Chapter 1: **Introduction: What do rulers want?**

The introductory chapter confronts the assumptions that scholars bring to the study of authoritarian regimes. Many theories of non-democratic rule assume that rulers seek to accumulate power and control. However, empirical cases from contemporary Africa, Asia, and post-Soviet Eurasia increasingly suggest that some rulers come to office seeking to extract large, personal, and often ill-begotten fortunes. This chapter parses the existing theories of non-democratic rule, and in doing so sets up the main puzzle addressed in the book: What are the governing strategies associated with wealth-seeking, kleptocratic rulers? Drawing on 14 months of field research, including over 160 personal interviews, the subsequent chapters investigate this question with reference to three cases from post-Soviet Eurasia: Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan.

Chapter 2: **Theory: The Logic of Kleptocracy**

Why do some non-democratic regimes give political opponents significant leeway to organize, while others enforce strict limits on such activities? This chapter develops my theory of kleptocracy, arguing that variation in the governing strategies of corrupt rulers can be traced to differences in the sources of their ill-begotten wealth. Where rulers’ illicit wealth is achieved through the collection of bribes, the government is more likely to tolerate political opposition. In contrast, where elites rely on resource wealth, government officials can pursue unpopular policies—including aggressive repression against opposition groups—without jeopardizing the accumulation of illicit profits.

Chapter 3: **Corruption in the Soviet Union**

Corruption was an integral component of political, economic, and social interactions in the Soviet Union. This chapter draws upon historical research on the Soviet economy to examine the endemic corruption that prevailed during that period. I demonstrate that one particular form of graft—based on the vertical flows of bribes—predominated among party and state officials throughout the Soviet republics. This type of corruption for private gain was entirely consistent with the Soviet political-economic system as it operated in practice. These similarities suggest that rulers and their subordinates across post-Soviet Eurasia embarked on the post-Soviet period with a common background in kleptocracy, as well as a shared understanding of the dynamics of bribery-based corruption.

Chapter 4: **Repression and Regimes**

This chapter lays out the dependent variable: variation in the repression of political opposition across Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. These governments behave quite similarly toward opposition candidates during election campaigns, but nonetheless demonstrate remarkable variation in the treatment of political opposition outside of election periods. In Georgia under
President Eduard Shevardnadze, repression was *intermittent*, consisting mostly of randomly targeted harassment. In Azerbaijan, repression has been *responsive*. The opposition has faced negative consequences only when they engage in certain forbidden activities, or bring up sensitive political topics. In Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev’s government pursues a strategy of *unconditional* repression, designed to eradicate political opposition altogether. The chapter concludes by arguing that everyday repression, as opposed to state-opposition dynamics surrounding elections, is the relevant object of study in authoritarian regimes.

Chapter 5: **The Sources of Ill-begotten Wealth**

Chapter 5 illustrates the differences in the source of rulers’ illegal wealth across these three cases. Existing studies of corruption seek to explain the causes, consequences, or overall level of corruption within a given country or across multiple cases. In contrast, I focus on differences in the *type* of corruption that predominates across country cases. In Shevardnadze’s Georgia, the practice of bribery was widespread and institutionalized: bribes were regularly extracted by state officials, who in turn were required to channel a percentage of the proceeds to their superiors and upward to political leaders. In contrast, embezzlement has prevailed in Kazakhstan, fueled by rising profits from the country’s vast natural resources. In Azerbaijan, meanwhile, a hybrid of the two patterns has emerged. While bribery-based corruption prevailed through the 1990s, significant evidence suggests that resource embezzlement has replaced bribery as the predominant source of illicit wealth for rulers.

Chapter 6: **Linking Corruption and Repression in Post-Soviet Eurasia**

Drawing on Mancur Olson’s conception of roving versus stationary bandits, I identify a causal link between these patterns of corruption and the strategy of repression adopted by ruling elites. In Shevardnadze’s Georgia, because society remained the original source of rulers’ illegal wealth, citizens could place practical constraints on the use of repression. Led by wealthy opposition activists, citizens could object to the repression of opposition groups by disrupting the efficient extraction of bribes. In Kazakhstan, citizens are not involved in the generation or collection of illegal rents; most of elites’ illegal income is based on the bribes, taxes, fines, and fees collected from foreign companies engaged in mineral extraction and export. Consequently, elites are insulated from the pressures of society and can pursue aggressive policies against political opposition without disrupting the flow of cash. In Azerbaijan, these two patterns of corruption co-exist simultaneously, incentivizing the selective repression of political opposition.

Chapter 7: **Conclusion**

The final chapter places the argument in comparative perspective, applying this argument to other regions with high diversity in non-democratic regimes and in patterns of state corruption. Using case examples from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, I demonstrate that the logic of kleptocracy bears relevance beyond post-Soviet Eurasia. The manuscript concludes by assessing the prospects for stability in kleptocratic regimes.