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Book Review:

On the Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus

Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan*

The Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Enduring Legacies and Emerging Challenges by Amanda E. Wooden and Christoph H. Stefes (eds.), 2014 (paperback), New York: Routledge.

The book is a broad overview of the politics and policies of post-communist countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia). It consists of 11 contributions by 13 authors, including two scholars from the region, covering a wide array of topics ranging from economic factors to gender stereotypes, and from ethnic conflicts to educational reforms. The book is a valuable contribution to the fields of transition studies, post-communist studies and comparative politics. It successfully utilises diverse methodological approaches, including both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The overarching paradigm is that of institutionalism, with an emphasis on making academic knowledge relevant for policy decision-making.

The editors (Amanda Wooden is an Associate Professor at Bucknell University, and Christoph Stefes is an Associate Professor at University of Colorado Denver) argue that the existing studies of the region are plagued by simple dichotomies: democracy versus authoritarianism, conflict versus stability, successful versus unsuccessful transition, while the reality is more complex and far from linear. To address this shortcoming, the book has an ambitious dual goal of acknowledging the diversities of important factors at play, at the same time revealing common patterns of political change in the region. This goal is skilfully accomplished by taking the reader on a journey through a vast region that has by and large remained a white spot on the modern social science map.

The first part of the book discusses theoretical and methodological questions, taking stock of what has already been done, highlighting existing problems, and suggesting possible ways to advance the academic and policy-relevant knowledge in the field of Central Eurasian Studies. It consists of an introductory chapter by the editors, which summarises the existing scholarship on the topic, points out the shortcomings, and proposes a policy-relevant research agenda built around the idea of transition with no endpoint. The second chapter by Wooden, Aitieva and Epkenhans critically examines the process of doing research in the region, highlighting some inherent shortcomings with an aim to *provide guidance to students along their path to discovering how to study the politics of the region* (p. 32).

The second part of the book discusses the politics of ethnic conflicts and protest movements, pitching them against the power of the state in various contexts through the region. In chapter three, Julie George poses and convincingly answers the question of why ethnic conflicts erupted in South Caucasus and not in Central Asia, solidifying empirical evidence into a simple and insightful theoretical framework. Chapter four by Lucan Way takes the theme of ethnic conflicts further, by showing how they can help or hinder the process of state consolidation. In chapter five, Eric McGlinchey shifts the readers' attention from the strength of the regime (Way's argument of the previous chapter) back onto the streets, arguing that the opposition's ability to learn to cooperate matters even in highly oppressive regimes.

The third part of the book focuses on policies and policy-making, highlighting the importance of legacies and choices made. One of the most interesting insights from chapter six by Pamela Blackmon shows that market liberalisation and democracy are not necessarily related, as it is often assumed in Western scholarship. The president of Kazakhstan resorts to authoritarian means (dissolving the

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parliament twice) in order to push through his market liberalisation reform. Chapter seven by Oksan Bayulgen challenges the assumption that wealth leads to stability, arguing that the Caspian energy wealth is more a curse than a blessing not only in the familiar sense of leading to the Dutch Disease and oil-fueled authoritarianism, but also because oil and gas fields and pipeline routes are a cause of regional disputes and tensions. Chapters eight and nine, by Christopher Waters and Irina Liczek and Jens Wandel respectively, reveal the gaps between the adoption of international treaties on paper and in reality, looking at human rights in the first case and gender equality in the second case. The latter makes a particularly important contribution by making a convincing argument of why and how government reports are useful research material, even if these are authoritarian governments reporting to the UN. In countries where documents are scarce and data access is restricted, it is crucial for scholars to be able to engage critically with the few sources available; the chapter by Liczek and Wandel is a prime example. Chapter ten by Carolyn Kissane looks at the impact of transition on education, showing a disheartening picture of deterioration of quality. An interesting insight is the evidence of how educational reforms proposed by the international community are being hijacked, politicized, covertly opposed, or turned to the needs of the authoritarian regime. The concluding chapter by Wooden and Stefes employs the concepts of path dependencies and critical junctures in an impressive attempt at summarising an extremely diverse array of factors and outcomes, discussed throughout the book. Predictions made about the future trajectories of countries have proved to be valid six years after the publication of the original hard cover copy of the book.

The book has a number of strengths. It is a compilation of rich and accurate material on a range of topics for a number of countries in the region. Most chapters show an impressive understanding of the context of the countries discussed. Western scholars writing about Central Asia and the Caucasus often convey an impression of external observers, who remain somewhat shallow. This book successfully overcomes that pitfall. Each chapter discusses at least two countries, emphasising the comparative aspect of the endeavor. Thus, the book abandons the conventional ‘one country, one chapter’ approach, which adds great value to the analysis. It helps the reader to make connections and see the region as something bigger than a mechanical sum of countries in it. All of the topics discussed in the book are highly relevant, some (such as the issue of educational reform as a part of the transition process discussed by Carolyn Kissane) are under-researched, hence particularly noteworthy. Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the book is the breadth and variety of methodological insights. It is an excellent, instructive and inspiring example of how to do research with restricted information in less than perfect settings.

The breadth and the diversity of the material presented inevitably poses challenges for the authors and the editors. Perhaps the biggest drawback of the book is that it feels like an uneven read. While some chapters are brilliant (those by Julie George, Lucan Way, Carolyn Kissane, Irina Liczek and Jens Wandel for example), others are arguably weaker. The survey presented in the chapter by Amanda Wooden, Medina Aitieva and Tim Epkenhans has little academic value due to a very small N. In his chapter on Central Asian protest movements, Erik McGlinchey overestimates the readers’ knowledge of the matter. As a result, the lack of sufficient background information makes following the argument difficult at times. The chapter on market liberalisation by Pamela Blackmon is somewhat overloaded with professional jargon. Visual representation of data is not always fully rigorous: Table 1.1 lacks the scale of the indexes presented. The ranking of responses in Table 2.6 is unclear: it lists respondents’ values that have been aggregated in some way (the responses do not sum up to a 100%) without explaining how these were aggregated. While the chapter on Caspian energy wealth by Oksan Bayulgen uses maps efficiently, a general map of the region, as well as maps of areas affected by ethnic conflicts and tensions would have been useful.

All in all, the book is a broad take on a complex, diverse and divergent region. It is fairly successful in showing patterns and parallels in the variety of processes underway in the vast and under-researched regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Although not all the puzzle pieces fit neatly into the

overarching theoretical framework suggested, that is probably more of a strength than a weakness. The book is meant to promote further research and, as such, it provokes important questions. Is this really a region in any sense of coherence? To what extent and in which countries of Central Eurasia is it still justified to talk about transitions? The volume is a noteworthy contribution to the studies of the region and promotes an enhanced understanding of the subject matter. It can be used as a source of information for policy makers, a textbook for graduate level studies, a starting point for research projects, or an enriching read for an accomplished expert. The book can be read as a whole or as a collection of stand-alone chapters. Despite six years since its original hardcover publication, the work has lost none of its novelty or relevance. As such, this second paperback edition is an extremely valuable addition to the growing field of comparative studies of Central Eurasia.

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