

## Democracy in Central Asia: competing perspectives and alternative strategies

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To cite this article: Aliya Tskhay (2017) Democracy in Central Asia: competing perspectives and alternative strategies, *Central Asian Survey*, 36:4, 583-585, DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2017.1332311

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2017.1332311>



Published online: 05 Jun 2017.



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Viewed from the perspective of modern anthropology, the book's discussion of kinship was weak. According to the Nalivkins, 'if the moral aspect of the local kin relations between children and parents is weak, other kin relations are literally nonexistent' (136). This is linked to the fact that when doing research on kinship one has to take into account people's genealogical trees to grasp the importance of this system. Furthermore, while kin usually had an active part in life-cycle events like childbirth, marriage and funerals, the otherwise detailed descriptions of life-cycle events miss the point that their attendees were not some foreigners or random strangers but, importantly, close neighbours (who are usually kin-related), extended family members, and *mahalla* members. This indicates that, given that people do not generally talk about their kin members, using participant observation will not help to grasp the role, let alone the complexity of the kinship system, because this practice is not verbally discussed. This shortcoming is understandable, however, in view of the Nalivkins' background and their contemporary ethnographic discipline's disinterest in studying kinship systems.

Despite this shortcoming, this historical study is unique in allowing us deep insights into the nineteenth-century everyday life of the Fergana Valley, particularly in providing interesting stories, examples, and real-life experiences of women. This book is valuable for those who would like to understand life in Central Asia better from a historical or anthropological perspective. It is thus recommended reading for scholars in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science, Islam studies and gender studies. Moreover, its engaging style and sheer readability make it accessible to a wider audience who would like to learn about another culture.

*Note: This review was commissioned and edited by Editorial Board member and former book review editor, Nick Megoran.*

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2017.1332309>



**Democracy in Central Asia: competing perspectives and alternative strategies**, by Mariya Y. Omelicheva, Lexington, Kentucky University Press, 2015, v+232 pp., US\$60.00, ISBN 978-0-81316-068-9

*Democracy in Central Asia* is a timely account of democratization processes and democracy promotion in the context of Central Asia but also of world affairs in general. After 25 years of independence Central Asian states are still in transition, with a new president in power in Uzbekistan, constitutional reform in Kazakhstan, and upcoming presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the expectation rose that these newly independent states would set a course for democratization, as it is 'the only legitimate form of the political rule' (1). The book focuses on official narratives of democracy and how it is promoted by the EU, the US, Russia, China, and three of the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The central question is why Central Asian states still demonstrate little progress in democratization. Omelicheva departs from the established view that the lack of liberal democratic culture in the region is the reason democratization programmes are

unsuccessful. By exploring not only the local dynamics and attitudes towards democracy but also the democracy promotion discourses of Western states (EU and US) and Eastern states (China and Russia), the author comes to the conclusion that the divergence of discourses is the key issue in the failure to ensure transition to democratic rule in Central Asia. Omelicheva highlights three crucial aspects in understanding democracy promotion discourse in Central Asia. First, there are divergent views on democracy that are propagated by various external actors (China, Russia, EU, US). Second, Central Asian political elites have their own vision of democracy and the course of democracy development their countries should take. Third, conversations with local population reveal how much they share or diverge from official democracy discourses.

As a core theoretical approach, the author uses discourse and content analysis of official texts (speeches of political elites of Central Asian states, the US, the EU, China and Russia, official documents of democracy assistance programmes) to tease out narratives related to three dimensions: diagnostic (what happened to democracy), prognostic (what should be promoted), and explicit value considerations and interests (30). The author uses the concept of 'frame', defined as 'a specific presentation, packaging, and positioning of issues related to democracy and democratization' (24–25).

Omelicheva brilliantly represents the diversity of the meanings of the concept of democracy among countries. The Western powers have contributed considerable funds towards democratization processes in Central Asian states (US\$1.8 billion from the US and US\$3 billion from the EU and its member states). Yet, the democracy assistance programmes have been in the shadow of strategic geopolitical issues surrounding cooperation between Central Asian states and the US and the EU. The US promotes universal principles of democracy with reference to its own experience and has focused its democratization programmes, through USAID, on four pillars: 'the rule of law and human rights, competitive political process, civil society, and institutions of democratic and accountable governance' (41). It is important to note that the US also emphasizes the universal applicability of democratic principles and lauds democracy as the only way of governance, approving even military enforcement of democracy, as in the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns under President George W. Bush. Even though US political elites criticized the human rights records of Central Asian states, security cooperation in the US-led fight against terrorism became a top priority. The EU is also striking a balance between its own democratic values (with emphasis on human rights) and strategic economic cooperation (especially in the energy sector). The necessity of securing the energy flow from Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan dictates the depth of criticism and pressure that could be imposed by Brussels on Central Asian governments.

In contrast to Western states, the concept of democracy is not used directly in official speeches of Chinese and Russian authorities. Neither state actively promotes democracy, citing the principle of non-interference into domestic affairs. Yet, democracy and democratization appear in three contexts in their official discourse (62–63). First, both China and Russia emphasize that they are democratic states for legitimacy purposes. Chinese and Russian authorities emphasize unique democracy development paths to be taken by states taking into account political, historical and cultural aspects, rather than the universal application promoted by the West. Second, both China and Russia approach democracy as the right to equal participation in decision-making, especially in the global affairs arena, promoting 'democratic multipolarity' and counterbalancing the notion of the US hegemony. Third, the concept of democracy is often associated with such adjectives as 'sovereign', 'managed', and 'Asian', underlining the individual attitude towards democratization by each state. Thus, for instance, the concept of 'sovereign democracy' corresponds to non-interference in domestic affairs, especially when it comes to the issue of human rights.


Political elites in the three case-study countries are insisting on their own paths to democracy, with their interest in protecting the established political regime, and referring to the historical presence of democratic norms and principles in these countries. Such cultural references, like the structure of the justice system in the Khanate period in Kazakhstan, practices of national assembly (*kurultai*) in Kyrgyzstan, and system of self-government (*mahalla*) in Uzbekistan, as well as endorsement of local values, traditions and beliefs in all countries, are deemed part of the democratic legacy but are not reflected in any way in the democracy assistance programmes of external actors. Therefore, Omelicheva argues that lack of salience of democratic norms and principles among ruling political elites and local populations in Central Asia is one of the key challenges to democracy promotion in the region.

Extensive empirical data, collected by the author in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan through surveys and focus groups, represent the viewpoint on democracy of citizens of these countries and serve as a barometer of the salience of democratic norms and principles promoted by external actors and local governments. Omelicheva finds that some focus group participants share the Central Asian governments' official narrative on democratization, revealing discontent with imposition of liberal democracy and market economy by Western powers. In addition, respondents expressed concerns regarding rapid democratization, preferring instead political stability, consistent with the narratives promoted by China, Russia, and Central Asian political elites. Some also stressed cultural and historical references to democratic principles that existed in Central Asian states, which are not reflected in Western democracy assistance programmes. The fieldwork also revealed that due to a lack of engagement of local populations with democratic institutions and processes, there is confusion and limited understanding around such concepts as the rule of law and human rights and liberties.

Mariya Y. Omelicheva's comprehensive approach to understanding the concept of democracy and how it is framed by various actors is one of the strongest features of her book. This book supplements the literature on democratization processes in the former Soviet Union with a diligent look at the local intricacies of political, social and cultural development in the Central Asian states in the course of independence.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2017.1332311>



**Uyghur nation: reform and revolution on the Russia–China Frontier**, by David Brophy, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2016, 347 pp., \$39.95, ISBN: 978-0-674-66037-3

David Brophy's book is dedicated to the study of the modern history of the Uyghurs, from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s, and specifically focuses on the emergence and execution of what the author calls 'Uyghurist politics' in China and Russia's frontier regions. This politics implies a construction of modern Uyghur ethno-national identity, a case frequently referred to as an example of how Bolshevik power constructed Soviet nationalities in Central Asia. While acceptance of the name 'Uyghur' by Eastern Turkistanis in Tashkent in 1921 is often mentioned in the academic literature, David Brophy's contribution reveals for the first time the complex nature of that process. Unlike the widespread view that the emergence of the Uyghur nation was one of the projects of the