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Book Reviews

Nationalism in Central Asia: a biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary

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Nationalism in Central Asia: a biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary, by Nick Megoran, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh University Press, 2017, 368 pp., \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0822964421

The book offers a compelling account of the complex, multileveled relationships which surround the boundary between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan since independence up to the present day. It describes not only the policies of the overarching – often distant – central authorities, but also their effects on the everyday lives of the republic's inhabitants, particularly the people who live adjacent to or straddled between borders. It shows in detail how a border – which remained mostly nominal for about 70 years or so – materialized after the collapse of the Soviet Union. To do so, the book concentrates on three significant events: the combined 1999 border crises in the Ferghana valley, which were sparked by an attempt on Islam Karimov's life and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's incursions from Afghanistan, the Andijan Massacre in 2005, and the June 2010 Osh Riots.

On top of offering a compelling narrative (or biography as Megoran labels it) of the Uzbekistani–Kyrgyzstani border, the book is a noteworthy contribution to post-classical nationalism. It focuses predominantly on people's everyday search for meaning, that is to say, how people act, apply, and reproduce the concepts of nation-making. In addition, Megoran is able to provide a number of secondary, relevant insights into Central Asian

politics; the book's reach extends beyond nationalism per se, which makes it of interest not only to scholars of nationalism but also to those of broader Central Asian politics. This is a strength of the book as far as I see it, but also a reason for some conceptual overreach – a topic to which I return below. Megoran's account therefore provides a synthesis of the relationship between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; a much needed chronicle of the experiences of people who were disenfranchised over the course of national border-making; and a detailed description of how ethnic and historical identifiers, as products of the current national-state international order, sometimes cause violence to people who question or otherwise fail to partake in what others consider to be the appropriate national categories, such as being “Uzbek” or “Kyrgyz.”

The book is composed of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion, each of which could be read independently, depending on the reader's specific interests. In the introduction, Megoran sets out the theoretical and empirical scope of the book, justifying how borders are intrinsic to the phenomenon of nationalism as such, as well as how they shape people's daily existence and identities and even destroy former ways of living. Afterwards, Chapter 1 addresses Uzbekistan's elite-level nation-building project, centered on the ideology of “National Independence.” In like manner, Chapter 2 looks mainly at Askar Akaev's vision for Kyrgyzstan, centered on the slogan “Kyrgyzstan – our common home,” and how it often collided with the more exclusionary vision of various opposition members. Via these first two chapters, Megoran is able to show how the top-down project of nation-making differed substantially between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; whereas authorities in Bishkek dealt with several competing visions for a collective identity, Uzbekistan's illiberalism meant the project of nation-making was far more centralized and seldom subject to (overt and rampant) criticism.

Chapter 3 descends from the top-down nation-making projects of elites in the governing capitals to the lives of the people in the borderland, such as the inhabitants of Chek, a town straddling the two borders. Megoran shows how local inhabitants adapted themselves to the hybrid existence of living in between two countries, a hybridity which was often reflected in the daily use of language – a feature which Megoran shows masterfully with recourse to his knowledge of Uzbek and Kyrgyz. He also shows how nation-making projects were interpreted through time, as borders gradually materialized

and eventually affected the lives of people who crossed the boundary for work and/or leisure or for other more personal reasons.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the city of Osh. It discusses the events and symbolic manifestations which allowed (but did not necessarily cause) the riots in June 2010. Megoran shows compellingly that the events were not in any way foreshadowed or the products of a single, categorical cause, but rather the result of a complex set of factors, such as precarity, popular dissatisfaction with the state of the economy and society, elite discourses, criminality, and the uncertainty which followed the removal of President Bakiev from office in spring 2010. Megoran also shows how the border itself reinforced fear, anger, and resentment amidst the many inhabitants of the city. Fears of a potentially hegemonic Uzbekistan alongside narratives about who was historically entitled to Osh led to a situation in which violent conflict became a looming, though avoidable, possibility between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz peoples who lived in the city. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the main findings of the book, underscoring the normative basis upon which it rests and the prospects of a more inclusive Central Asia in the future.

The book is likely to remain a key contribution to understanding nationalism and border-making in Central Asia. Its attention to multilevel relationships, based on a host of first-hand accounts collected over two decades of research, provides substantial insight into local politics. Were that not enough, from a theoretical point of view, Megoran does well to highlight (more than once throughout the book) the ideological basis on which local politics routinely rest. More than just addressing the material concerns of elites, their struggle for domination, and the interest-based concerns of many local political networks, as is often the case in works of Central Asian politics, the book shows persuasively how ideas, norms, and meaningful symbols matter. Ideology is not taken to be something superficial to which people pay only lip service, but something – no matter how thoroughly contested – with which people interact. As Megoran summarizes in the conclusion, “it is crucial to emphasize the ideological resonance of nationalism throughout society” (247). Megoran thus offers a novel perspective of regional politics, as he does not just address the rent-seeking practices of local actors or the ways in which they seek to entrench their domination over potential competitors.

Apart from the key contributions, my main point of contention lies with the very application of the concept of nationalism itself. As mentioned, Megoran argues

persuasively that – in order to understand the clashes which materialized along Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan's border – it is necessary to look into how their respective ideologies confronted one another. Though I agree entirely, I am not entirely convinced as to whether the concept (or ideology) of “nationalism” is able to do justice to the many complex issues to which the book refers. Regardless of how far nationalism is stretched as a concept, not all the struggles and grievances mentioned in Megoran's work were, as I see it, “national” in scope. In this regard, distinguishing conceptually between state and national ideology may have been useful. The book, for example, refers to Karimov's illiberalism in contrast to Akaev's liberalism in the 1990s, which evidently impacted border-making. But it is difficult to see how differences over how to organize a political economy are national in scope or else can be subsumed under the phenomenon of nationalism, irrespective of whether state and nation have become increasingly coterminous in the current international order. Some of the ideological differences between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan pertain perhaps to issues which cannot be entirely encompassed by the study of nationalism. That said, conceptual intricacies aside, the book's refreshing perspective of local politics and its in-depth explanation of local events are detailed and very insightful. As a final point, the book is also a pleasure to read and will remain an indispensable contribution, or so I hope, to understanding Central Asian ideas, politics, and the phenomenon of nationalism.

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