

Stabilizing Authoritarian Rule: The Role of International Organizations

CHRISTINA COTTIERO 

The University of Utah, USA

AND

STEPHAN HAGGARD

University of California San Diego, USA

Research has demonstrated how membership in more democratic regional intergovernmental organizations (ROs) can strengthen the prospects for democracy. However, a significant number of ROs are dominated by autocratic members who have quite different preferences: to limit democratic contagion and consolidate authoritarian rule against democratic challengers. We outline a menu of mechanisms through which ROs with authoritarian memberships might have pernicious effects on the prospects for democratic rule. We use cross-national quantitative analyses to demonstrate that membership in more deeply authoritarian international organizations is associated with autocratization. We supplement the quantitative results with an analysis of twenty-nine of the most authoritarian ROs and illustrative case studies. The multi-method approach strengthens inference by showing that authoritarian international organizations do in fact engage in behaviors inimical to democratic rule.

La investigación ha demostrado cómo la pertenencia a organizaciones regionales (OORR) más democráticas puede reforzar las perspectivas de democracia. Sin embargo, un número importante de organizaciones regionales están dominadas por miembros autocráticos cuyas preferencias son muy diferentes: limitar el contagio democrático y consolidar un gobierno autoritario frente a los retadores democráticos. Delineamos un menú de mecanismos a través de los cuales las organizaciones regionales con miembros autoritarios podrían tener efectos muy perjudiciales en lo que se refiere a las perspectivas de un gobierno democrático. Utilizamos análisis cuantitativos transnacionales para demostrar que la pertenencia a organizaciones internacionales significativamente más autoritarias está asociada a la autocratización. Complementamos los resultados cuantitativos con un análisis de 29 de las organizaciones regionales más autoritarias y estudios de casos ilustrativos. El enfoque multimétodo refuerza la inferencia al mostrar que, de hecho, las organizaciones internacionales autoritarias adoptan comportamientos contrarios al régimen democrático.

La recherche a démontré de quelle manière l'appartenance à des organisations régionales démocratiques est susceptible d'accroître les chances d'asseoir une démocratie. Néanmoins, un nombre significatif d'organisations régionales est contrôlé par des membres autocratiques, dont les objectifs sont tout autres : limiter la « contagion démocratique » et consolider un régime autoritaire contre ceux qui le contestent. Nous détaillons une série de mécanismes par le biais desquels des organisations régionales présentant une composante autoritaire ont un impact néfaste sur les perspectives démocratiques d'une société. Au moyen d'analyses quantitatives transnationales, nous démontrons que l'appartenance à des organisations internationales autoritaires est associée à un processus d'autocratisation. Ces résultats quantitatifs sont complétés par une analyse de 29 organisations régionales parmi les plus autoritaires, ainsi que par des études de cas. Cette approche combinant plusieurs méthodes corrobore notre conclusion selon laquelle les organisations internationales autoritaires adoptent des attitudes contraires au système démocratique.

Introduction

In a recently published report, Freedom House sheds light on transnational repression, a phenomenon in which “governments reach across national borders to silence dissent among their diaspora and exile communities”

Christina Cottiero is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at The University of Utah.

Stephan Haggard is the Lawrence and Sallye Krause Distinguished Professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California San Diego.

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(Linzer and Schenkan 2021). The report draws on 608 episodes on the part of 31 authoritarian origin states operating in 79 hosts. Yet, the report also shows that not all of these efforts are undertaken by authoritarian regimes acting on their own. Rather, “regional organizations built around authoritarian norms of regime protection, especially the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have expanded their collective efforts against exiles ... Regional cooperation against exiles creates a sprawling web of control, forcing people either to flee further afield or to silence themselves” (Linzer and Schenkan 2021).

The growth and influence of regional intergovernmental organizations (ROs) dominated by authoritarian regimes are generally underappreciated in the international organization (IO) literature. An earlier generation of work demonstrated that RO membership can have positive effects on democracy and human rights at the domestic level (Pevehouse 2002, 2005; Hafner-Burton 2005;

Lankina and Getachew 2006; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006, 2008; Poast and Urpelainen 2015, 2018). If the contracting parties to ROs—the principals—are authoritarian regimes and their leaders, we would not expect them to advance the cause of democracy; to the contrary, they may collude to protect autocratic incumbents. An emerging body of research—much of it focused on particular regions—presents evidence to this effect (Ambrosio 2008; Aris 2009; Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Söderbaum 2010; von Soest 2015; Libman and Obydenkova 2018; Kneuer et al. 2019; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Lemon and Antonov 2020). However, with a handful of important exceptions (Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Debre 2020, 2022), this work has not taken a cross-national approach to measuring the effect of membership in authoritarian-led ROs at the domestic level. Nor has it detailed the scope of such cooperation across ROs with authoritarian memberships.

We start with the presumption that authoritarian regimes have an interest in consolidating their power and limiting democratic challengers. We argue that ROs dominated by autocratic members can act like protective cartels, providing external support to meet this objective. We define authoritarian ROs not in terms of their decision-making structures—which tend to be strongly intergovernmental—but in terms of their memberships: the extent to which a given RO is made up of authoritarian members.

Drawing on the earlier literature on the effects of membership in democratic ROs, we classify the activities authoritarian ROs undertake to support member state regimes in three areas: pooling resources to support members facing challenges, up to and including through military intervention; solving coordination problems to limit transnational support for political oppositions, as suggested by the Freedom House report; and legitimating authoritarian rule through propagation of norms and performative acts such as “zombie” election monitoring, or what we call “election validation.”

Empirically, we adopt a multi-method approach that measures the effect of membership in more authoritarian organizations on the prospects for democracy and shows how ROs cooperate in this regard. Our quantitative analysis considers a panel of authoritarian regimes (1951–2010) and draws on a new dataset of authoritarian ROs that extends and modifies the widely used Correlates of War IGO Data Set (Pevehouse, McManus, and Nordstrom 2019). We focus on an indicator we call the “IO autocracy score” (IAS). The IAS captures how autocratic a state’s comembers are on average across the organizations of which the state is a member. This variable allows us to evaluate the political consequences of being embedded in more or less autocratic ROs. Using a two-stage Heckman-style model to account for states’ propensities to select into more or less authoritarian ROs, we find that membership in more authoritarian ROs is associated not just with an absence of liberalization, but moves in a more authoritarian direction. These findings are robust to a variety of potential confounds, including indicators of linkages among autocratic regimes that do not pass through the authoritarian ROs.

That membership in more authoritarian ROs is associated with movement toward more autocratic rule is suggestive but does not directly demonstrate that particular forms of cooperation are present or play a causal role. To address this question, we supplement the quantitative findings with a “large-*N* qualitative analysis” and illustrative case studies that demonstrate effects at the country level. We adopt an “extreme X” approach (Seawright 2016, 89–92) that

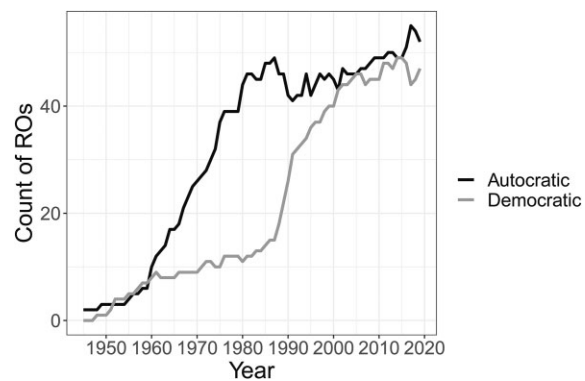


Figure 1. The growth of authoritarian and democratic ROs, 1945–2019.

focuses on a subsample of twenty-nine “hard” authoritarian ROs: those whose average V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) scores never cross a democratic threshold. If the relationship between a country’s IAS score and the prospects for democracy in our quantitative models is causal, we would expect these organizations to be engaged in the supportive activities postulated in our theory. Drawing on an original dataset of the activities of authoritarian ROs and illustrative cases, we demonstrate the prevalence of forms of cooperation postulated in the theory. Just as democratic ROs attempt to advance and protect the cause of democracy, so ROs with autocratic memberships engage in “illiberal solidarity” (Costa Buranelli 2020). Authoritarian ROs provide support—both material and ideational—that contributes to the consolidation of autocratic rule.¹

Consolidating Autocratic Rule: Theory and Causal Mechanisms

Conceptually, we think of authoritarian ROs as those dominated by authoritarian member states. A sense of the scope of authoritarian ROs is captured in figure 1, which is based on all ROs focused on political, economic, or security issues from 1945 until 2019. The figure reports counts of ROs whose members are, on average, electoral democracies using the V-Dem Project’s polyarchy variable and a standard (0.5) threshold.² This V-Dem variable, which we also use in our quantitative analysis, rests on a minimalist electoral definition of democracy but includes the ability of political and civil society organizations to act freely (Teorell et al. 2016; Coppedge et al. 2020).

In the post–World War II period, ROs were initially formed by advanced industrial democracies, particularly in Europe. Following waves of decolonization, new ROs formed in the 1960s–1970s and the share of authoritarian ROs grew. The onset of the third wave of democratization subsequently increased the share of ROs with democratic members. The growth rate of ROs also fluctuated slightly as countries founded and dissolved organizations; approximately 23 percent of ROs dissolved or were replaced prior to 2019. However, the number of ROs with primarily authoritarian members generally grew from the 1990s onward.³

¹Costa Buranelli (2020) defines illiberal solidarism as a logic of international cooperation and convergence promoted by elites to enhance shared authoritarian values and resist efforts to institutionalize democracy worldwide.

²ROs composed of small Caribbean Island states are excluded because their member countries (e.g., Grenada, St. Lucia) are not included in V-Dem data.

³Online appendix figure 1 illustrates that there are generally twice as many autocracies with membership in at least one authoritarian RO each year in

Table 1. How authoritarian ROs support authoritarian rule

| <i>Functions</i> | <i>Mechanisms: corresponding treaty provisions and actions</i> |
|--|--|
| Pooling resources and providing material support | Financial support through grants or loans Mutual defense arrangements Joint military exercises |
| Solving coordination problems | Intervention Police cooperation and information sharing Anti-terrorism policies and cooperation Norms against coups or irregular transfers of power |
| Legitimation of authoritarian rule | Promoting “stability” (political, security, or economic) as an organizational goal Principles of noninterference and pluralism of regime type Election monitoring and validation |

We conceive of national governments as the principals of ROs, who collectively take decisions to write rules, coordinate policies, and delegate powers to ROs in pursuit of common interests. The interests of these principals are affected by regime type. While democracies are responsive to the median voter, a representative agent, or a duly elected ruling coalition, authoritarian regimes are responsive to the interests of autocrats and a narrower selectorate. We adopt a standard assumption that autocrats desire foremost to remain in power, and this motivates their interests in limiting democratic contagion from abroad and political challenges at home.

Building on an extant literature on the mechanisms through which IOs made up of democracies might sustain democratic rule, we consider how parallel mechanisms may contribute to consolidating authoritarian rule, in effect, reducing the probability that autocrats will be overthrown. [Table 1](#) groups these forms of cooperation under three widely recognized functions that IOs perform: pooling of resources; solving coordination and collective action problems; and legitimation. We operationalize the discrete functions listed under each broad type of cooperation and show their incidence for the entire sample of authoritarian ROs as well as a subsample of particularly “hard” authoritarian ones.

First, ROs pool resources and provide material support to members. This can entail economic or military support. In some authoritarian ROs, the bulk of funding disbursed through the organization comes from wealthy member states. This is true of ROs anchored by China, Russia, and the Gulf monarchies. Prior to its economic collapse, Venezuela also distributed significant material support through ROs. In authoritarian ROs with poorer memberships, such as those in Central Africa, organizations have increasingly procured funding from global institutions, donor states, and regional banks as much if not more than they do from member states’ contributions. In either case, support from ROs serves a number of political and economic functions: providing short-term countercyclical finance that members can draw in times of crisis; funding longer-run developmental objectives that garner wider public support; or providing resources that can be distributed to narrow constituencies through corruption.

ROs can also provide military support in ways we typically associate with alliances. Some create mutual defense commitments and cooperate militarily to augment domestic capabilities and deter challengers. Cooperative activities

in support of members include training exercises and information-sharing platforms across multiple domains. ROs have also coordinated military interventions to defeat challengers in the context of civil wars, in the wake of coups d’etat, and in the form of peacekeeping, counterterrorism, or peace enforcement operations. Authoritarian ROs also can intervene in the face of anti-regime mass mobilizations of civilians and opposition activists.

These forms of direct support to autocrats partially overlap with actions taken to control “contagion” and the channels through which democracy might diffuse geographically within a region (e.g., [Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016](#)). [Lemon and Antonov \(2020\)](#) show how such coordination was accomplished in the post-Soviet space through legal harmonization, and we focus primarily on police cooperation and joint anti-terrorism activities. Police cooperation includes commitments not to provide safe haven for comembers’ opponents, including those promoting democratic objectives ([Christensen and Weinstein 2013](#); [Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2016](#)). Promises to instead extradite wanted individuals can not only weaken domestic oppositions but also violate international norms such as that of non-refoulement.

Particularly since the onset of the “War on Terror,” authoritarian cooperation supports cross-border police and military coordination against internationally recognized extremist organizations. However, research demonstrates that the tactic of reframing oppositions as terrorists has moved from the domestic level up to ROs in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (e.g., see [Whitaker 2010](#)). Some of these ROs coordinate against “irregular” transfers of power occurring through mass mobilization of democratic oppositions by portraying members of those oppositions as terrorists or criminals. A smaller number of ROs formally reject coups and irregular transfers of power in their treaty documents.

Finally, authoritarian ROs may have socializing and legitimizing effects ([Ambrosio 2008](#); [Vanderhill 2013](#); [Cooley 2015](#); [von Soest 2015](#); [Diamond, Plattner, and Walker 2016](#); [Thomas 2017](#); [Weyland 2017](#)). Scholars have debated whether authoritarian ROs are ideologically committed to promoting authoritarianism or simply act defensively to limit democratic contagion ([Tansey 2016](#); [Yakouchyk 2019](#)). Even if not seeking to spread authoritarianism per se, such organizations tacitly endorse authoritarian incumbents by prioritizing political “stability” above participatory institutions and indicating that it is acceptable to limit political freedoms. Although democratic as well as authoritarian ROs may enshrine norms of noninterference, authoritarian ROs are more likely to restrict cross-border activities that democracies would tolerate, such as the operation of human rights

comparison to democracies. Democracies are not wholly shut out of authoritarian ROs.

Table 2. Incidence of authoritarian IO support for autocracy

| | <i>Pooling resources and providing material support</i> | | | |
|---|---|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | <i>Financial support (percent)</i> | <i>Military exercises (percent)</i> | <i>Ever intervene (percent)</i> | <i>Mutual defense (percent)</i> |
| Full sample (sixty-one ROs) | 45.9 | 32.8 | 27.9 | 23 |
| Hard authoritarian ROs (twenty-nine ROs) | 55.2 | 48.3 | 41.4 | 37.9 |

Table 3. Incidence of authoritarian IO support for autocracy

| | <i>Solving coordination problems</i> | | | <i>Legitimation of authoritarian rule</i> | | | |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|---|--|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| | <i>Police cooperation (percent)</i> | <i>Anti-terrorism (percent)</i> | <i>Anti-coup, irregular (percent)</i> | <i>Political noninterference (percent)</i> | <i>Ever monitor (percent)</i> | <i>Stability principle (percent)</i> | <i>Average total activities</i> |
| Full sample (sixty-one ROs) | 60.7 | 62.3 | 14.8 | 50 | 50.8 | 82 | 4.5 |
| Hard authoritarian ROs (twenty-nine ROs) | 86.2 | 82.8 | 10.3 | 65.5 | 69.0 | 93.1 | 6.6 |

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). A particular form of legitimation that we identify in a number of authoritarian ROs is the dispatch of election monitors to endorse the results of rigged elections (Merloe 2015; Walker 2016), a practice we call “election validation.”

Is there evidence that ROs engage in such activities? And is there evidence that ROs dominated by more authoritarian regimes—as indicated by higher IAS scores—are more likely to engage in such self-protective activities? Tables 2 and 3 suggest that the answer to both of these questions is “yes.” These tables show the percentage of the full sample of sixty-one general, political, and security authoritarian ROs that formed prior to 2010 and existed for at least 5 years that engage in each of the activities identified in table 1, as well as a subsample of twenty-nine “hard” authoritarian ROs whose average IAS scores are always below the V-Dem threshold for electoral democracies (0.5).⁴ As can be seen, not only do significant shares of all authoritarian ROs engage in these activities, the more authoritarian subsample engages in virtually all of them to a greater extent.

In sum, we propose three main ways in which authoritarian ROs cooperate to consolidate authoritarian rule and limit prospects for democracy, and identify corresponding forms of collective action. We advance the following overarching proposition:

H1: *Membership in more authoritarian ROs reduces the extent of political liberalization in autocracies.*

Subsequent sections explore this proposition in two ways. First, in the next section, we present estimates of the effect of membership in more or less authoritarian ROs (the average RO autocracy score) on changes in authoritarian regimes’ electoral democracy scores. Our results indicate that members of more deeply authoritarian ROs are not only less likely to liberalize their politics. They are actually more likely to move in the opposite direction by further

restricting civil and political liberties. We complement the quantitative design by examining the activities of the “hard authoritarian” RO subsample, cataloging the extent and types of cooperation on an organization-by-organization basis. Exemplary cases illustrate how these activities affect political outcomes at the country level.

Authoritarian Sample

Since we are focused on estimating how IO membership affects authoritarian consolidation (or liberalization), we limit our sample to authoritarian regimes. We use the Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) dataset on regime type to identify countries under authoritarian rule each year. The full sample includes 280 authoritarian governments in 118 countries, although our analysis is restricted to the 205 authoritarian governments in 103 countries where data are available on all co-variables.

ROs are drawn from the Correlates of War IGO Dataset Version 3.0 (Pevehouse, McManus, and Nordstrom 2019) and a new set of organizations we identified that were missing from the original dataset. The intergovernmental organizations in the dataset are extremely heterogeneous; they span complex political and economic institutions such as the European Union and highly focused functional organizations, such as the Union of Banana Exporting Countries. Although functional and industry organizations may affect national politics, many of the causal mechanisms we have outlined above, such as military cooperation, police cooperation, and socialization to authoritarian rule, are only likely to operate through organizations engaged with “high politics.” We therefore recoded the dataset to exclude functional organizations that typically represent or regulate particular professions or industries, leaving us with a sample of ROs. Codings of the full list of ROs in our sample can be found in online appendix 1. The sample of ROs is also heterogeneous with respect to the composition of memberships: some are composed mostly of democracies and others have exclusively authoritarian members.

⁴The sample of sixty-one organizations whose activities were coded excludes regional banks, lending, and insurance institutions.

Quantitative Research Design

We test our hypothesis using time-series, cross-sectional data spanning 1951–2010, where the unit of analysis is the country-year. We estimate linear models where our dependent variable, changes in democracy scores, is calculated as the difference between a country's polyarchy score in year t and its score in subsequent periods: 1 year ($[t + 1] - t$), 3 years ($[t + 3] - t$), and 5 years ($[t + 5] - t$). The polyarchy variable, produced by the V-Dem, is an index that captures the key components of electoral democracy, including freedom of association and free and fair elections. Increases in this score reflect political liberalization; decreases capture autocratization through reduction in political freedoms.

Our approach adopts one of the two complementary but distinct approaches for modeling democratization (or autocratization). One approach central to the “transitions” literature and used by [Debre \(2022\)](#) in her work on authoritarian ROs follows the convention of identifying regime change as a discrete event. Models of this sort estimate the likelihood of regime change in any given country-year, as democracy and autocracy are treated as categorical variables. Considering continuous measures of democracy—the approach we adopt here—captures more incremental changes (see, e.g., [Teorell \[2010\]](#) and [Coppedge et al. \[2020\]](#) for a discussion).

The main independent variable—the average IAS—is constructed using the scores of all organizational comembers on the V-Dem polyarchy index, which we rescale to span 0–10 rather than 0–1 ([Teorell et al. 2016](#)). For every country-year, we first calculate the average electoral democracy score of comembers for each RO in our sample of which the country is a current member, excluding the country under observation from the calculation. The average IAS is then calculated as the average of those comember democracy scores multiplied by -1 ; it thus captures the entire network of ROs of which the given country is a member. We multiply the scores by -1 so that higher IAS scores—the main explanatory variable of interest—are associated with membership in more authoritarian ROs. In our full sample, the IAS ranges from -10 (least autocratic) to 0 (most autocratic) with a mean of -2.47 . For example, in 2000, Liberia was a member of three ROs from our sample. Liberia's IAS score for that year is the simple average of its comembers' democracy scores for those three organizations, excluding the democracy score of Liberia, multiplied by -1 : -3.569 .

Considering the possibility of nonrandom assignment to more deeply authoritarian ROs, we control for the inverse Mill's ratio generated in a first-stage probit model (presented in online appendix section 2). This procedure attempts to deal with the possibility that regimes with the least interest in liberalizing would be more motivated to create and join authoritarian ROs. If this was the case, it would be more challenging to estimate independent effects of authoritarian ROs, as opposed to the effect of committed autocrats. After controlling for the inverse Mill's ratio to address this omitted selection variable, we bootstrap standard errors to account for additional uncertainty introduced through estimation.

Because our rescaled polyarchy scores are bounded between 0 and 10, there are ceiling and floor effects with respect to how much any country can either deteriorate or improve. We therefore control for a country's current polyarchy score to account for differential possibilities related to a country's starting point. To address possible alternative drivers of political change, we control for structural features of the country's political economy and both

longer- and shorter-run economic performance. These are operationalized as GDP per capita (log), expected to be positively correlated with the prospects for democratic rule, and GDP growth ([Bolt et al. 2018](#)), which would favor authoritarian persistence. The logged value of a country's oil production is included as it is commonly viewed as a barrier to democratic rule ([Ross and Mahdavi 2015](#)). We also consider natural gas production as another resource that might generate a “resource curse” in the online appendix. With respect to relevant authoritarian institutions, we include a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if a country is led by the military ([Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014](#)). Military-led autocracies are more likely to be short-lived regimes of emergency or have the latitude to return to the barracks ([Geddes 1999](#)); they are thus more likely to democratize than other autocratic regime types ([Magaloni and Kricheli 2010](#)).

Our vector of controls also includes a Cold War dummy to reflect the fact that the strategic environment became less favorable to autocrats following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This dummy variable equals 1 prior to 1989 and 0 afterward. A particular question of interest is whether our estimates could merely reflect exposure to authoritarian great powers, China and Russia, which have other instruments for influencing political developments. To address this possibility, we include controls for the number of comemberships a country shares with these two countries each year.

Due to the panel nature of our data, we also account for serial correlation in the error terms of our models and heterogeneity at the country level. To address the latter concern, we include country fixed effects in each specification and for the former, we cluster our standard errors at the country level. Because our independent variables are measured on very different scales, we standardize them for ease of interpretation.

Quantitative Results

As can be seen in [table 2](#), the negative relationship between IASs and liberalization is present over each time frame; membership in more authoritarian IOs leads to more authoritarian political outcomes across 1-, 3-, and 5-year windows. Because we present standardized coefficients, we can say that a one standard deviation (1.87 point) increase in the IAS would lead to a 0.070 (in $t + 1$), 0.181 (in $t + 3$), and 0.308 (in $t + 5$) decrease in the rescaled polyarchy score (0–10) over the respective time frames, controlling for each state's propensity to select into authoritarian ROs.⁵ It is also interesting to note that the influence of the IAS is consistent over time while controlling for the count of comemberships with Russia and China.

In online appendix 3, we assess robustness of our results to several variants of our IAS measure, including using the value of the most authoritarian RO of which a country is a member, the inverse-standard deviation-weighted IAS, capturing potential heterogeneity in membership, and the GDP-weighted IAS instead of the average score. The relationship between the IAS and adverse political outcomes remains consistent across these measures except for the GDP-weighted measure. This likely reflects the outsized concentration of GDP among democracies and more democratic ROs in the sample. When we measure authoritarian IO influence as the proportion of a country's RO comembers that are autocratic, we obtain similar results to those in [table 4](#).

⁵Table 9 in the online appendix provides the coefficients from the same model with nonstandardized independent variables.

Table 4. Determinants of liberalization, 1951–2010

| | Dependent variable: | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Polyarchy $\Delta t+1$ (1) | Polyarchy $\Delta t+3$ (2) | Polyarchy $\Delta t+5$ (3) |
| IO autocracy score | −0.070* (0.036) | −0.181** (0.082) | −0.308*** (0.106) |
| GDP per capita (log) | −0.039 (0.035) | −0.125 (0.087) | −0.177 (0.128) |
| Growth GDP per capita | −0.008 (0.014) | 0.003 (0.018) | 0.001 (0.025) |
| \$ Value oil production (log) | 0.062* (0.031) | 0.084 (0.081) | 0.093 (0.136) |
| Country polyarchy score | −0.224*** (0.042) | −0.647*** (0.080) | −0.884*** (0.097) |
| Cold War | −0.074*** (0.026) | −0.174** (0.068) | −0.136 (0.083) |
| Military regime | 0.027 (0.019) | 0.035 (0.043) | 0.051 (0.061) |
| Comemberships—China | 0.037* (0.022) | 0.141** (0.054) | 0.255*** (0.068) |
| Comemberships—Russia | −0.068 (0.043) | −0.206** (0.098) | −0.319** (0.133) |
| Inverse Mill's ratio | 0.000 (0.009) | 0.001 (0.013) | 0.001 (0.016) |
| Country fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Country clustered standard errors | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 3,091 | 2,881 | 2,671 |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.049 | 0.194 | 0.289 |

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Online appendix 3 also includes placebo tests. First, we substitute in the IAS of the least authoritarian RO of which a country is a member each year. Given that there are ROs with predominantly democratic members in the sample, we would not expect membership in these ROs to be associated with autocratization. Results are consistent with this expectation. We also would not expect a higher IAS to be associated with slowed liberalization in democracies, where we would not expect leaders to leverage RO resources to undermine democracy (even if they may do so inadvertently). Results presented in online appendix 3 indicate that when we replace our sample of authoritarian regimes with democracies, again controlling for propensity to join authoritarian ROs and the same independent variables, there is no relationship between the IAS and future polyarchy scores in those democracies.

We consider the possibility that economic liberalization matters more for the path of political change by controlling for a country's trade openness (Levitsky and Way 2010). Again, the effect of the IAS remains consistent. Finally, the online appendix includes an additional assessment of a confounding resource curse explanation, controlling for the value of natural gas produced in a country in addition to oil. This additional control does not significantly alter the observed relationship between the IAS and authoritarian consolidation.

Qualitative Research Design

The foregoing section demonstrated that for nondemocracies, increases in the IAS were associated with the depression of future democracy scores. Yet, these regressions are in a reduced form in nature; they do not show that the bundle of postulated causal mechanisms is present. One recent multi-method approach for complementing regres-

sion analysis is so-called large- N qualitative analysis or LNQA. This method is particularly appropriate for small populations or phenomena that are relatively rare such as strongly authoritarian ROs (Goertz 2017; Haggard and Kaufman 2018; Goertz and Haggard 2023). In multi-method LNQA designs, regressions generate average treatment effects of the stipulated causal variable at the population level: in this case, the effect of membership in more or less authoritarian ROs on the prospects for democratic rule. The LNQA complements these findings by asking whether the postulated causal mechanisms are present and operate as predicted. In a fully specified design, this would entail tracing the causal effect of IO membership down to the individual country level. The standard method in multi-method case selection, including LNQA, often focuses on so-called (1, 1) cases: those in which both the independent and dependent variables are in evidence or take high values and which can thus validate or call into question the quantitative analysis. We provide illustrative examples of individual cases using this approach, showing how authoritarian ROs served to blunt liberalization. However, given the size of the sample and the continuous nature of the outcome variable, this strategy is precluded for the entire sample of country cases. We can, however, focus on the first stage of the process, in effect on the independent variable: whether authoritarian organizations in the sample actually engaged in the activities we hypothesized. The presence of these activities is a necessary condition for the theory to be correct, and allows us to offer simple generalizations of authoritarian ROs' activities.

Although some LNQAs select the entire population of the stipulated causal factor for analysis, we follow what Seawright has labeled an "extreme-X" approach by sampling on the most authoritarian ROs (Seawright 2016, 89–92; Goertz 2017, 63–66). As Seawright (2016) explains the logic, "when the average effect of X on the pathway variable is large, the

Table 5. Coding of authoritarian ROs

| <i>Causal mechanism</i> | <i>Variables and coding rule</i> |
|--|---|
| Pooling resources and providing material support | Financial support: Does the organization provide grants or loans to members? Mutual defense: Does the organization's charter or subsequent treaties establish the organization as a mutual defense pact, where aggression against one state is viewed as aggression against the collective? Military exercise: Has the organization ever conducted military exercises? Ever intervene: Has the organization ever staged a military intervention in a member state? |
| Solving coordination problems | Police cooperation agmt: Do the organization's charter or subsequent treaties commit members to police cooperation? Antiterrorism policy: Does the organization's charter or subsequent treaties refer to combatting terrorism as a goal of the organization? Anticoup irregular: Does the organization's charter or subsequent treaties condemn irregular changes of regime (not through normal procedures) or coups? |
| Legitimation of authoritarian rule | Stability: Does the organization's charter or subsequent treaties mention promoting stability (political, security, or economic) as a goal of the organization? Political noninterference: Does the organization's charter or subsequent treaties mention adherence to the principle of non interference in the affairs of member states? Ever monitor: Has the organization ever sent election observers to a member state during elections? |

average case where X takes on an unusual value will obviously have an unusual value for the pathway variable W ." In our case, the "pathway variables" are the RO activities that we hypothesize are providing protective effects for autocrats.

As previewed in tables 2 and 3, we selected those ROs formed prior to 2010 (the cutoff in our quantitative analysis) whose average V-Dem polyarchy scores over their entire life span never rose to 0.5, a cutoff that has been used for separating electoral democracies from autocracies.⁶ We remove two ROs from the sample: one which was extremely short-lived and one which never functioned whatsoever. Our sample therefore includes 29 authoritarian ROs.

The coding scheme is presented in table 5 and mirrors the activities outlined in the theory section and in table 1. Tables 6 and 7 provide organization-by-organization information for the 29 most authoritarian ROs on each of these dimensions, breaking out the cases summarized in tables 2 and 3. The last row of each table presents the number of countries cooperating on each dimension. The last column of table 7 presents the number of dimensions on which each organization cooperates. In combination, this exercise identifies the scope of cooperation within and across "hard" authoritarian ROs.

Because the regressions report average treatment effects, they mask the uneven distribution of cooperation. We find that there are some "robust cooperators" engaged in more activities and other authoritarian ROs that do little with respect to the dimensions of interest. If we take as a cutoff cooperation in more than five of the ten critical areas, however, we find that seventeen of the twenty-nine organizations fall in this "robust cooperator" category.

Pooling Resources and Providing Material Support

We hypothesized that the most direct way in which authoritarian ROs might support autocratic incumbents was through the pooling and transfer of material resources. This can either take economic form or involve security assistance: mutual defense agreements, joint exercises, and even intervention. Direct financial support is contingent on the resources members provide to ROs and on ROs' capacity to borrow or solicit aid. Nonetheless, nineteen of the twenty-nine organizations have provided financial support to members. ROs with memberships that include higher-income countries can rely on richer members, and often set up parallel funds to channel support. For example, the Arab Monetary Fund was launched by the Arab League during oil price booms of the 1970s to provide liquidity to member states with balance-of-payments difficulties (Fritz and Mühlich 2019). In contrast, organizations made up largely of lower-income countries have been able to use their organizations as a means of accessing extra-regional resources. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), for example, is made up of eight low- and lower-middle income countries in the Horn of Africa. With 80 percent of its 40 million USD annual budget provided by donors, including the World Bank, European Union, and United States, IGAD has become a fundraising and donor coordination platform for projects in the region (Berhe 2019).

To the extent that such transfers fund popular projects or provide rents that incumbents can distribute to core constituents, they should mitigate political risk and reduce pressures for reform. One of the better-known examples is the GCC's intervention in Bahrain in 2011, which had financial and military components. The GCC is made up entirely of monarchical members, and was established in 1981 in response to the Iranian revolution. Although the organization divided in its response to the Arab Spring, its members had common interests in supporting the stability

⁶Note that the IAS in our statistical analyses reverses the original V-Dem scores to span -10 to 0, rather than the original 0-1. Using the IAS, the hard authoritarian organizations never fall below an average score.

Table 6. Incidence of authoritarian IO support for autocracy

| | Pooling resources and providing material support | | | |
|--|--|--------------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Financial support | Military exercises | Ever intervene | Mutual defense |
| African Union | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Afro-Malagasy Union | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Arab Maghreb Union | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Association of Southeast Asian Nations | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Central Asian Cooperation Organization | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Collective Security Treaty Organization | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Commonwealth of Independent States | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Community of Sahel-Saharan States | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| East African Community | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Economic Community of Central African States | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Economic Community of Great Lakes Countries | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Economic Cooperation Organization | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Eurasian Economic Community | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Gulf Cooperation Council | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Gulf of Guinea Commission | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Intergovernmental Authority on Development | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| International Conference of the Great Lakes Region | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Lake Chad Basin Commission | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| League of Arab States | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Mano River Union | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Organization for African Unity | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Organization of Turkic States | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Regional Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Shanghai Cooperation Organization | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Southern African Development Coordination Conference | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Warsaw Treaty Organization | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 16 | 14 | 12 | 11 |

of monarchical rule (Yom 2014). Members intensified cooperation over time, and the organization has coordinated on eight of the ten dimensions we identify.

From its inception, the GCC considered external security threats from Iran to be intimately interwoven with potential internal political challenges from Shia minorities. In statements issued regarding its intervention in Bahrain, the GCC was quick to portray it as a response to meddling by Iran (Al Arabiya 2011; Salem 2011). The GCC's Muslim Scholars League also accused Bahraini anti-regime protesters of inciting "sectarian *fitna*" or civil strife at the expense of Bahrain's Sunni Muslims (Heydemann and Leenders 2011). Yet the Arab Spring naturally raised the potential not just for leadership replacement but for regime change toward a constitutional monarchy (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry 2011; Loüer 2011; Zunes 2013).

The military intervention in Bahrain, led by Saudi troops under the banner of a GCC joint force called Peninsula Shield Force (established in 1982), represents an example of direct military support, and a number of analysts conclude that this intervention directly forestalled further political liberalization in Bahrain (see, e.g., Zunes 2013; Akkaya 2019); an analysis of V-Dem polyarchy scores before and after the intervention shows a marked decline in the wake of the intervention. It is also worth noting that a key component of the GCC's overall strategy was the infusion of significant financial resources into both Bahrain and Oman. Both countries were more vulnerable to declining oil reserves than other GCC members and continued to face

the most pressing challenges of economic diversification. Announced on March 10 following a GCC Foreign Ministers meeting in Riyadh, the GCC promised no less than \$10 billion to each country to upgrade housing and infrastructure over 10 years, directly addressing risks associated with unemployment (Laessing and Johnston 2011). Moreover, the strategy of sustained economic support continued over the remainder of the decade. A second financial package for Bahrain was timed to coincide with the run-up to parliamentary elections in November 2018, in which the monarchy again faced political challenge (Mogielnicki 2018).

Provision of military support is not uncommon among authoritarian ROs. Eleven of the twenty-nine ROs have language in their charters that constitute the organization as a mutual defense arrangement. An even larger number—fourteen of the twenty-nine—have conducted joint military exercises, including eight of the eleven that committed to collective defense agreements. Authoritarian ROs' military exercises provide a venue for members to share best practices, demonstrate their willingness to reveal capabilities to comembers, and increase interoperability of members' militaries to conduct joint operations.

Military exercises organized by ROs without formal defense agreements, such as the SCO, can also be wide-ranging in their scope. The SCO, formally inaugurated as such in 2001, grew out of two earlier five-party agreements aimed at reducing border tensions, with China playing an initiating role and Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as founding members. The majority of SCO

Table 7. Incidence of authoritarian IO support for autocracy

| | <i>Solving coordination problems</i> | | | <i>Legitimation of authoritarian rule</i> | | | <i>Total*</i> |
|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| | <i>Police cooperation</i> | <i>Anti-terrorism</i> | <i>Anti-coup, irregular</i> | <i>Political noninterference</i> | <i>Ever monitor</i> | <i>Stability principle</i> | |
| African Union | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 9 |
| Afro-Malagasy Union | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Arab Maghreb Union | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Association of Southeast Asian Nations | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| Central Asian Cooperation Organization | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Collective Security Treaty Organization | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Commonwealth of Independent States | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Community of Sahel-Saharan States | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| East African Community | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| Economic Community of Central African States | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 9 |
| Economic Community of Great Lakes Countries | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Economic Cooperation Organization | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Eurasian Economic Community | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Gulf Cooperation Council | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 8 |
| Gulf of Guinea Commission | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Intergovernmental Authority on Development | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| International Conference of the Great Lakes Region | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Lake Chad Basin Commission | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| League of Arab States | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Mano River Union | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Organization for African Unity | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Organization of Turkic States | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Regional Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Shanghai Cooperation Organization | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| Southern African Development Coordination Conference | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Warsaw Treaty Organization | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Total | 25 | 24 | 3 | 19 | 20 | 27 | — |

*Totals carried over from table 6.

exercises center on counterterrorism, including a 2007 exercise that “simulated the response to another state’s request for intervention to prevent an international terrorist group from taking control of the state” (Southerland, Green, and Janik 2020). A recent inventory by the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission (2020) catalogs seventeen exercises organized by the SCO between 2002 and 2019 in which Chinese forces participated.

Authoritarian ROs have also acted on their security commitments. Twelve of the hard authoritarian ROs we identified have engaged in military interventions, including the GCC and six other organizations with collective de-

fense arrangements. Perhaps the archetypical authoritarian international institution of the early postwar period—the Warsaw Pact—provides two particularly well-known examples: Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.⁷ Early analysis tended to view the Warsaw Pact as little more than a Soviet instrument—and with some justification. For example, Soviet military policy “simply forced Eastern

⁷In addition to intervening on behalf of its members, the Warsaw Pact is coded as engaging in six of the ten functions we outline, including a mutual defense commitment, military exercises, police cooperation, and norms of stability and nonintervention, with the latter interpreted as nonintervention by “hostile” forces.

Europe's communist military establishments to evolve as parts of the Soviet army and not as independent entities" (MacGregor 1986, 228; Mastny 2005, 5). New research shows that the organization became less hierarchical over time and provided an organizational forum through which Eastern European countries could air their interests (e.g., Crump and Goddard 2018).

The common interest in limiting the diffusion of opposition became clear in the political crises that jolted the region from the early 1950s. The first of these occurred in Germany in June 1953, and was suppressed by Soviet forces prior to the formation of the Warsaw Pact. In 1956, tensions arose between Moscow and the Polish and Hungarian parties over reforms and the emergence of protests. Although Soviet decision-making was pivotal, the two separate interventions in Hungary in October and November were invited, one by the government and the second by hardline factions under János Kádár that had been communicating with Moscow over the course of the Hungarian uprising. Among their concerns were Imre Nagy's increasing sympathy to more democratic rule and his inclination to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact altogether. The path of Hungary's V-Dem polyarchy score conforms with expectations; the brief phase of liberalization in 1955 swiftly reverses in 1956. The intervention provided a reminder of the ground rules of the Soviet bloc (Kemp-Welch 2010): that no member could leave and the states of Eastern Europe would maintain a communist monopoly at all times. However, it is noteworthy that in the aftermath of the intervention, a meeting of key Warsaw Pact countries formally articulated a common interest in limiting further political reform in Hungary. The Polish and Romanian leaderships had confronted the effects of political contagion from the Hungarian revolution, and wanted to avoid repeating those experiences. The concerns of the East German party leadership over defections to the West were a pivotal factor in the escalation of the second Berlin crisis in 1958–1961, which ultimately ended with the construction of the wall.

In 1968, the Polish and East German leaderships feared that the pro-democracy Prague Spring would spread and support military exercises and a tougher Warsaw Pact response (Mastny 2005, 36; Kemp-Welch 2010, 223). Although the intervention was dominated by the Soviets, the "Warsaw Five" of the Soviet Union, Poland, East Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria issued a statement in July pressing the Dubcek government to return Czechoslovakia to the authoritarian fold. The Soviet intervention and the subsequent articulation of the Brezhnev doctrine recapitulated norms made clear in 1956: that domestic political reforms could not threaten the stability of authoritarian rule among the members of the "socialist commonwealth." Again, the path of V-Dem polyarchy scores comports with expectations: a process of partial liberalization that began in the 1950s was swiftly reversed in the aftermath of intervention. During the crisis around the emergence of Solidarity in Poland in 1980, Moscow relied even more heavily on Warsaw Pact maneuvers to send a political signal to Warsaw. Ultimately, intervention was unnecessary only because the Polish military held steady in the face of the Solidarity challenge and navigated out of the crisis by imposing martial law. As in the other cases, a brief moment of modest liberalization, as measured by Poland's polyarchy scores, was reversed.

Solving Coordination Problems

A strand of the literature on political liberalization has suggested that democracy may spread geographically

through social networks and communication associated with proximity. Pro-democracy groups learn, mimic, and draw strength from fellow activists in neighboring countries. To protect themselves from this democratic "diffusion," autocrats strengthen their diplomatic, economic, and military collaboration with other authoritarian regimes (von Soest 2015; Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016; Schmotz and Tansey 2018; Kneuer et al. 2019). As the Freedom House report cited in the introduction suggests, comembers limit the ability of activists and opponents to find safe haven or exercise influence from abroad by sharing information on their whereabouts.

Of particular importance in this regard are two forms of cooperation that are prevalent across the cases. Twenty-five of the twenty-nine hard authoritarian ROs have police cooperation arrangements, which often include extradition clauses, and twenty-four have anti-terrorism arrangements. After 9/11, the United Nations (UN) Security Council affirmed the importance of cooperation to counter terrorism, passing a number of resolutions and decisions including most notably UNSC Resolution 1373. The United States and its allies increasingly used terrorism as a justification to crack down against non-state actors. Many autocrats exploited the opportunity to follow suit. Human rights organizations increasingly focused attention on the way anti-terrorism laws were turned against groups that constitute legitimate political, regional, or ethnic-religious opposition to the authoritarian status quo (Amnesty International 2014; Edel and Josua 2018).

Prominent among the SCO's original objectives are "combating terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations, fighting against illicit narcotics and arms trafficking, and other types of transnational criminal activity ..." (Art. 1). The significance of these "three evils" can be seen in several legal and organizational features of the SCO. These include the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, which articulates a norm of deterring irregular regime change (Art. 1, 1)—even if democratic—and establishes detailed cooperation on the issue; the 2004 Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) established in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, as a separate legal entity; and a 2009 Convention against Terrorism (Xiaodong 2010). The organization's fifth anniversary statement spoke of an "independent role in safeguarding stability and security in the region" and made a commitment in the case of emergencies to "immediate consultation on effectively responding to the emergency to fully protect the interests of both the SCO and its members" (Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2006).

These documents appear to hew closely to extant international conventions and carefully define terrorism, separatism, and extremism in terms of violence and the use of force; for example, extremism is identified as "the use of violence or changing violently the constitutional regime of a State." However, the debate about the organization has focused on the extent to which these norms are designed not only to deter terrorists so defined (e.g., Aris 2009; Xiaodong 2010) but also to strengthen authoritarian incumbents and deter, prosecute, and delegitimize oppositions (Ambrosio 2009; Libman and Obydenkova 2019, chapter 11). It is not surprising that legal analyses of SCO commitments note their "potential to impact individual rights that are protected by international law, including security of the person, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of association, privacy, and fair treatment under the law" (Human Rights in China 2011, 76).

The treaty is specific with respect to harmonizing legislation, exporting China's "three evils" concept, and assuring that persons found in violation should not be acquitted "based upon exclusively political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious, or any other similar considerations." The parties also commit to establish a formal request-for-information process (Arts. 8 and 9) and to cooperate with respect to curtailing the financing of groups engaged in illicit activities (Art. 7). Although far from transparent, the RATS allegedly maintains "blacklists" and a database of suspected terrorists, separatists, and extremists, as well as their networks and funding sources ([Human Rights in China 2011](#), 81–96). In 2010, when a representative of the World Uyghur Congress (a human rights organization designated as terrorists by China) attempted to travel to SCO members Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, he learned that he was on a list of people banned from entering Kyrgyzstan. When he traveled onward to Kazakhstan, he was detained and informed that he would not be allowed to enter any SCO member country ([Jardine, Lemon, and Hall 2021](#)).

Moreover, early in the treaty (Art. 2,2), SCO parties agree that designated suspects will be subject to extradition, removing the possibility of regional safe havens and denying asylum claims. The means for achieving these objectives violate the international legal norm of non-refoulement for refugees. A task force report on early SCO activities noted that as of 2010, "extraction, via administrative expulsion, deportation, or even kidnapping by security forces operating outside of state borders" had already emerged as one of the controversial means SCO member states deploy in assisting one another ([Portland State University Taskforce on US Democracy Promotion and Assistance Policies 2010](#), 11).

It should be underscored that these forms of collaboration did not entirely prevent episodes of political liberalization, most notably in Kyrgyzstan and more recently—and modestly—in Uzbekistan. Moreover, the SCO chose not to intervene directly as the Warsaw Pact and GCC did. Nonetheless, since the founding of the SCO, the four original Central Asian members of the organization have never seen their average V-Dem polyarchy scores exceed 0.5.

Legitimizing Authoritarian Rule

As we noted in the introduction, much of the work on authoritarian IOs has made reference to the role that they play in legitimizing authoritarian rule. Particularly in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international environment placed strong ideational pressures on authoritarian incumbents. The advanced industrial states—and particularly the United States—sought to promote democracy and punish autocrats deemed illegitimate, including through military intervention. A dense network of transnational NGOs also sought to advance democratic norms on the ground. When autocrats rejected liberal norms regarding human rights and pluralism, ensuing crises of legitimacy sparked anti-government protests, as was most dramatically visible during the Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring. As a result, autocrats developed a new ideational playbook: seeking to reframe discourse around stigmatized behaviors, delinking liberal norms from conceptions of legitimacy or acceptability, and holding stage-managed elections ([Hyde 2011](#); [Debre and Morgenbesser 2017](#); [Morgenbesser 2020](#)). These efforts include three practices that we identified in our coding scheme and LNQA exercise: the prioritization of societal "stability"; the codification of norms of "noninterference," at least from

outside democratic forces; and the development of what we call "election validation" infrastructure.

The effort of authoritarian ROs to support the status quo is reflected in the large majority of organizations that have statements prioritizing "stability" (27/29). These ROs implicitly endorse the proposition that repressive tactics—particularly crackdowns on oppositions—are justifiable in the name of maintaining domestic and regional order. Even tacit support from ROs bolsters autocrats' claims that anti-democratic practices such as attacking protesters and intimidating opposition figures serve this higher purpose. More generally, authoritarian ROs have an interest in supporting illiberal norms such as the idea that societal coherence supersedes individuals' or groups' civil and political rights ([Ambrosio 2008](#); [Cooley 2015](#)). Some authoritarian ROs go beyond endorsing illiberal norms and participate in the production of pro-regime propaganda. In April 2021, amid widespread international criticism of China's persecution of ethnic minorities in its Xinjiang province, SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov toured Xinjiang with other diplomats from the region. In a televised interview with China's state-owned broadcaster CGTN, Norov agreed that accusations of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Chinese government against Uyghurs in Xinjiang were false and spoke at length about how impressed he was with the province's agricultural development and standards of living ([CGTN 2021b](#)). In a segment on CGTN's YouTube channel, Norov appeared to read directly off a teleprompter, listing economic growth figures for Xinjiang ([CGTN 2021a](#)).

A second norm that a number of authoritarian ROs endorse is the long-standing principle of noninterference. Nineteen of the twenty-nine authoritarian ROs emphasize the principle of noninterference in members' internal affairs, with most including this principle in their founding charters. As discussed in the second section, however, this principle is applied in a selective way. Authoritarian ROs are likely to endorse intervention in support of authoritarian incumbents while claiming that transnational NGOs monitoring human rights are interfering with member state sovereignty. Authoritarian RO counternorms are clearly aimed at limiting the penetration of democratic political forces and thus countering "liberal interventionism."

Finally, we found that twenty of the twenty-nine organizations have engaged in monitoring—and in effect validating—members' elections. Even highly authoritarian regimes use elections for the purpose of signaling support and intimidating oppositions ([Magaloni 2008](#)). Autocratic incumbents invite so-called zombie monitors from authoritarian ROs to cast a positive light on elections that are neither free nor fair. These monitors mimic the practices of monitors from more credible organizations, attempting to appease international actors and persuade voters regarding the quality of elections. They do so in part by releasing election monitoring reports and statements to media organizations that downplay incumbents' abuses. A growing body of survey research and case studies suggest that such efforts convince at least some voters that polling was conducted fairly ([Debre and Morgenbesser 2017](#); [Bush and Prather 2018](#)).

Election validation has become ubiquitous in sub-Saharan Africa's competitive authoritarian states. Over three quarters of the African ROs in our sample, which remained at least partially active in the 2000s, have adopted election monitoring practices (11/14). The African Union (AU) is the least authoritarian-dominated of these fourteen ROs, and it does sometimes criticize the elections it observes. Yet, the AU and other ROs in the region have validated dozens

of elections rife with fraud and anti-competitive behavior. The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) is one of several authoritarian ROs in our sample that has released joint election observation statements with the AU. Independently and alongside the AU, ECCAS sent monitors to at least twenty-five national elections in ten of its eleven member states between 2005 and 2020 (Bush, Cottiero, and Prather 2023),⁸ validating elections for some of Africa's most repressive regimes.

Positive election monitoring reports from Africa's authoritarian ROs—particularly when issued jointly with the AU—communicate solidarity among incumbents against their critics from domestic civil society groups and Western human rights organizations. Nganje and Nganje (2019) show that RO solidarity can have significant domestic repercussions, citing the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as an example. The DRC experienced some political liberalization in the first half of the 2000s before slowing after Joseph Kabila's first election as president in 2006. When Kabila claimed to win reelection in 2011 through polls that civil society observers denounced as fraudulent, the United States and European Union quickly questioned the validity of Kabila's win. However, after five African ROs issued a joint statement expressing satisfaction with the election, the United States and European Union lost leverage over Kabila and backpedaled on earlier criticisms and statements about re-running the polls (Nganje and Nganje 2019).

The Republic of Congo's President Denis Sassou-Nguesso has also sought legitimation through RO monitoring, including monitoring of legislative elections. Following a transitional term as president after the country's 1997 civil war, Sassou-Nguesso won presidential elections in 2002, 2009, 2016, and 2021. In July of 2012, despite the harassment of opposition candidates, including the arrest and disqualification of former opposition alliance spokesman Paul-Marie Mpouele, the AU and ECCAS' joint observation mission declared legislative polls in Congo "free, transparent and credible."⁹ AU-ECCAS observers also declared the election "generally peaceful," despite Congolese police firing live rounds on supporters of opposition candidate Mathias Dzon in response to demands for transparency with respect to election results. Not coincidentally, Dzon lost to Hugues Ngouelondele, the ruling party candidate and son-in-law of Sassou-Nguesso (Associated Press 2012).

ECCAS continued to serve as a tool for election legitimation after Sassou-Nguesso amended Congo's constitution to remove term limits, setting the stage for his 2016 reelection. In 2021, Sassou-Nguesso secured a fifth term in office amid opposition boycotts and an internet, text message, and social media shutdown.¹⁰ While the government refused to accredit domestic election monitors from Congo's influential Catholic Church, ECCAS was again invited to provide a positive review of Congo's polls. Dr. Sergio Esono, the head of ECCAS's electoral observation mission, told reporters that "The election on March 21, 2021, was conducted peacefully and serenely ... The enthusiasm of Congolese voters for the election was clearly significant" (Asala 2021). Since 2003, the quality of the country's elections and its polyarchy scores have remained virtually unchanged.

Conclusion

The debate about the role of IOs in supporting democracy has shifted in recent years as authoritarian regimes forged or reinvigorated ROs. Have powerful or ambitious regional powers—China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and, prior to its collapse, Venezuela—promoted autocracy through the ROs that they helped to create and sustain? Are cartels of authoritarian leaders in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia colluding to protect themselves?

We approached the question through a multi-method design. Following earlier econometric work on democratic IOs, and accounting for selection into authoritarian ROs, we showed how membership in more authoritarian ROs dampened the prospects for political liberalization in non-democracies. To strengthen our confidence in the statistical results, we coded a sample of "hard" authoritarian organizations that should be most likely to exhibit the postulated cooperative behavior in support of autocrats. Across a majority of these organizations and a significant number of issues, ROs did cooperate in the way suggested by our theory. We found particularly robust cooperation in articulating norms of stability and in the areas we identified as addressing coordination problems, including anti-terrorism and police cooperation. Over a third of the organizations we examined went so far as to directly intervene with military force in support of autocratic incumbents. In countries as diverse as Hungary under communist rule, Bahrain, and the DRC, autocrats used ROs to prevent political liberalization.

We see several directions for future research. First, regional hegemons have a variety of instruments at their disposal and any effects on political development at the country level are by no means coming only through an international institutional channel. We showed that our results are robust to models that account for multiple alternative measures of authoritarian linkage and relations with China and Russia in particular. And we argued that apparently hierarchical organizations—with the Warsaw Treaty Organization as a prime example—may nonetheless reflect common interests in limiting the diffusion of democratic ideas. However, more research can be done on both separating out and relating the lines of influence emanating from larger powers within these organizations. For example, authoritarian great powers may indeed support allies bilaterally. However, support through one channel does not necessarily negate the significance of support through the regional organizational channel if viewed as acting in concert.

A second topic that warrants further research is the relationship between these organizations and powerful democratic states. A number of African ROs dominated by authoritarian leaders receive significant funding from the United States, European Union, and European Union member states. Channeling funding through these organizations could redound to the benefit of authoritarian elites, suggesting that leaders of democracies should be more cautious in their approaches to cooperation with ROs.

Finally, there is ample room for further research at the country level. We have established a statistical relationship between membership in authoritarian ROs and political outcomes at the domestic level in autocracies, have shown that the organizations cooperate as expected, and provided illustrative examples of how the activities of ROs were connected to adverse political outcomes at the country level. Yet, more work is needed on how these external lines of support interact with domestic developments to consolidate authoritarian rule. The military intervention against anti-regime protests in Kazakhstan under the banner of the

⁸The one member state that has not received ECCAS monitors is Burundi.

⁹African Union and the Economic Community of Central African States (2012). See the United States Department of State (2013) report regarding harassment of opposition figures.

¹⁰The Economist (2021).

CSTO in 2022 underscores the relevancy of authoritarian RO membership at critical junctures.

We also currently lack a theory of how authoritarian ROs affect their democratic members. In the online appendix, we report tests that suggest that membership in more authoritarian ROs does not appear to lead to political regress in extant democracies. But have leaders of democracies in “bad neighborhoods” joined their authoritarian RO comembers in illiberal policing or counter-terrorism programs? Have democracies in more authoritarian ROs become more willing to overlook anti-democratic behavior among their comembers, as has been the case with democracies in ASEAN regarding Myanmar?

With respect to autocratic regimes, the link between authoritarian RO memberships and political outcomes at the domestic level appears to pertain. A broad literature has focused on the extent to which the international environment is hospitable or hostile to political liberalization and democracy, with new work focusing on channels through which democracy promotion may generate headwinds. Yet, this work must still grapple with authoritarian international cooperation. Just as autocrats individually engage in complex strategies at home to deflect democratic challengers, so have they cooperated with one another to contain oppositions. Not only are the policy implications troubling, but the theoretical implications for the study of IOs are as well. Cooperation can prove a double-edge sword, both strengthening the prospects for democracy where regional institutions have firm democratic roots and consolidating authoritarianism where cooperation takes place among autocrats.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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