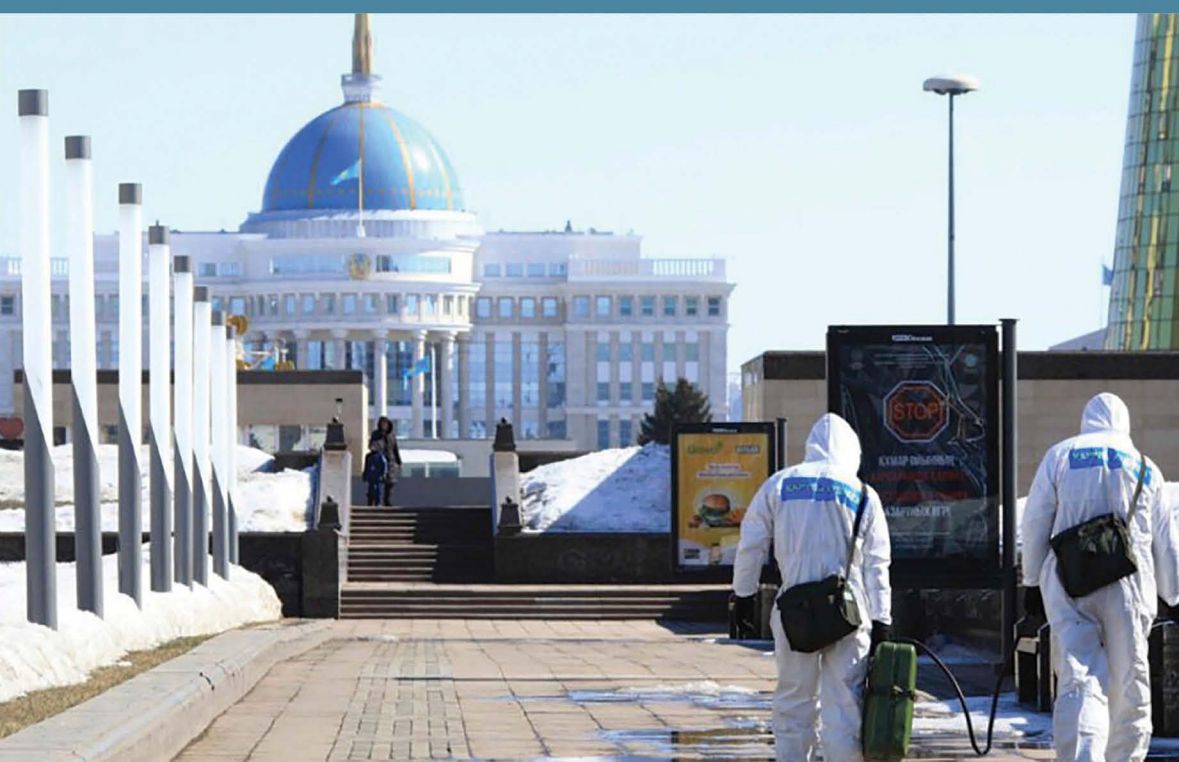
LUCA ANCESCHI

PANDEMIC POLITICS IN CENTRAL ASIA

AUTHORITARIAN CONTAGION



Pandemic Politics in Central Asia

This book examines how the authoritarian regimes of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to consolidate their political control over Central Asia. Through restrictive policies and strategic manipulation, these governments reshaped the region's politics and societies during 2020–2022.

This book offers readers an insight into three key areas where Central Asia's pandemic power grab was most visible: mobility control, whereby restrictive legislation limited freedom of movement and suppressed dissent; authoritarian information flows, whereby COVID-19–related measures aligned media and digital information to government messaging, further curtailing freedom of expression; and the international politics of the pandemic, whereby the regimes capitalised on global instability to strengthen their kleptocratic hold over Central Asia's politics and society. This book provides a detailed analysis of these strategies, offering a compelling exploration of how crises can be used to entrench authoritarianism.

It is ideal for scholars, students, and professionals in political science, international relations, and Central Asian Studies. The book is also valuable to readers interested in understanding the intersection between public health crises and authoritarian governance.

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Abbreviations

ACF	Anti-Corruption Foundation
ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
GDP	gross domestic product
IHR	International Health Regulations
ILO	International Labour Organisation
Kfk	Karagandiskii farmatsevticheskii kompleks
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OxCGRT	Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker
PCR	polymerase chain reaction
PPE	personal protective equipment
RDIF	Russian Direct Investment Fund
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VPN	virtual private network
WHO	World Health Organisation

Introduction

It is an unseasonably freezing, autumnal afternoon in Astana,[1] and I am deep in conversation with fellow delegates contributing to a workshop on Kazakhstani foreign policy. Suddenly, the colleague who has so kindly coordinated my visit to Kazakhstan sends me a WhatsApp message containing directions to a specific room where a COVID-19 test has been set up for me. Upon my surprise—these messages were exchanged in 2024, when PCR (polymerase chain reaction) testing was a memory from a relatively distant past—this colleague explained to me that returning a negative PCR test was a prerequisite to participate in the plenary session, scheduled for the next day, to be chaired by President Qasym-Jomart Toqayev. I was soon informed that these tests would not have been administered had the president not confirmed his participation in the workshop; on the day of the plenary, furthermore, it became apparent that not everyone in the room was required to undergo a test.

As I underwent my PCR test—which, incidentally, turned out to be negative—I was made to think once again of the political context that shaped how Central Asia's states managed the COVID-19 crisis, and how the governments' pandemic responses resonated through societies across the region. The randomness of the test and the opacity of the circumstances by which it was administered, moreover, reminded me of numerous conversations I had while researching this book: many of my interlocutors had in fact highlighted the unpredictability of rules and regulations introduced by Central Asia's governments as part of their strategies of pandemic management.

The latter proposition identifies with greater precision the empirical core of this study, which delves into patterns and modalities of crisis management at play in Central Asia at the time of COVID-19 (March 2020–March 2022). As the most severe health emergency to have erupted globally across the last 100 years, the COVID-19 pandemic has represented a significant watershed, one in which political space is reorganised, hierarchies are questioned, and established powers are challenged (Hay 1996; Barbosa and Coates 2021; Heupel et al. 2021). Beyond its devastating public health impact and long-lasting socio-economic repercussions, COVID-19 shaped up as a truly 'political disease' (Mason 2016, 149), one that, in other words, intervened to

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influence dynamics of power maintenance and redistribution. Investigating how these dynamics have played out in Central Asia between 2020–2022 outlines the contours of the puzzle that I intend to solve in this book.

Pandemic Power Grabs: Introducing the Central Argument of the Book

State responses to the COVID-19 pandemic revolved around the onset of emergency politics and the enactment of the extraordinary measures that, in the spring of 2020, were introduced by virtually every government in the world to contain large-scale SARS-CoV-2 infection and mitigate its long-term socio-economic impacts. In their drive to implement these measures, state actors from across the globe faced a hitherto unprecedented dilemma: addressing the most severe health crisis in more than a century while living up to their human rights obligations and preserving their governance standards. In Western Europe, to begin with, public conversations on the challenges that the pandemic had come to pose to democracy and human rights pivoted on the assumption that, in outliving the lifting of restrictions, the erosion of rights and liberties may turn into a permanent socio-political feature of the 2020s and beyond (Norrlöf 2020; Simon 2020; Stasavage 2020). Across Central and Eastern Europe, moreover, the onset of emergency politics maximised the executive power of governments with an already questionable commitment to the rule of law, leading to the systematic abuse of state resources and facilitating, as a consequence, an evident pandemic 'power grab' (Guasti and Bustikova 2022) in the V4 countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia). Similar dynamics, finally, defined pandemic politics in Southeastern Europe (Huszka and Lessenska 2020), while the eruption of the COVID-19 crisis in the Russian Federation posed a somewhat significant, yet ultimately temporary, challenge to the authoritarian resilience of the regime led by Vladimir Putin (Chaisty, Gerry, and Whitefield 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic exerted a similarly detrimental influence over governance standards across the Asian continent. The politics of COVID-19 instigated a process of decay at the core of many of Asia's democracies, and it moreover led to further regime entrenchment within the continent's continuously expanding authoritarian space. Since the early days of the pandemic, collective imaginaries of the impact that COVID-19 has had upon Asia have been shaped by the unrelenting attack perpetrated by the government of the People's Republic of China against the freedom of movement of its citizens (Greitens 2020; Liu 2020); the diffusion of disinformation, often state-led, in Bangladesh (Aziz, Islam, and Zakaria 2020), India (Kanozia, Kaur, and Arya 2021), and Pakistan (Ittefaq, Hussain, and Fatima 2020); the vicious campaign of extra-judicial killings carried out by the Duterte administration while hiding behind the pandemic measures enforced throughout the Philippines (Czech 2022); and the onset of COVID-19 securitisation dynamics in Indonesia, where the government militarised the enactment of legislation originally meant to pursue epidemiological control (Primandari 2020).

This book problematises the nexus between pandemic politics and downward variations in governance standards in one of Asia's lesser-known constituencies, namely Central Asia, arguing that emergency measures introduced to manage the spread of COVID-19 became tools that further entrenched authoritarian rule in a region where governance quality was already abysmal before the pandemic had set on. In tackling this nexus, I illustrate the paths whereby the non-democratic leaderships of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan manipulated the politics of COVID-19 to strengthen their control over key socio-political processes at play across the region. It is *vis-à-vis* the following three policy areas that Central Asia's pandemic power grab surfaced more noticeably.

1. **Mobility control**, whereby the regimes—through restrictive legislation enacted in thoroughly repressive fashion—limited the population's freedom of movement and, indirectly, their capacity to protest.
2. **Authoritarian information flows**, whereby COVID-19–related measures ostensibly meant to align broadcast, print, and digital information flows to the governments' pandemic message curtailed even further the freedom of expression of everyday citizens across Central Asia.
3. **The international politics of the pandemic**, whereby the three regimes studied here capitalised on a rapidly mutating international environment to strengthen their kleptocratic hold over Central Asia's politics and society, and moreover benefited from the crumbling international order to pursue large-scale deception of their COVID-19 response capacity.

There is an in-depth study of authoritarian decision-making sitting at the heart of the argument that unfolds in this book. This study addresses a rapidly expanding line of research[2] by delving deeply into the options available to—and the constraints faced by—Central Asia's regimes at a time of crisis. The logic of authoritarian consolidation became the ultimate force that guided the political systems studied here in the management of a crisis as severe and as unprecedented as the COVID-19 pandemic. The primacy of regime preservation stimulated the assemblage of a new authoritarian toolkit in pandemic Central Asia: the identification of the constituent elements of this toolkit represents the principal empirical end that I pursue throughout this study.

Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are understood here as laboratories of authoritarian innovation. To this end, the book engages with—and attempts to push beyond—prior research that has focused on the circulation of norms and practices within the authoritarian spectrum (Ambrosio 2010; Hall and Ambrosio 2017), and on the constant work of updating and upgrading that defines non-democratic politics (Heydemann 2007; Sinkkonen 2021). The book joins, moreover, a series of conversations on the ever-evolving nature of authoritarianism in Central Asia (Cooley and Heathershaw 2018; Costa Buranelli 2020; Keegan 2024; Knox and Sharipova

2024) and beyond (Tansey 2016; Dukalskis 2021). The transportability of its findings beyond Central Asia's narrow—but by all means not unimportant—regional settings targets policy and academic debates focusing on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had exerted on governance standards in Asia and beyond.

Methodological Note: How to Study Regimes That Do Not Want to be Studied?

Two fundamental issues of methodological consideration need to be addressed when it comes to unveil the research agenda underpinning this book. The first relates to the rationale for case study selection, which has led to the exclusion of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan from the range of countries analysed here. To begin with, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—as well as Tajikistan, incidentally—are established non-democratic systems that, throughout the pandemic, have been governed by relatively stable authoritarian regimes. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, experienced a traumatic change of government in October 2020, when a series of turbulent events resulted in the accession of Sadyr Japarov to the presidency of the Kyrgyz Republic (Doolotkeldieva 2021). The marked autocratisation that ensued Japarov's rise to power (Ismailbekova 2024) ultimately brought Kyrgyzstan in line with the norm of personalist rule retrievable elsewhere in Central Asia. Discontinuity in Kyrgyz pandemic management—crisis managers in Bishkek had to respond to two very different governments at the time of COVID-19—increased the heterogeneity of the Kyrgyz case *vis-à-vis* the other processes of crisis management studied here.

The inclusion of the Tajik case, conversely, would bring minimal variance to the study. As it investigates policies implemented locally in response to global emergencies, this book puts a premium on disentangling the domestic/external nexus in crisis management. To successfully unravel this nexus, the cases analysed here had to rely on a varied range of foreign policy paradigms: different regime attitudes to global processes, ultimately, would set into motion different processes of pandemic management. At the opposite ends of this spectrum are Turkmenistan—which understood isolation as a longstanding foreign policy posture (Anceschi 2009)—and Kazakhstan, where the Nazarbayev regime had normally adopted a very proactive foreign policy posture (Anceschi 2020). In the middle of this continuum sits Uzbekistan, which, under Shavkat Mirziyoyev, abandoned the isolationist trends the regulated pre-2016 foreign policymaking, becoming increasingly more involved in cooperation in Central Asia (Kobilov n.d.) and beyond (Dadabaev 2019). Notwithstanding Tajikistan's somewhat more positive approach to regional cooperation (Allison 2008, 187) and ongoing engagement with the Islamic Republic of Iran (Nourzhanov 2012), the international politics of the Rahmon regime are somewhat reminiscent of the Turkmen foreign policy practice, particularly when it comes to calibrate international isolation *vis-à-vis* regime-building.

The exclusively authoritarian nature of the political systems studied here identifies the other methodological issue considered while researching this book. Throughout the pandemic, Central Asia had become a space of dual closure[3] *vis-à-vis* social sciences field research. One modality of closure was temporary yet airtight: as international travel was restricted by pandemic-related measures, foreign researchers had virtually no access to the region throughout 2020–2021 and much of 2022. The other, in turn, related to the long-term influences that non-democratic governance exerts on the openness of field research sites across the region (Reny 2016).

This study operationalises a non-ethnographic, qualitative research agenda centred on semi-structured interviews and secondary data extracted from official documents and non-governmental sources, including independent media. This agenda had to contend with—and ideally, overcome—the dual nature of closure previously sketched out, while acknowledging that, in the case of Turkmenistan, the unsavoury mix of authoritarian governance and extreme isolation that has defined Turkmen politics since the early 2000s did altogether prevent most foreign researchers from accessing the country.

I unpacked this agenda around two interlocking segments. On the one hand, I outlined the contours of the policymaking milieu studied in this book through access to governmental sources. In 2020, I participated in a series of online seminars on Uzbekistan's pandemic responses organised by the Senate of Uzbekistan and the United Nations (UN) Development Programme; in 2023 and 2024, moreover, I completed two short trips to Tashkent and Astana, respectively.

On the other hand, I opted to engage remotely with Central Asian respondents when it came to assessing the human rights implications of the crisis management frameworks in place in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan at the time of COVID-19. As data collection for this project was mostly conducted during 2020–2021, it rapidly became clear to me that pandemic politics had become one of Central Asia's newly established red lines—a range of highly politically sensitive topics (Glasius et al. 2018, 37) that social scientists with regional knowledge and fieldwork experience know not to traverse. Openly discussing this topic while conducting in-country research might have crossed a government-imposed red line, one that would put at risk, first of all, the safety of my respondents.

The research showcased in the book hence offers a series of avenues for digital engagement with the field, including remote interviews with Central Asian respondents, and the preparation of observable indicators pointing to governance deterioration across the three policy areas previously described. To assemble these indicators, the book is built on extensive data scraping—based on the consultation of more than 2,000 news items and documentary sources originally published in Russian and local languages—and substantive interview work, through more than 50 in-depth conversations with activists and independent media operators working in and on Central Asia. These interviews were almost all conducted in 2020–2021, at a time when the repressive

outlook of the three regimes in question was at its apex, yet international travel restrictions limited physical access to the region. Behind the protection of virtual private network (VPN) technology, these respondents were able to offer candid assessments of the liberticide impact of Central Asia's pandemic management, and also granted me access to unpublished resources and legal proceedings that provided further evidence of the power grabs I describe in the book. For their safety, all of my respondents—even those who actually asked me to be identified in the book—will remain anonymous.

Mediated approaches to qualitative interview research (Howlett 2022) allowed me to reach the voices I wanted to hear (Turner 2013, 400), amplifying Central Asian perspectives at a time when access to the region was severely curtailed, and open discussion of the central topic of this book drastically constrained by the persistence of authoritarian governance.

The Plan of the Book

In order to identify the constituent elements of the authoritarian toolkit assembled in Central Asia at the time of COVID-19, the book engages at first with the dynamics whereby non-democratic political actors have normally responded to extraordinary situations like those that crystallised during the pandemic. To this end, I establish an *ad hoc* analytical framework probing the politics of crisis, emergencies, and disasters in non-democratic settings. Introduced in detail in Chapter 1 under the rubric of authoritarian pandemic management, the framework identifies three main dimensions in which to unpack how contemporary non-democratic regimes reacted to crises, namely the normalisation of risk through crisis response, the communication of the crisis, and the internationalisation of crisis dynamics.

Authoritarian pandemic management is the lens through which Central Asia's pandemic politics is presented as an exercise in authoritarian consolidation: the rest of the book, in fact, pursues the systematic application of this framework to the Central Asian case. Chapter 2 problematises pre–COVID-19 crisis management in Central Asia, illustrating how successive regimes—both prior to and after the collapse of the Soviet Union—responded to the numerous crises, emergencies, and disasters erupted across the region from the 1930s until the onset of the pandemic.

The remaining chapters, in turn, operationalise the authoritarian pandemic management framework *vis-à-vis* Central Asia's pandemic settings. In Chapter 3, my investigation of risk normalisation dynamics in the region led to the production of an extensive catalogue of policy responses whereby the regimes in question and their local enablers transformed extraordinary measures, including quarantine and lockdowns, into ordinary elements in the lives of the citizens of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as into instruments of long-term authoritarian consolidation. In a narrative continuum that spans across Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, my focus on message control unveils the patterns whereby crisis communication strategies implemented

at the time of COVID-19 became the fig leaf for reducing even further the freedom of expression of media operators and everyday citizens across the region. Finally, my investigation of the dynamics whereby Central Asia's leaders endeavoured to internationalise their COVID-19 response revealed the presence, in the region's pandemic politics, of a series of non-transparent strategies that put Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan at the epicentre of transnational mechanisms of authoritarian consolidation.

Notes

1 Kazakhstan's capital city was transferred from Almaty to the northern town of Aqmola—quickly renamed Astana—on 10 December 1997. In March 2019, shortly after Nursultan A. Nazarbayev had voluntarily relinquished the presidency of the republic, the regime opted to honour the outgoing president by renaming the capital city as Nur-Sultan. This was, however, a short-lived denomination: in September 2022, eight months after the events of *Qandy Qantar* (Qazaq: 'Bloody January'), the Kazakhstani Parliament included this toponym into a wider wave of de-Nazarbayevifaction measures: the city, ever since, has returned to be known as Astana.

This book used both toponyms when mentioning Kazakhstan's capital city, adjusting denomination to the specific period to which reference is made. Throughout the pandemic, the city was actually known as Nur-Sultan, so my readers will encounter this name more often. When references are made to pre-2019 and post-*Qantar* Kazakhstan, in turn, I will use the more established toponym: Astana.

2 In a seminal attempt to systematise the authoritarian practice of crisis management, Hin-yeung Chan called for the identification of a suitable framework to reconceptualise crisis governance in non-democratic settings (Chan 2013). This call stimulated the rise of a novel line of inquiry, which, as Chan advocated, engaged with the issue of crisis management by progressively abandoning analytical standpoints exclusively concerned with democratic milieux and, more in general, polities situated in the West.

The 2010s witnessed the rapid expansion of scholarly efforts that interrogated the practice of crisis management consolidated in the People's Republic of China. In this context, the international scholarly community directed its attention to the Beijing floods of 2012 (Repnikova 2017) or the earthquakes that hit Sichuan in 2008 (Landry and Stockmann 2009) or Wenchuan (2008), Yushu (2010), and Lushan (2013) (Peng 2017). While focusing on disasters of very different scales, these works highlighted the adaptability of Chinese crisis communication and, moreover, illustrated the robustness of local patterns of civic participation. A further range of works problematised a similar set of dynamics, focusing in turn on the Russian Federation (Bertrand 2012; Samoilenko 2016). These studies, ultimately, identified a common analytical thread in the complex balancing work performed by the Putin regime at a time of crisis, when rapid, effective post-disaster responses had to be deployed by considering, first and foremost, their medium-term impact on Russia's authoritarian stability.

Another prominent trope in the ongoing debate on authoritarian crisis management relates to the advantage that non-democratic regimes are presumed to enjoy over democracies in responding to an emergency. Focusing on state responses to the SARS pandemic in China and Taiwan, Jonathan Schwartz highlighted a correlation between regime capacity to enforce coercive measures and success in pandemic responses (Schwartz 2012). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Schwartz's conclusions resonated within an expanding line of research that surveyed the successes

encountered by pandemic responses across the democracy/authoritarianism divide. On this latter point, see, for instance, San, Bastug, and Basli (2021).

3 On spaces of closure and field research, see Koch (2013).

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1 Authoritarian Pandemic Management

A Framework for Analysis

Emergencies[1]—concatenations of 'moments of great danger that necessitate an urgent response' (Beckett 2013, 85)—take politicians and decision-makers out of the 'routines of everyday politics' (Rosenthal, Charles, and 't Hart 1989, 5), thrusting them into what Carl Schmitt, writing in the 1920s, called a state of exception. During a state of exception, the introduction of extraordinary measures supports crisis management, intended here as the ensemble of 'management practices concerned with nonroutine phenomena and developments', namely crises, emergencies, and disasters (Boin 2004, 168). In the original formulation of the *ausnahmezustand*, Schmitt argued that the exception 'makes relevant . . . the whole question of sovereignty' (Schmitt 1985, 6): the agency[2] of the decision-maker who adjudicate on the commencement of the state of exception hence underpins the Schmittian understanding of sovereignty (Norris 2007, 32). It is for this reason that, in Schmittian terms, the exception itself becomes more significant than the rule (Schmitt 1985, 15): states of exception, ultimately, offer an advantageous perspective from which to observe the nuances of modern governance. This latter proposition constitutes the departing point for the argument articulated in this book.

In democratic settings, a state of exception sets on when the politics of emergency induces leaders and decision-makers to enhance their powers. Crisis management thus becomes a process characterised by an '"upward" shift in decision making' (Boin et al. 2005, 42). *Plenitudo potestatis*—or fullness of power (Agamben 2005, 5)—is regularly presented as an optimal measure to address the many urgencies and uncertainties of crisis management. There are, nevertheless, numerous pitfalls to executive exceptionalism (Heupel et al. 2021, 5): expanded powers pose a series of uncomfortable questions to democratic leaders, who are tasked to uphold good governance standards and preserve the rule of law while addressing the eruption of emergencies of any magnitude.

Statehood is by no means the only determinant to establish where the politics of emergency is played: in its drive to advance multilateralism, the post-war liberal order attributed specific crisis management competencies to international organisations, as well. Multilateral actors acquire emergency

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powers in two fundamental ways: from below—namely via the delegation of member states—or, alternatively, from within, as the introduction of extraordinary powers, at particular junctures, comes to constitute a convenient measure to further specific multilateral agendas (Kreuder-Sonnen 2020, 40–41). Studying the implications of emergency self-empowerment at multilateral level, Christian Kreuder-Sonnen highlighted the routinisation of exceptionalism, as powers meant to be temporary continued to feature in institutional remits even after the conclusion of a specific crisis (Kreuder-Sonnen 2019).[3]

Recently, the global decay of democratic standards brought another category of actors at the forefront of crisis management: authoritarian regimes and their rulers. As non-democratic politics is defined by quasi-permanent states of exception, it is somewhat more problematic to disentangle the nexus between exceptionalism and authoritarianism. In ordinary circumstances—that is, beyond the eruption of a crisis and the onset of emergency politics—non-democratic leaders wield powers that are generally unconstrained. In exercising an augmented version of such powers during a crisis—short or protracted as the latter may be—these leaders are unlikely to consider implications for governance standards and human rights. What is indeed a state of exception for democratic rulers hence represents the normality for their authoritarian counterparts: the politics of emergency ultimately constitutes 'a central theme of authoritarian rule' (Bieber 2020).

Nowadays, as authoritarian leaders are managing an expanding number of crises, the politics of emergency has come to constitute an even more appropriate lens to study behaviour and evolution of non-democratic regimes worldwide. Inevitably, the forms of crisis management that crystallise in authoritarian settings have substantive implications *vis-à-vis* the perpetuation of non-democratic governance. There is, in this sense, a triangular nexus connecting emergency politics, executive exceptionalism, and authoritarian consolidation. The COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the global visibility of this nexus, increasing exponentially its political significance.

To highlight the core elements of this nexus, this chapter addresses the following two interlocking questions. Is there a specific mode whereby the non-democratic leaders of the 21st century respond to crises and emergencies? What is the correlation between the executive exceptionalism normally elicited by these responses and the consolidation of the power held by political regimes featuring very low governance standards? In tackling these questions, this chapter introduces authoritarian pandemic management—the analytical framework that supports my study of Central Asia's pandemic politics. The chapter, initially, filters through the lens of non-democratic politics a series of established scholarly discourses on crisis management, to successively identify three discrete areas—crisis response, crisis communication, and crisis internationalisation—wherein to unpack this framework. The selection of these areas, as it will be explained with greater precision in what follows, is better suited to outline the contours of the authoritarian toolkit assembled in Central Asia between March 2020 and March 2022.