broad set of measures authoritarian regimes can use to mitigate the conflict. Its rhetoric of the protest emergence as emanating from separatism, hooliganism, and foreign subversive forces must be understood as a tool for maintaining divisions and isolation within the regional group. It provides the regime with sources for minority containment. This tool functions in conjunction with the co-optation of Karakalpak regional political elite into the broader Uzbek governing project.

Contrary to many other conflict zones, the Karakalpak question has not attracted substantial support outside of Uzbekistan, neither from ethnically related Kazakhstan nor from regional powers (such as Russia) up to more distant power centres such as China, the EU, the US or Turkey. No external actors were interested in deteriorating the situation or supporting several activists promoting separatism.

Therefore, a combination of several measures and circumstances together with a mostly inactive population satisfied with formal autonomy within Uzbekistan enabled a relatively peaceful resolution of the Karakalpak case in 2022 in the framework of authoritarian system. Although several commentators and analysts admitted the long-term deterioration of Karakalpak-Uzbek relations (Ryskulova 2022), the interviews and subsequent events in the region show that the situation remains much less troubled.

Nevertheless, despite the weak presence of factors mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the events have opened a discussion about the meaning of autonomy in Karakalpakstan and the Karakalpak identity. It brought the sensitivity of the problem to the surface and impacted people regarding the potential change of Karakalpakstan's status. The notion of the eventual possibility of secession is now seeded in the population more profoundly than it was present before the protests. This latent and awakened perception of Karakalpak identity (both ethnic and territorial) can be raised by anybody under different circumstances in the future.

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## Notes

- 1 Although the situation in these cases mostly lacks the minority-majority component, the authoritarian nature of the regimes is partially transferable to Uzbekistan.
- 2 The exact number of Karakalpaks is still unclear, as no census was organised in Uzbekistan since 1989. According to official Uzbekistan figures, the ethnic composition of Karakalpakstan consists

of 38,3% Uzbeks, 34,1% of Karakalpaks, 18,4% Kazakhs, 5,3% Turkmens, 1,2% of Russian in addition to Koreans, Tatars and other ethnic groups (Dzhumabaeva 2020, 146). Similar figures are replicated throughout many popular sources, including Wikipedia. Some oppositional activists claim that Karakalpaks formed about 60% of the region's population (ICELDS 2018).

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