

Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall, eds.: **Kyrgyzstan beyond “Democracy Island” and “Failing State”: Social and Political Changes in a Post-Soviet Society.** Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015. 275 pages. ISBN 978-1-4985-1516-0

How does one bring to the fore the dynamic, core discussions of a country sitting in a far overlooked part of the globe that for the past 25 years has repeatedly been subjected to the conceptualized extremes of “democracy island” and “failing state”? Marlene Laruelle, Associate Director and Research Professor at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University, and Johan Engvall, Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs and a Non-Resident Research Fellow with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, sought to answer this question by coordinating this anthology and striving to present a far more nuanced look at particular under-analyzed aspects of Kyrgyzstan. They simply state that, “the ambition is for the book to represent a counterweight to simplistic descriptions found in much of the reporting of the country” (xi). Once a route for the famed Silk Road, Kyrgyzstan has seen countless events traverse its landscape since independence. A pro-Western orientation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the ouster (one bloody) of two presidents, the first female president in Central Asia, once the only country in the world to host both American and Russian military bases, inter-ethnic violence between the two largest ethnic groups, and the site of Central Asia’s first foray into parliamentary democracy make the country a fascinating case study for all Central Asia watchers. With the nation seemingly existing in a constant state of flux, the enclosed studies offer pragmatic examinations of several well-trodden themes but also expose readers to often overlooked aspects that further our understanding of dynamism inherent in the country.

Originally conceived as individual essays delivered at a conference in Uppsala in 2012, Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall assembled together some of the regions’ most important academics, writers, and independent researchers concerning a wide range of topics: party politics, public corruption, social and ethnic identity, civic nationalism, Islam in society, urban change, Soviet legacy, and grassroots entrepreneurship. Well-balanced between foreign and local perspectives, the work incorporates rigorous methodologies while still remaining largely approachable to those with a cursory knowledge. The extent of English and Russian language sources is also prolific and is a fantastic bibliography for any graduate student or researcher to scour from. All contributing authors have at one time or another lived or worked in the country thus bringing invaluable firsthand experiences and understanding along with theoretical constructs. Several chapters, notably Ch. 4 & 8, support their assertions by factual analysis aided by new empirical research and opinion polls. This new empirical research data will prove invaluable to future study efforts as well as enlighten readers on previously murky topics.

Far from being a general work on the country, the collection of papers is divided into three core sections and covers politics, society, and identity formation. The logic of the arrangement begins with overarching themes that are pertinent to all Kyrgyzstani citizens and then slowly progresses towards focusing on minute and exact groups or issues such as

urban development around the capital, Bishkek, and political moderates' efforts to stem ethno-nationalism. In the introduction, a broad overview of Kyrgyzstan since independence is given, with most attention paid to large events and main actors. The subsequent four chapters cover topics well known to frequent observers: party politics, state sponsored corruption, grassroots mobilization, and NGO engagement. In the second section, the discussion moves on to society in regards to class-consciousness, Soviet-era influences, and urban development. Lastly, the third segment covers identity with a focus on nationalism, ethnic sovereignty, civic identity, and Islam.

Kyrgyzstani politics are anything but boring and predictable, thus making for lively processes. Johan Engvall, who parallels Henry Hale's ("Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia", 2005) analysis of Kyrgyzstan as a *competing-pyramid* scheme where several distinct patron-client pyramids with no single dominating group vie for resources and power, provides a synopsis of predominantly political and economic events. Comprehensive, though brief, the chapter succinctly outlines the country post-independence while closing with the most pressing issues such as inter-ethnic relations, erosion of state sovereignty, and corruption. In the following chapter, Shairbek Juraev pragmatically examines the evolving role of political parties as many continue to lack Western-style platforms and ideologies while remaining a means of mobilization for the Janus-faced state official/businessman. Also, the increased competitiveness in parliamentary elections, along with the new proportional system, has incentivized parties to adopt practices from Russia, such as locomotives where elected representatives abdicate their seats immediately after election in favor of fellow party officials further down the rolls (pg. 30). Johan Engvall then returns to the discussion in Ch. 3 that officials, upon attaining office, facilitate corruption by "creating a private market within the state" that provides means for a "distinct political-economic order" (pg. 39–41). Offices are basically franchised and looked upon as lucrative job opportunities as opposed to the view largely held in the West where bureaucratic offices are bastions of job security. With all political parties requiring constituents and a means to mobilize them, Asel Doolotkeldieva posits the concept of "brokerage" as a means to "partially explain the weak sustainability of grassroots movements" (pg. 59), thus handicapping efforts at mass mobilization. Running counter to Scott Radnitz who posits that civil mobilization in Kyrgyzstan is not grassroots in nature but rather a top-down, political leveraging tool used by local oligarchs and power players (*Weapons of the Wealthy*, 2010), uncertain politics and brokers' use of informal types of engagement actually undermine the assertive foundation of local mobilization thus hindering change. Lastly, Madeleine Reeves focuses on local NGO efforts to foster *yntymak* (positive harmonious coexistence/solidarity) among potentially volatile border groups or locales while institutionalizing means of "preventative development" that will retard potentially explosive scenarios. Using a mainly anthropological approach, she seeks to contest aspects of cosmopolitan theory previously applied to the region and topic and rather concentrate on basic issues of coexistence while conceding that the best laid plans cannot account for inherent uncertainty (such as trigger happy border guards).

With only 25 years of independence under its belt, Kyrgyzstan is still left with vestiges of the Soviet Union, and this is most vivid in society at large. As class-consciousness was central to Marxist-Leninist theory, Elmira Satybaldieva makes the argument that class and its accompanying values must be reexamined due to over two decades of social, political, and, especially, economic stratification. Using Osh as the case study and Bourdieusian class analysis as her methodological framework, she seeks to reveal “alternative values” held by the bottom strata, such as the Aristotelian view of money, within “practical moral reasoning” (pg. 113). This makes perceptions among different classes as much a moral stance as arguing what one group states they are for or against. Aisalkyn Botoeva and Regine A. Spector then examine how entrepreneurs and SMEs are utilizing Soviet training and skill sets in the garment industry. Using the Association of Folk Arts and Crafts, a Soviet founded institution, as their case study, both authors argue that networks and traits garnered before independence are utilized for capitalist success while fostering modern business qualities (professional self-worth, incentivized creativity, competitiveness) in those involved. In one of the most intriguing and captivating chapters of the book, Emil Nasritdinov, Bermet Zhumakadyr kyzy, and Diana Asanalieva empirically debunk myths concerning a topic that vexes Bishkek residents to this day, the issue of *novostroiki*. Long held myths and a propensity to problematize settlements fictionalize *novostroiki* as bastions of unlawful behavior and squalor, whereas the reality is that most are fully integrated communities with a population of ordinary, working citizens. Using open-question opinion polls and a recently declassified Bishkek city plan, they largely dispel common misconceptions of *novostroiki* held by various neighborhoods of Bishkek proper.

Since the collapse of the Soviet supranational identity, the debate over the nation’s character has raged with foci not only at the local and national levels but also among certain debatable topics such as ethnicity, religion, and nationalism. Marlene Laruelle posits that state sovereignty and identity are not mutually exclusive and that competing notions of nationhood threaten said sovereignty in the regime’s mind, as well as usurp their prerogative. Influenced by Soviet-era historiography and the introduction of the national concept, emphasis on Kyrgyz ethnogenesis is maintained by the government but debates on nationhood are now fragmented and drowned out by competing claims from political elites and academics (pg. 180). Building off of the previous chapter, both David Gullette and John Heathershaw probe how identity and an ethno-nationally defined state are possibly synonymous in the ethnic Kyrgyz mind and its implications for the country’s international relations. What seems to be a theoretical constructivist lens, it portrays that the State is woven into *Kyrgyzsness* and that an impingement or fictionalized threat (from minorities, predominantly) of the latter endangers the sovereignty of the former. Also, political moderates and their attempts at stymying extreme nationalists is analyzed by Erica Marat, who speculates that the moderates’ efforts of civic identity/nationalism is done “not at the expense of the state... but along with it” (pg. 222). A fairly balanced status quo under incumbent head of state Atambayev, while conducive for the time being, is not a sustainable long-term consensus, as can be seen with recurring calls for the nationalization of the

Kumtor gold mine, for example. Lastly, David Montgomery investigates how Islam acts as a moral impetus for democratic and civil engagement. The state's inability to understand the religious motivation for communal involvement in certain areas the state reserves as their own purview means that they misjudge Islamic groups as oppositional agents to state power whereas in reality it is purely a new form of civil engagement.

This volume was extremely successful in achieving its goal of presenting a multi-faceted approach to Kyrgyzstan. However, its incorporation of overly complex theoretical premises, predominantly borrowed from anthropology, and analyses at times was both exhausting and distracting. This emphasis detracted from the honest, practical examinations and revelations that will attract most readers to the book and prove to be the greatest contribution this scholarship offers. Furthermore, given that most of the works were sheer examinations with no testable hypothesis, the subject matter may be slightly skewed by the subjective, conjectural lens of the authors. At other times, various authors seem torn between pragmatism and theory within their own debates such as in Ch. 10. Additionally, some common pitfalls committed by even the most grizzled Central Asia observers, such as lauding individual successes within minute case studies such as Kyrgyzstani textile workers' impact on global fashion in Ch. 7, are prevalent. Some of the work does successfully argue against predominant tropes and largely held public perceptions; yet the general analysis should be more vigilant in recognizing that these results may still fall within the minority when compared to the overall state of Kyrgyzstani society, economy, and politics. While containing a sense of optimism in regards to understanding, some of the chapters would fair better in tempering their conclusions with the idea that these are the exceptions rather than the rule.

Overall, this edited volume presents well-organized and mutually supporting chapters that flow succinctly and elucidate upon each other's work while providing engaging topical discussion relevant to followers of Kyrgyzstan. It does surprisingly well in challenging preconceived notions not only held by outside observers but also those held by Kyrgyzstanis. By doing so, the book not only contributes to one's understanding of the country but also motivates one in rethinking established approaches to aspects of society, politics, and identity within Kyrgyzstan. From this aspect, it will prove to be an invaluable resource for Central Asia followers and enthusiasts, as well as a great tool for academics and researchers in the field for years to come.

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doi: 10.14712/23363231.2017.13

Frank Trommler: **Kulturmacht ohne Kompass. Deutsche auswärtige Kulturbeziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert.** Köln: Böhlau, 2014. 732 pages. ISBN 978-3-412-21119-6

“The drama of the rise and fall of cultural diplomacy on the background of the national expansion” – those are the words which Trommler, professor emeritus at University of