Analyzing the Impact of Political Space on Democratic Quality in Uzbekistan: An Econometric Assessment Using the V-Dem Database[*]

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ABSTRACT

In this study a multiple regression model is presented analyzing the impact of political space on democratic quality in Uzbekistan. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database is used. It is focused on the indices of political violence, freedom of peaceful assembly and polarized society. The main hypothesis of this study is that due to political reformations after the collapse of Soviet Union, major changes have been achieved in Uzbek society and its political system, a fact that has created new challenges for the future. It seems that there is a shift towards liberalization in Uzbekistan, a fact that denotes the implementation of reforms directed towards fostering political, economic, and social openness within the country.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Electoral Democracy, V-Dem Database, Political Space.

INTRODUCTION

In democratic theory, democracy extends beyond mere electoral procedures, encompassing liberal constitutionalism, popular participation, socio-economic equality, and consultation, as proposed by various theoretical frameworks (Coppedge et al. 2011; Cunningham 2002; Held 2006). Despite this theoretical diversity, the predominant focus in measuring democracy has been on electoral or liberal definitions (Coppedge et al. 2011; Munck 2009).

There are exceptions to this trend, such as the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) and the Participation Enhanced Polity Scores (PEPS), which aim to capture deliberative and participatory democracy, respectively. Additionally, indicators developed by Ringen (2007), Morlino

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(2011), Bühlmann et al. (2012), and the Bertelsmann Foundation (2014) seek to measure egalitarian, deliberative, and participatory aspects of democracy. However, there is still a need to enhance the validity and reliability of measurements and to encompass various dimensions of democracy across a broader spectrum of countries and years using diverse indicators (Coppedge et al. 2015a; Jäckle et al. 2012; Munck 2016).

The V-Dem database represents a notable step in this direction. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database introduces innovative approaches to measuring different facets of democracy, including electoral democracy, liberal democracy, deliberative democracy, egalitarian democracy, and participatory democracy. These indicators are derived from data collected through the V-Dem project, spanning a global sample of 202 countries from 1900 to 2022 (Coppedge et al. 2015b; Lindberg et al. 2014; V-Dem.net).

The V-Dem data distinguishes itself from other democracy measures in several key aspects:

1. Unique distribution: Democratic principles are translated into over 400 detailed questions with precisely defined answer categories or measurement scales.

2. Extensive data volume: Data is sourced from nearly 200 indicators compiled by experts, primarily non-academics from the countries in question, selected based on their academic expertise in relevant fields.

3. Rigorous methodology: The study primarily focuses on the electoral dimension of democracy, utilizing the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) within the V-Dem dataset. The EDI evaluates the quality of elections within a country, employing a sophisticated methodology that considers various aspects such as electoral integrity, competitiveness, and fairness of electoral laws.

Political Space

The concept of political space refers to universally recognized regulations that enable individuals to freely organize, engage, and communicate with one another, thereby influencing the political and social frameworks within their vicinity (Malena 2015). It represents a fundamental concept in any open and democratic society, obligating states to safeguard individuals while upholding and facilitating essential rights such as freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression (United Nations 2023a).

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Although the term "political space" gained prominence in the post-millennium era, the foundational rights underlying this concept have long been integral to democratic societies. The global alliance of civil societies, CIVICUS, began regularly employing this term following the initiation of the Civic Space Initiative in 2011. Political space is defined as "the physical, virtual, and legal realms where individuals exercise their rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly." Through online and offline forums, establishment of associations, discussions on public concerns, and participation in decision-making processes, individuals utilize political space to address issues and enhance their quality of life. It serves as a cornerstone for responsible, responsive democratic governance and societal stability. Moreover, political space is closely intertwined with the post-World War II development of human rights norms, notably enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which delineates explicit protections for freedoms of association, assembly, and expression.

Conceptually, political space is intertwined with the evolution of civil society. While the principles of civil society have historical roots in various cultures, the term itself traces back to ancient Greece and Aristotle's early works on communal structures characterized by shared rules or ethos (Jäckle et al. 2012). Some scholars closely align civil society with the modern notion of political space, viewing it as comprising elements such as freedom of speech and an independent judiciary, essential for a democratic society. Particularly in dialogues among Eastern and Central European intellectuals, civil society is also conceptualized as a domain of civic values—an arena outside the family where individuals engage in social activities to advance common interests. Political space encompasses physical, virtual, and legal realms where individuals exercise their rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly, contributing to responsible democratic governance and societal stability.

Linked closely with the development of civil society, political space traces its roots back to ancient times and has gained prominence in modern democratic discourse. Fundamental rights within the civil sphere, including freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, are legally guaranteed and protected by international agreements and constitutions. Recognizing the importance of a coherent definition of political space, civil society actors have initiated international initiatives such as the Citizens' Charter, providing a global framework for civic engagement.

Freedom of association, expression, and assembly are essential components of political space, protected by international law to ensure civil society's freedom to operate and engage in

activities without undue interference. Limitations on these rights are minimal, with state actions primarily aimed at facilitating civil society activities and fostering an enabling environment for their function and well-being.

Index Variables

Indicators and Sub-indicators of EDI

This study primarily examines the electoral dimension of democracy in Uzbekistan, given its pivotal role in contemporary urbanized societies. The Electoral Democracy Index (EDI), a component within the V-Dem dataset, is specifically designed to evaluate the quality of elections within a country. The methodology employed by the V-Dem project in constructing the Electoral Democracy Index is highly sophisticated. The Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) comprises several indicators aimed at capturing various aspects of electoral processes and institutions. These indicators encompass areas such as electoral integrity, competitiveness of elections, and fairness of electoral laws. They are further categorized into sub-indicators, each addressing specific dimensions of electoral democracy.

The index was constructed by averaging the weighted averages of key metrics, including freedom of assembly (v2x_frassoc_thick), "clean" elections (v2xel_frefair), freedom of expression (v2x_freexp_altinf), elected representatives (v2x_elecoff), and voting rights (v2x_suffr). Additionally, a multiplicative interaction of these indicators was considered in the final equation (Teorell et al. 2019). The final form of the equation is:

$$
\begin{aligned}
v2x\_polyarchy = {} & .5 * MPI + .5 * API \\
= {} & .5 * (v2x\_elecoff * v2xel\_frefair * v2x\_frassoc\_thick* \\
& v2x\_suffr * v2x\_freexp\_altinf) \\
& + .5 * ((1/8) * v2x\_elecoff + (1/4) * v2xel\_frefair \\
& + (1/4) * v2x\_frassoc\_thick + (1/8) * v2x\_suffr \\
& + (1/4) * v2x\_freexp\_altinf)
\end{aligned}
$$

Civic Space

Protection of Rights:

Fundamental rights within civil society, such as freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, are legally guaranteed. Nations that have ratified international agreements like the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are obligated to uphold and protect these rights. Many such nations have enshrined these protections in their constitutions as fundamental freedoms. Governments are not only obligated to respect and promote these rights but also to safeguard them from infringement by both governmental and non-governmental entities. Thus, a robust constitution supported by comprehensive laws and an impartial law enforcement system is crucial for facilitating and preserving political freedoms. Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals framework aims to "foster fair, peaceful, and inclusive societies," highlighting the importance of these rights.

Citizens'Charter

Recognizing the need for a clear definition of political space and its organization, civil society groups have initiated numerous international initiatives. In November 2015, an informal meeting of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) convened in Bangkok, urging the International Center for Civil Society to lead the development of a Citizens' Charter. This charter seeks to establish a global framework for civic engagement in shaping societies. Serving as a common policy and civil rights framework for individuals and organizations, the Citizens' Charter outlines criteria for citizen participation and serves as a global reference point for civil society actors regarding their rights enshrined in international law. It affirms people's rights to actively contribute to shaping their communities and can serve as an effective advocacy tool and platform for international solidarity, offering support to CSOs and activists worldwide.

Freedom of Association

The freedom of association grants every individual the right to establish or refrain from joining civil society groups, regardless of characteristics such as race, gender, religion, or political beliefs. This freedom encompasses activities such as setting up branches, fundraising, and collaborating with other groups. International law safeguards this freedom, permitting state intervention only in specific circumstances such as national security or public safety. Government actions should primarily support civil society activities, fostering an environment conducive to their operation and prosperity.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression allows individuals to freely express opinions, seek, receive, and share information and ideas without interference. This freedom is essential for civil society's existence, enabling critical analysis and involvement in policy matters. Civil society organizations also have the right to conduct inquiries and document their findings under this freedom. International law places restrictions on freedom of expression only in specific circumstances to protect the rights and dignity of others and ensure national security and public order.

Freedom of Assembly

The right to free assembly allows civil society to engage in lawful protests, meetings, and demonstrations to address common concerns. International law imposes similar restrictions as on freedom of association, permitting limitations only in certain circumstances and requiring measures to manage public gatherings to be proportionate and necessary.

Political Space Index Variables

The index variables first consisted of general themes such as political polarization, political violence, and peaceful civil gatherings. More specifically:

• The "Political Polarization Index" (v2cacamps) evaluates the degree to which a society is divided into competing political factions. It examines whether political differences spill over into social relations beyond political discussions. Societies are considered highly polarized if supporters of opposing political factions avoid friendly interactions and prefer confrontational approaches in political discourse. The measurement scale ranges from the absence of political controversies to the frequent occurrence of political disputes in everyday life, rated on a five-point scale (Pemstein et al. 2023).

• The "Political Violence Index" (v2caviol) assesses the frequency of political violence perpetrated by non-state actors within the current year. It's essential to acknowledge that in modern bourgeois democracies, legal violence exists alongside illegal violence (Rawls 1999). Legal violence refers to instances where violence or force is permitted or sanctioned by law. This might include cases of self-defense, maintaining law and order by law enforcement agencies, or military operations. However, it's crucial to emphasize that even legal violence must adhere to established laws and regulations. Legal principles such as necessity, proportionality, and lawful self-defense are typically applied to ensure that the use of force is justified (Morreall 1976). The term "political violence" denotes the use of physical force by non-state actors to achieve political objectives. It refers to violence that is not motivated by profit-seeking or criminal activities. Non-state actors encompass individuals or groups that are not officially part of

the state apparatus. Therefore, politically motivated factions and youth groups are considered non-state actors, even if they have informal ties to the ruling party. Political violence against individuals excludes psychological and symbolic forms of violence, such as the destruction of property. Responses on the index are measured on a five-point scale, ranging from the complete absence of violence by non-state actors to frequent resorting to violence (Pemstein et al. 2023).

• The "Index of Freedom of Peaceful Assembly" (v2caassemb) measures the level of respect and protection by authorities towards citizens' right to peaceful assembly. Peaceful assembly is defined as the intentional and temporary gathering of people in a public space to express a common purpose (ODIHR and Venice Commission of the Council of Europe 2010). Authorities are permitted to restrict the right to assembly only if such limitations are necessary for reasons of national and public security, public order, the safeguarding of public health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. These restrictions must be lawful, justified, and proportionate to the objective pursued. The absence of rational and legal restrictions was considered when assessing the response to the question. However, if there is evidence indicating that these restrictions are merely a pretext, they were considered in the evaluation. Responses were rated on a five-level scale, ranging from the complete prohibition by state authorities of peaceful assembly under threat of violence to the granting of this right under the specified conditions (Pemstein et al. 2023).

Aim and Methodology

Uzbekistan declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. However, the transition towards democracy was slow, and the country retained many authoritarian structures inherited from the Soviet era. President Islam Karimov, who came to power in 1989, continued to maintain tight control over politics, the economy, and society (Wilson & Wilson 2005). In the early 2000s, there were some initial attempts at economic and political reforms (Bohr et. al. 1998). However, these changes were limited, and Uzbekistan remained largely authoritarian. There were periodic crackdowns on opposition groups and civil society, which hindered the development of a vibrant democratic culture. The death of Islam Karimov in 2016 marked a significant turning point for Uzbekistan. Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded Karimov as president. Mirziyoyev has initiated a series of reforms aimed at modernizing the country and opening it up to the international community. These reforms include measures to improve the economy, promote human rights, and increase political openness. There has been some relaxation of restrictions on political opposition, media, and civil society. Several political prisoners have been released,

and steps have been taken to improve relations with neighboring countries. In 2019, Uzbekistan adopted a new constitution, which introduced several changes aimed at enhancing the role of parliament and promoting the separation of powers. The new constitution also introduced presidential term limits, limiting the president to two consecutive terms in office. While elections have been held in Uzbekistan, they have been criticized for lacking genuine competition and transparency. However, there have been some efforts to improve the electoral process and allow for greater political participation. Opposition parties and independent media still face significant challenges, but there have been instances of increased space for political debate and dissent (Human Rights Watch 2023).

Based on the V-Dem database, purpose of this paper is the examination of the impact of civic space on the quality of electoral democracy in Uzbekistan. Current president Shavkat Miromonovich Mirziyoyev presents the model of "New Uzbekistan". But what does it actually mean "New Uzbekistan" and how did it take shape in the consciousness of Uzbeks? The president is clear: "*Building New Uzbekistan is not a subjective desire, it is not a public relations campaign but an objective need, which has fundamental historical foundations, imposed by today's political, legal, socio-economic and cultural-humanitarian conditions that correspond to the long-standing aspirations and national interests of our people. New Uzbekistan is a state whose main purpose is to ensure the free, organized and prosperous life of our multi-ethnic people. It is a state that develops in full compliance with the rules recognized by all in the field of democracy, human rights and freedoms, based on the principles of friendship and cooperation with the international community*", he commented characteristically (Editör 2021).

Data Analysis Methodology

Econometric methods were employed to investigate the impact of the political space index on the quality of the electoral dimension of democracy in Uzbekistan. Specifically, a time-series analysis was conducted using a multiple regression model after necessary reliability checks were performed with the assistance of Eviews software.

Descriptive Data

This study presents the electoral democracy index and the political space of Uzbekistan the period some years before the collapse of Soviet Union in 1990 until 2022. Subsequently, some descriptive data of the variables to be used in the multiple regression model that will follow will be presented.
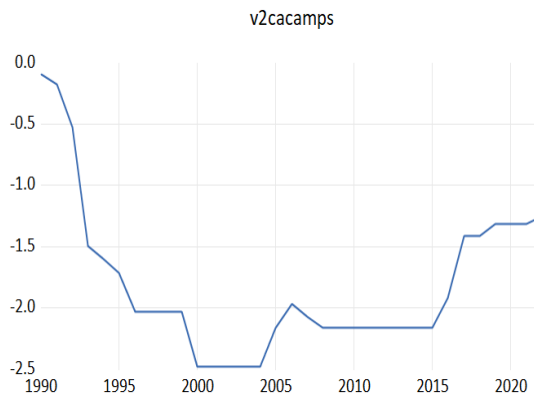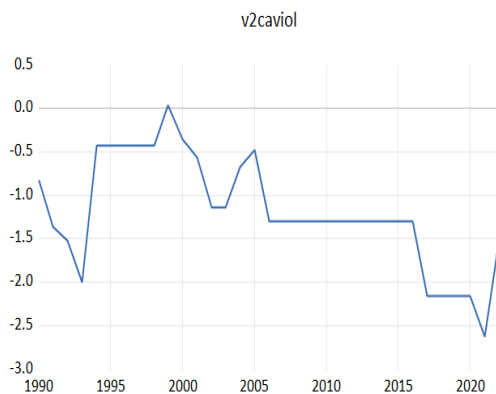
The following chart illustrates the electoral democracy index in Uzbekistan according to the V-Dem database.

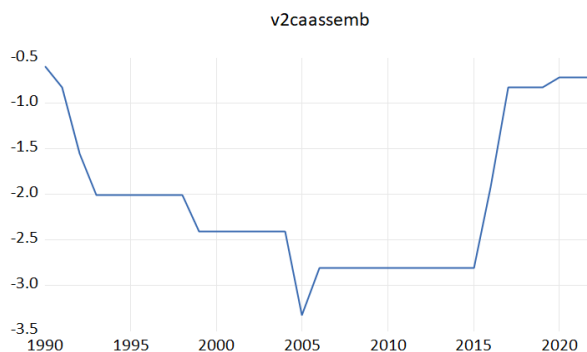**Graph: 1.** Timeline of electoral democracy index in Uzbekistan
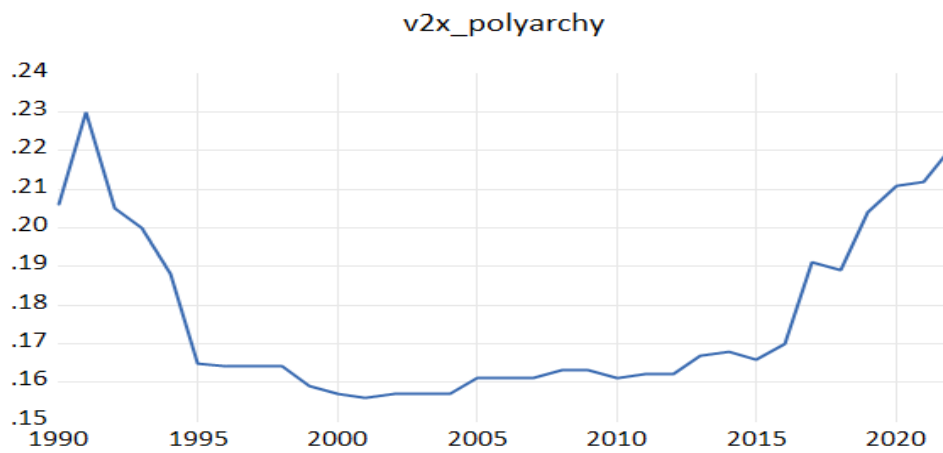
The other variables that compose the civic space index are as follows:

Graph: 2. Timeline of political violence index in Uzbekistan   *Graph: 3. Timeline of polarized society index in Uzbekistan*

Graph: 4. *Timeline of freedom of peaceful assembly index in Uzbekistan*

Multiple Regression Model

Before proceeding with the regression analysis, we need to conduct necessary checks to ensure the reliability and validity of our model. In this particular study, unit root tests will be conducted to explore whether the time series is stationary or not.

Null Hypothesis (Ho): The time series has a unit root, indicating it is non-stationary.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1): The time series does not have a unit root, indicating it is stationary.

Stationarity in a time series refers to the property where the statistical characteristics of the data series remain constant over time. A stationary time series is one in which the mean, variance, and autocorrelation remain stable over time. In our study the data set includes observations for the time period from 1990 to 2022 for these four variables (v2x_polyarchy, v2caviol, v2cacamps, v2caassemb)· 122 observations were obtained. In our case, all three indicators (Im, Pesaran and Shin W-stat, ADF – Fisher Chi-square, PP – Fisher Chi-square) are below 0.05, indicating that the time series is stationary (I-1).

Table: 1. Unit Root Tests

```
Group unit root test: Summary
Series: V2X_POLYARCHY, V2CAVIOL, V2CACAMPS, V2CAASSEMB
Date: 03/25/24   Time: 13:21
Sample: 1990 2022
Exogenous variables: Individual effects
Automatic selection of maximum lags
Automatic lag length selection based on SIC: 0 to 2
Newey-West automatic bandwidth selection and Bartlett kernel
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Method	Statistic	Prob.**	Cross-sections	Obs
Null: Unit root (assumes common unit root process)				
Levin, Lin & Chu t*	-4.90517	0.0000	4	122
Null: Unit root (assumes individual unit root process)				
Im, Pesaran and Shin W-stat	-5.29112	0.0000	4	122
ADF - Fisher Chi-square	44.7292	0.0000	4	122
PP - Fisher Chi-square	67.5939	0.0000	4	124

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** Probabilities for Fisher tests are computed using an asymptotic Chi
   -square distribution. All other tests assume asymptotic normality.
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Also, an autocorrelation test, a heteroscedasticity test, and a multicollinearity test will be conducted.

Autocorrelation Test

The autocorrelation test allows us to evaluate the relationship between observations in a time series at different time intervals (lags). This can give us indications of whether the time series exhibits repeating patterns at specific time intervals.

H0: There is no first order autocorrelation.

H1: There is first order autocorrelation.

Table: 2. Autocorrelation Test

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Breusch-Godfrey Serial Correlation LM Test:
Null hypothesis: No serial correlation at up to 2 lags
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F-statistic	0.202885	Prob. F(2,27)	0.8176
Obs*R-squared	0.488597	Prob. Chi-Square(2)	0.7833

So, since p value is greater than 0.05 the data are not correlated.

Table: 3. Heteroskedasticity Test

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Heteroskedasticity Test: Breusch-Pagan-Godfrey
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F-statistic	1.461550	Prob. F(6,42)	0.2148
Obs*R-squared	8.463693	Prob. Chi-Square(6)	0.2061
Scaled explained SS	35.02056	Prob. Chi-Square(6)	0.0000

The Breusch-Pagan-Godfrey heteroskedasticity test is not statistically significant (0.2148). Therefore, homoskedasticity is observed in our model. Homoskedasticity is an important assumption in statistics and econometrics, especially when using parameter estimation models. The presence of homoskedasticity facilitates the evaluation and interpretation of the model results. Conversely, heteroskedasticity (varying dispersion at different points) can affect the statistical reliability of estimators and statistical tests, so it is important to consider during data analysis.

Multicollinearity Test

Multicollinearity refers to the situation where there is high correlation between the independent variables of a regression model. This means that the independent variables are relatively closely related to each other, making it difficult to separate the effect of each variable in explaining the dependent variable.

In our case, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to examine multicollinearity. For examining multicollinearity, we have to report Centered VIF column. There was variation in the results, but all the variables had scores below 10. It's worth noting that a threshold of 10 indicates multicollinearity.

Table: 4. Multicollinearity Test

Variance Inflation Factors
Date: 03/25/24   Time: 19:29
Sample: 1990 2022
Included observations: 33

Variable	Coefficient Variance	Uncentered VIF	Centered VIF
V2CAVIOL	5.55E-06	5.891463	1.305034
V2CACAMPS	1.17E-05	24.98450	2.591234
V2CAASSEMB	7.43E-06	21.10463	2.904268
C	3.77E-05	22.10051	NA

Having conducted the necessary checks and determined that our model is reliable, we will proceed with the regression.

Three statistically significant coefficients were observed in the multiple regression model. Before interpreting them, it's worth noting that the Adjusted R-squared value indicates

that 88% of the variation in the electoral democracy index is explained by the indicators of freedom of universities from politically motivated surveillance, the institutional autonomy of universities regarding internal management, financial administration, and the implementation of educational policy, and the freedom index of academic exchanges and knowledge dissemination. The F-statistic is 83.26, indicating statistical significance, which demonstrates that our model is well-adjusted. Finally, the Durbin-Watson statistic is 1.4, indicating no serial correlation in our model.

Dependent Variable: V2X_POLYARCHY
Method: Least Squares
Date: 03/25/24   Time: 19:32
Sample: 1990 2022
Included observations: 33

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
V2CAVIOL	-0.007778	0.002356	-3.301831	0.0026
V2CACAMPS	0.020311	0.003425	5.930265	0.0000
V2CAASSEMB	0.007958	0.002725	2.920190	0.0067
C	0.220110	0.006140	35.84999	0.0000

R-squared	0.895976	Mean dependent var		0.176424
Adjusted R-squared	0.885215	S.D. dependent var		0.022144
S.E. of regression	0.007503	Akaike info criterion		-6.833942
Sum squared resid	0.001632	Schwarz criterion		-6.652547
Log likelihood	116.7600	Hannan-Quinn criter.		-6.772908
F-statistic	83.26075	Durbin-Watson stat		1.426881
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000000			

In the above results, the statistically significant coefficients were three. Specifically:

- An increase in the political violence index reduces the quality of electoral democracy in Uzbekistan. This finding indicates that intimidation and insecurity as well as social disturbance have a negative long-term effect on the country's social and political system.

- An increase in the index of polarized society increases the quality of electoral democracy. In other words, there is a positive relationship between opposing political interaction and the quality of electoral democracy.

- Finally, there is a positive relationship between the index of peaceful assembly and the electoral democracy. Specifically, an increase in the above index increases the level of electoral democracy.

CONCLUSION

Uzbekistan was a part of the Soviet Union for approximately 69 years. It became a part of the Soviet Union on December 30, 1922, when it joined as one of the republics of the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Uzbekistan remained a constituent republic of the Soviet Union until it gained independence on September 1, 1991, following the dissolution of the USSR. The transition towards democracy in Uzbekistan has been gradual and complex (Tsereteli 2018).

The results above show there has been a shift towards liberalization in Uzbekistan from 1990 until 2022 (OECD 2023). Liberalization in Uzbekistan refers to the process of implementing reforms aimed at opening up the country politically, economically, and socially. This process has been particularly notable since Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed the presidency in 2016 following the death of long-serving leader Islam Karimov. Mirziyoyev's administration has pursued a series of liberalization measures to modernize the country and improve its international standing. This process includes privatization of state-owned enterprises and liberalization of currency exchange regulations to promote market competition and stimulate economic growth but political reforms also such as steps towards greater political openness and tolerance for dissent, including the release of political prisoners and relaxation of restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly (Laruelle 2017). Uzbekistan has embarked on ambitious economic reforms geared towards a market-oriented approach. Commencing in September 2017, the government undertook various measures, including unifying the exchange rate, liberalizing the foreign exchange market, initiating price and trade liberalization. Additionally, since January 2019, significant reductions in tax rates for both businesses and individuals have been implemented (World Bank 2019). In a bid to promote tourism and business, the country has removed the requirement for entry visas and has reaffirmed its intention to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). Furthermore, the government has expanded social safety net coverage and notably enhanced the accessibility of economic data. While Uzbekistan's progress has been remarkable thus far, being a latecomer to reform, it stands to gain valuable insights from the experiences of other transitioning economies.

Overall, Uzbekistan's transition towards democracy is ongoing and faces numerous challenges. While there have been positive steps towards reform, the country still has a long way to go in terms of building democratic institutions, promoting human rights, and ensuring genuine political competition.

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