

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Kyrgyzstan Beyond “Democracy Island” and “Failing State”: Social and Political Changes in a Post-Soviet Society by Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall

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and extremely interesting contribution to the history of non-violent resistance and especially the history of Serbia and southeastern Europe in the difficult and dramatic final decade of the 20th century.

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***Kyrgyzstan Beyond “Democracy Island” and “Failing State”: Social and Political Changes in a Post-Soviet Society.*** Ed. Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015. xii, 275 pp. Bibliography. Index. Chronology. \$95.00, hard bound.  
doi: 10.1017/slr.2017.46

The politics and society of Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked, mountainous outpost along the ancient Silk Road connecting the west to China, have arguably elicited more academic publications and policy reports than developments in any other Central Asian state. Dubbed as a “laboratory” of foreign assistance (xi), the republic has hosted scores of western donors seeking to provide technical assistance to Kyrgyzstan’s burgeoning civil society; to its vocal, if poorly organized, political parties; and to a government marred by ethno-political divisions and corruption. A more liberal environment conducive to academic research has allowed for greater scrutiny of Kyrgyzstan’s political transformations, socio-economic challenges, and foreign policy (x). Against this backdrop of the vast knowledge of Kyrgyzstan’s politics and society acquired by the Central Asian specialists, what else, if anything, can be added to our understanding of the country?

A new volume *Kyrgyzstan beyond “Democracy Island” and “Failing State,”* edited by Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall, not only charts new territory in the study of Kyrgyzstan but also seeks to present a powerful “counterweight to simplistic descriptions” of Kyrgyzstan as an “island of democracy” in the ocean of authoritarianism, or as the prototype of a “failing state” struggling with lawlessness, crime, and instability (xi). The volume brings together a team of young and veteran scholars of Central Asian politics from Europe, Central Asia, and the United States. With the most intimate country-specific knowledge acquired through the years of lived experience and field research, these researchers dispel the dominant presumptions of Kyrgyzstan as economically and politically weak, unstable, and lacking any real resources of value.

The volume is conceptually divided into three sections dedicated to the contemporary politics of Kyrgyzstan, some of the overlooked aspects of its socio-economic development, and identity formation. While the stated goal of the monograph is to enhance our understanding of Kyrgyzstan’s post-Soviet transformation, the conclusions of individual chapters have implications for the other Central Asian republics and beyond. For example, Shairbek Juraev’s chapter, “The Evolving Role of Political Parties in Kyrgyz Politics” serves as a cautious reminder that in the context of the post-Soviet politics, a high degree of political participation and contestation has not been matched by political cohesion and consolidation within political parties. In Kyrgyz politics, the transformation to a parliamentary system has not been accompanied by the institutionalization of a party system. While Kyrgyzstan has a better record of holding contested elections, the republics’ parties have become largely engaged in a “campaign of contributions, not ideas” (30) and hijacked by wealthy politicians and businessmen interested in economic wealth or greater political leverage (34).

Engvall’s chapter, “Why Are Public Offices Sold in Kyrgyzstan?” challenges a conventional logic linking pervasive corruption in post-Soviet countries to low wages of public officials. Instead, Engvall uses a “state capture approach” (40) to demon-

strate how a distinct political-economic order has been created in Kyrgyzstan linking officials at various levels of the commercialized state hierarchy. Aisalkyn Botoeva and Regine A. Spector's chapter, "Sewing to Satisfaction: Craft-based Entrepreneurs," illuminates the agency of local craft-based apparel producers who have been able to successfully re-employ the skills they acquired during the Soviet period in a new competitive economic environment. A perspective that emerges from a close investigation of the experiences of these craft producers, who speak of the creative freedom and dynamism in their profession, provides for a stark contrast to the portrayals of a stagnant Kyrgyz economy (125).

These and other chapters of the book are both accessible for novices and insightful for experts. For the new enthusiasts of Central Asian politics, they offer concise, engaging, thoroughly researched, and well-written treatment of history, politics, economics, and society of Kyrgyzstan. For the seasoned scholars, the chapters invite to rethink the "misformulations" that emerged from applying western theoretical frameworks on sovereignty, democracy, the economy, conflict, and society in Central Asia, and consider the new line of inquiry into everyday class attitudes, official corruption, urban growth, local entrepreneurship, political parties, and social order and Islam.

By combing anthropological, sociological, and political science perspectives with an overview of pertinent methodologies ranging from participant observation and surveys to the application of Geographical Information Systems, this interdisciplinary volume can serve as a textbook for area studies students and instructors. This is not to suggest that the book will be of lesser value for those interested in other parts of the world or "variable-oriented" comparative researchers. On the contrary, the individual chapters of the book highlighting the limits of the mainstream comparative politics and international relations theory provide for an instructive read for those outside the area of Central Asian studies. To illustrate, David Gullette and John Heathershaw's chapter, "The Affective Politics of Sovereignty: Reflecting on the 2010 Conflict in Kyrgyzstan," critically engages the western perspectives on sovereignty that stay remiss of affective politics of society and, therefore, are lacking in their ability to help us understand traumatic events like the 2010 conflict in the south of Kyrgyzstan. Likewise, David Montgomery's chapter, "Islam beyond Democracy and State in Kyrgyzstan," highlights the limits of conventional normative political theory about democracy and the nation-state.

The book is an essential reference for policy makers and other stakeholders in the region as it invites us to rethink the policy tool-kit adopted by the western donors in their effort to deal with corruption or nurture political pluralism in Kyrgyzstan. Madeleine Reeves' chapter, "In Search of *Tolerantnost'*: Preventive Development and Its Limits at the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Border," is particularly instructive in this regards. As the title of the chapter suggests, it demonstrates the limits of traditional preventive development programs in contexts of political polarization (92) and shows how the programs of rural development seeking to contribute to conflict prevention inadvertently reproduce the fault lines of conflict in the communities where they operate.

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***The Social Process of Globalization: Return Migration and Cultural Change in Kazakhstan.*** By Douglas W. Blum. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xii, 214 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$99.99, hard bound.  
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The author's objective is to examine the social processes of globalization through the singular case of return migration and its relation to cultural change in Kazakhstan.