

***Politics, Identity and Education in Central Asia: Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.***

Edited by Pınar Akçalı and Cennet Engin-Demir. Routledge. 2013. 248 pp. (ISBN-13: 9780415816137).

This book takes post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan as a case study from among the Central Asian states to shed light on the recent past of the country and discuss some of its current challenges. It is neatly organized into 3 sections on issues of politics, identity and education, comprising 3 articles in each section, supplemented by an introduction and a conclusion penned by the two editors to link and summarize the entire book. In the words of its editors, the main concern of the book is to look at how the country is “balancing the legacy of the past with the challenges of the present on the one hand and the demands of domestic and international actors on the other.”

The first section, which is on politics, studies the issues of elite consolidation and rivalry, political leadership and constitutionalism in 3 different articles. In the first article of the section, Irina Morozova looks at the phenomenon of elite consolidation and rivalry in the country between 1960 and 2010, both during the Soviet period and post-independence, by entering factors such as ethnic, political, geographical, economic-developmental and educational divides within the population and thus traces the continuities and the ruptures in this regard. In the second article of the section, Seçil Öraz scrutinizes the links between political leadership and democratization during Askar Akaev’s rule. Using methods of discourse and policy analysis, the author evaluates Akaev’s leadership against the backdrop of literature from Weber, Burns and Linz & Stepan. She argues that although the country was initially seen as an exception among other Central Asian Republics with its high potential for democratization, Akaev’s presidency shifted from democratic to authoritarian and from legal rational to traditional styles of governance, which hurt the prospects of democratization in the country. The last chapter of the section by Anita Sengupta looks at the short but lively story of institution-building in general and constitutionalism in particular in Kyrgyzstan and demonstrates how the country oscillated between different forms of political systems during its first two decades, for example, from a semi-presidential system in 1993 to a presidential-parliamentary one in 2007.

The first two chapters of the second section of the book, which is on identity, are ethnographic studies. In the first chapter of the identity section, the author Aksana Ismailbekova deals with the issue of identity through the lens of field research in a Kyrgyz village where she looks at the patron-client relations on a new private farm which used to be a kolkhoz in a highly detailed and interesting story of economic transformation from a centrally planned to a market-based economy in the post-Soviet period. Comparing the current new farm system to the old kolkhoz system, the author successfully explains the challenges of the new system and shows the adaptations both parties have made to the new circumstances by reappropriating their former functions and mechanisms, especially those related to kinship. The next chapter of the section, a similar ethnographic study, is brought to the reader by Svetlana Jacquesson, who has conducted research to look at widespread current “social uses of descent and kinship in a Kyrgyz village” in the post-independence period. In the village where the decline of herd breeding as a result of the transformation of kolkhozes into private farms has resulted in land farming being defined as the most important activity, she studies different families (the basic social unit) and their private farms to trace how relations of descent and kinship unfold and what impact they have on business. In the last chapter of the section, David Radford, in a qualitative study of in-depth interviews from 2007, studies the identity of a group called “mashayache,” those Kyrgyz who converted to Christianity in post-independence Kyrgyzstan after the end of the 70-year ban on religions. He looks at how “mashayache” argued that the identity of being a Kyrgyz was not confined to being Muslim, proving that “ethnic identity is not fixed but is dynamically affected by its constant interaction with external changes and new opportunities,” in the words of the author.

The last section of the book jumps to a different area, education. In the first chapter of the section, Düishön Alievich Shamatov, lamenting that most of the studies on education in the region are quantitative and statistical studies with severe limitations, focuses on the personal story of a young history teacher in a rural area in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan as a qualitative study. After summarizing the practice of teaching of history during the Soviet period, the author looks at the political changes that

came after perestroika and glasnost and highlights the professional challenges that history teachers in general faced during the transition period and finally through the personal story of a young history teacher. Next, Alan J. DeYoung studies universities in post-independence Kyrgyzstan from inside out by listening to the views of several parties such as students, teachers, administrators and parents. He successfully shows the gaps between dreams and realities, expectations and practices in an atmosphere where higher education has become highly demanded, more easily available and accessible yet with lower quality and with lesser prospects for many in the end due to the circumstances of the new era. In the final chapter of the section, Martha C. Merrill also looks at the issue of higher education but from a different angle: what she calls “the inevitability of international actors.” She lists and elaborates on 12 different reasons – some completely within the country’s control, some where the country has limited control and some beyond its control – why Kyrgyzstan cannot escape the influence of international actors on its educational sector. Her chapter not only summarizes the serious challenges of the country’s educational system but could also be a great guideline for policy changes for decision makers in this field.

Overall, the book is clear enough to help a novice reader on Kyrgyzstan understand the main debates in its recent history and detailed enough to satisfy the appetite of scholars of post-Soviet/Central Asian studies. The book includes authors from various countries and disciplines, and the variety of disciplines makes it both a challenging read for those who are used to reading only in politics or economics about the region and a rewarding learning experience. For those who think they may be lost in the midst of various topics, the editors are there with their introductory and concluding chapters where they do a good job linking together the 9 articles that make up this rich book.

Itır Toksöz  
*Doğuş University, Istanbul-Turkey.*