



## Democracy in Central Asia. Competing Perspectives and Alternative Strategies

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Overall, the volume provides interesting (and also innovative) insights into identity formation in the Central Asian countries. What could have strengthened the book would be the inclusion of more comparative studies within the region, as case contextualisation supports a better understanding of identity-building processes. Most of the studies employ process tracing, investigating a number of Soviet legacies, in order to make sense of the construction of identities today. This leads to both redundancy and generalisation. Soviet legacies on the macro-level apply to all cases under investigation, and identity building seems to be more complex than just responding to the past. Comparison of contemporary identity projects within the region would highlight the unique and diverse aspects of identity-building processes in different Central Asian countries, some of which seem to reflect contemporary rival projects in the political and social spheres rather than responses to the Soviet past. One perspective generally missing is bottom-up research and micro-focus on identity formation. All contributions explore the field top-down from a macro- or meso-level analysis.

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Mariya Y. Omelicheva, *Democracy in Central Asia. Competing Perspectives and Alternative Strategies*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015, 220pp., \$60.00 h/b.

DESPITE HUGE DEMOCRACY PROMOTION EFFORTS UNDERTAKEN BY Western governments in Central Asia, their results, largely, have been disappointing. Mariya Y. Omelicheva sets out to explain this puzzling difference between aims and outcomes by focusing on the content of democracy promotion policies themselves, particularly on how discourses of democracy and democratisation are defined and conceived by the Central Asian states and societies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, as well as the main external actors which aim to influence them.

To this end, the book begins by considering the state of democracy in these countries before moving to the main theoretical and methodological aspects in Chapter Two. One main focus of this book is the contested nature of democracy for Central Asian governments and societies, as illustrated by the use of democracy promotion frames. As a 'specific presentation, packaging, and positioning of issues related to democracy and democratization' (pp. 24–25), a frame gives prominence to the communicative power of ideas and their resonance with Central Asian governments and societies. Omelicheva importantly notes that rather than as top-down instruments, the discursive frames employed are neither entirely determining nor irrelevant in how they are perceived. The extent to which these frames are perceived as being culturally compatible, consistent and credible by the governments and societies under consideration is an important underlying factor in whether or not they are even able to resonate at a given time or under certain circumstances (p. 30).

Chapters Three to Six focus on the discourse of 'representatives of the US, EU, Russian, Chinese and Central Asian governments' in order to define their democracy (or autocracy) promotion frames and their development (p. 30). Both EU and US perspectives on regional engagement tend to focus on democracy and human rights, though there are some key differences. The huge growth of democracy assistance initiatives under the Bush administration coincided with the increasing importance placed on counterterrorism by Washington. This uneasy juxtaposition has largely continued under the Obama administration, albeit with discourse shifting from democratisation to Central Asian states' 'stability, prosperity, and security' (p. 48). The EU has focused on good governance and 'effective policy making, public accountability, and transparency' (p. 52), though it too has softened its rhetoric on human rights and democracy recently, in part due to its energy interests in the

region. Unlike the US, the EU is a collective actor, suffering from a lack of central coordination and differing interests of its member states. Furthermore, whilst it is the most generous donor in the region, the European Union has little visibility as an international actor (p. 50).

Russia and China refer less to democracy in their foreign policy statements. When it is mentioned, it is to confer legitimacy on their own models of governance and to dismiss the universality of liberal democracy, stressing the validity of alternative forms of governance. Despite some differences, both states 'present domestic stability, international autonomy, and economic prosperity as the three pillars of their governance models' (p. 68).

Omelicheva employs the use of focus groups in the representative countries to examine the beliefs and attitudes of people in the Central Asian states, the results of which form Chapter Six. These results, together with the analyses of the representative democratisation frames, show that 'rigid and simplistic' (p. 144) definitions of democracy in the West create binaries which fail to grasp the ways in which these are actually perceived in the region, from which recommendations are made to increase the effectiveness of democracy assistance in the region.

One important contribution of the book can be found in the salient advice and recommendations offered to democracy promoters. Omelicheva notes that Western democratisation efforts have hitherto lacked 'cultural compatibility, salience, consistency, and credibility for Central Asians' (p. 134), representing in this sense a key obstacle to being able to change perceptions and attitudes. Models of governance promoted by Russia and China enjoy a broader appeal, due to their consistency—they serve the interests of ruling elites—and their success in the eyes of Central Asian governments and societies, which place value on stability and security as a precursor to democracy (pp. 120–25). Initiatives should 'place greater emphasis on the development of critical thinking, skills of deliberation, and appreciation for political or ideological pluralism' (p. 141). This would require a greater degree of patience on the part of democracy promoters, as well as a more active effort to appreciate the specific contexts in which these frames are interpreted and understood. Such an approach may be less costly than policies offering piecemeal results or even 'invalidate democracy, making further democratic gains more difficult' (p. 140). Democracy promotion should also be disentangled from the pursuit of other objectives, thus setting into motion a wider process whereby the accomplishments of democracy are promoted and articulated in a way which does not dismiss Central Asian governments and peoples' beliefs in their own models (p. 141).

The data acquired via focus groups conducted in the region provide a welcome complement to the official discourse, though here the concept of democracy promotion frames could be strengthened by an inclusion of the non-discursive factors that have undoubtedly influenced understandings of democracy in Central Asia. For example, the valid criticisms of democracy promoters' focus on 'short-term observable changes in, for example, citizens' participation in elections' (p. 140) could be developed to acknowledge the ways in which non-verbal symbolic and performative aspects of elections influence and are constitutive of understandings of democracy in the region.

This one suggestion aside, the book provides a welcome reassessment of the international relations of Central Asia through the lens of democracy promotion. By focusing on the discourse of democratisation policies and their resonance and interpretation, both in official discourse and in societal attitudes, some important implications and recommendations are made: focus less on short-term, measurable changes and more on efforts that resonate with the states and societies of the region themselves. Vitality, the language of democracy promotion matters. This book is useful for those with an interest or involvement in the region and to organisations operating in the region. Likewise, this work can serve as an indispensable resource for further research focusing on the importance of discourse in Central Asia's international relations and societies.

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