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## BOOK REVIEW

**Democracy in Central Asia. Competing perspectives and alternative strategies**, by Mariya Y. Omelicheva, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015, 220 pp., US\$60.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0813160689, including graphs and figures

In her empirically rich study, Mariya Omelicheva attempts to answer why Western democracy promotion has been so ineffective in the post-Soviet successor states of Central Asia. Her answer does not come as a surprise to scholars of Central Asia: “the ideas, beliefs and practices promoted by the United States and the EU in Central Asia lack cultural compatibility, salience, consistency, and credibility for Central Asians” (134). Her work thereby fits squarely into the long list of studies that declare the defeat of Western democracy (promotion), the end of the Third Wave, and/or the ominous rise of authoritarian great powers.

Her analysis focuses on Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan where Omelicheva conducted extensive surveys and subsequently set up focus groups with citizens to arrive at a deeper understanding of the survey results. Her underlying theoretical assumption is that democracy and its related concepts such as the rule of law and civil society are socially constructed. Democracy “frames”, therefore, vary from one culture to the next and the Western democracy promotion frame fails to resonate among the peoples of Central Asia.

In Chapter 3, Omelicheva analyses official statements made and policy documents issued by the United States government and the European Union. She concludes that Western democracy promotion has essentially focused on furthering political competition and the protection of individual rights, downplaying security and economic growth. The West did so, however, inconsistently. Whenever Western security interests were at stake, the United States and the European Union were willing to soften their calls for democratic reforms.

In the following chapter, she shows how China and Russia, the two most influential authoritarian powers in Central Asia, reverse the Western list of priorities. At home and abroad, the Chinese and Russian governments promote stability and security as preconditions for economic growth which they claim is a necessary condition for an eventual transition to full democracy. Putting Western democracy promotion on its head fits well with the agenda of the political elite of Central Asia’s countries. Security and economic growth are the cornerstones of their attempt to legitimize authoritarian rule. Political competition and individual rights are thereby denounced as divisive, counteracting citizens’ longing and need for security and material well-being (Chap. 5).

In Chapter 6, Omelicheva convincingly shows that Central Asian citizens are neither oblivious of their leaders' legitimizing strategies, nor do they oppose them. Instead, many Central Asians consider Western democracy promotion as insincere and Western institutions as unhelpful, if not outright detrimental, to address the countries' most pressing problems in a region that is plagued by instability and poverty. In contrast, the frames promoted by China, Russia, and local governments enjoy much wider support among the population. In her two concluding chapters, she nicely brings together the findings from her empirical chapters, links them back to her theoretical framework, and provides policy recommendations.

Omelicheva deserves applause for her empirical work. Her summaries of the democracy frames in East and West are succinct and illuminating. Her biggest contribution is her field research. Through her presentation of the survey and focus group results the reader gains a solid understanding of the political values in Central Asia. Her social constructivist approach thereby provides a useful framework for analysis.

It is regrettable that her research ends in 2011. Since 2011, Kyrgyzstan has moved even farther away from authoritarianism. While Kyrgyzstan's regime is a far cry from a functioning democracy, the level of state repression that we regrettably see in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan has never been reached in Kyrgyzstan. Omelicheva's study would have gained from highlighting and trying to explain these differences. After all, she offers three explanations for the failure of Western democracy promotion: incompatibilities of democracy frames (her main argument), inaptitude of Western organizations to promote their model of democracy, and the West's lack of credibility due to the readiness to sacrifice democratic ideals on the altar of national security. Is the Western frame more compatible with the political values of Kyrgyz citizens? Did Western organizations simply do a better job in promoting democracy in Kyrgyzstan? Or were they simply more credible because they did not feel compelled to sacrifice democratic ideals in Kyrgyzstan? It would have helped her argument if Omelicheva had provided at least some tentative answers to these questions.

Finally, her policy advice in the concluding chapter is not overly helpful. Promoting democracy through a "slower, more complex, and more uncertain process of adapting, fine-tuning, and calibrating the existing democratic knowledge, ideas, and norms in the relevant state's novel cultural and political contexts" (143) does not suggest any concrete measures or guidelines.

Nevertheless, Omelicheva's study is an important one for students of Central Asia. Graduate and advanced undergraduate students of Central Asia would certainly gain from carefully reviewing her empirical findings. The same holds true for scholars of democracy promotion and the foreign policies of powerful authoritarian states. Last but not least, it would not hurt if inexperienced representatives of Western organizations read her book before working in the region. They might find little concrete policy advice, but gain a solid

understanding of how Central Asian citizens perceive their own governments as well as Western institutions.

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