

BOOK REVIEWS

US Policies in Central Asia: Democracy, Energy and the War on Terror. By Ilya Levine. New York: Routledge, 2019. 256 pp. doi: 10.22679/avs.2022.7.1.007

The Central Asian region receives interest mostly when it is related to global powers. It is usually regarded as a ‘strategic backyard’ or ‘soft belly’ of powers such as Russia, China, and sometimes even India. Ilya Levine’s *US Policies in Central Asia: Democracy, Energy and the War on Terror* focuses on the Bush administration’s controversial efforts to engage with and confront five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Mostly based on the author’s Ph.D. research in 2009-2013, the book offers a detailed analysis of how the Bush administration ‘understood and balanced its most controversial interests – democracy, energy, and the war on terror – in an ‘important but under-examined part of the world’ (p.3). While many factors shaped the US policies in Central Asia – the region got special attention with the start of the Afghanistan war as Washington saw a strategic partner in once a ‘neglected part of the world’ – main elements that influenced the US strategies were ‘complex interdependence between the US and the region; Central Asia’s neglected status in Washington; and beliefs about overlaps between US interests’ (pp. 3-5).

The book has four main parts. Part one is dedicated to examining the US’s democracy promotion in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Washington had ‘relatively high hopes for successful liberalisation’ for Kyrgyzstan due to the latter’s vibrant political dynamics and active civil society (p. 50). It allocated \$109.87 million for ‘Governing Justly & Democratically’ programmes in Kyrgyzstan between 2001 and 2008 (p. 50). Levine looks at the ‘Tulip revolution’ of 2005 and the overthrow of President Akaev as a major event to measure US influence. While western media and NGOs saw foreign assistance (including US support) to democracy promoting programmes in Kyrgyzstan ‘as a ground for popular uprising,’ the scholarship gives attention to shared grievances over corrupt government, ‘unemployment, inequality, and the unfair redistribution of economic,’ and the role of patronage networks as a mobilizing force for the Kyrgyz people (p. 52).

The Bush administration employed a quiet but continued engagement policy towards Tajikistan preferring it to an open confrontation. Levine observes a few reasons. For one, democratization is a lengthy process and open confrontation would not give a long-term

result. Besides, Russia's influence in Tajikistan only left room for Washington to cooperate with Dushanbe in terms of 'counternarcotics, border management, and, increasingly, economic reform' (p.73). Lastly, because president Rahmon built a 'highly centralised system of patronage' where the political elite would only benefit as long as they retain their position, there were 'no powerful local players for Washington to align with' (p.75)

In part two, Levine studies Washington's engagement with Uzbekistan in its War on Terror despite the latter's negative human rights record. Uzbekistan, due to its geolocation at the heart of Central Asia sharing a border with all other countries in the region and with Afghanistan, was a strategic partner for the US. Although engagement with Tashkent began before the Bush administration, improved strategic cooperation 'allowed Uzbekistan to play a significant but ultimately replaceable role in the war on terror' (p. 101). Between 2001 and 2005, Washington used Uzbekistan's Karshi-Khanabad airbase 'for special operations, combat search and rescue, theatre lift, and intelligence functions' (p. 101). Against Washington's hope, that a counterterrorism partnership would bring some democratization to the country, Tashkent showed 'uneven levels of commitment to strategic cooperation and liberal reform' allowing the engagement to slowly deteriorate (p. 103). As the Bush administration could not turn a blind eye to the Andijan crackdown of 2005, coupled with Karimov's suspicion of NGO and foreign aid's role in the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the Washington-Tashkent partnership collapsed. With China and Russia's support, Karimov asked the US to vacate the Uzbek airbase within five months, marking 'the first failure of American superpower in Central Asia' (p.109).

Part three discusses American interests in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan centered around energy, security, and democracy. The most isolated Central Asian country, Turkmenistan is rich in gas reserves, ranking sixth in the world. Because of Russia's 'near monopoly' over Ashgabat's gas exports, Bush's policies encouraged diversifying the gas exports of Turkmenistan via 'new, non-Russian routes' to undermine Moscow's anti-democratic influence in the region (p. 142). Similarly, Kazakhstan's oil 'used to be sent via the Russian distribution network through the Atyrau-Samara pipeline' and Washington sought for 'diversification (preferably by American companies) of the production and export of Kazakhstan's oil' (pp. 159-60). Ultimately, China's investment in the region's energy undermined Russia's role but 'it came at a possible cost to America's strategic leverage over China' (p.163). America's energy interests in the region, however, conflicted with its other agendas, such as its war on terror and democracy building. Although both Ashgabat and Astana (now Nur-Sultan) were eager to receive support from the US for energy and security development, they were reluctant in political reforms, preferring to secure their respective regimes. To end the book, part four gives an overall assessment of Bush's Central Asian policies and the factors Obama inherited that had him have a similar approach to the region.

US Policies in Central Asia: Democracy, Energy and the War on Terror is a very detailed book. However, readers who are not familiar with the region and its context might find it hard to keep up with the storylines. Given the book develops an extensive debate around America's rivalry with Russia, China, and Iran over their influence in Central Asia, giving more space

for a discussion on the region's relationship with them and the factors that formed those relationships is needed. Despite these, I strongly recommend the book as a must-read for those interested in US foreign policy in general and for students and scholars of Central Asian studies.

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Russia's Muslim Heartlands. By Rubin, Dominic. London: Hurst & Company, 2018. 352 pp. (ISBN-13: 978-1-84904-896-5) doi: 10.22679/avs.2022.7.1.008

The author of this book, Dominic Rubin, is a British philosopher and cultural historian who has spent many years in Russia and has become fluent in the language. He is a professor of philosophy at the Higher School of Economics (HSE), a university in Moscow and St. Petersburg modeled after Western universities. He has been able to catch the nuances of the lives of people in post-Soviet space, some of which might be of interest to both Western and Russian readers.

Book as a Source about Russian Muslims

The book is loosely organized yet it has several well-defined large parts. Each deals with a particular region of the USSR. The first parts deals with Moscow Muslims, both native Muscovites as well as numerous newcomers, mostly from the Caucasus and Central Asia. The author shows how the collapse of the USSR and sociopolitical and ideological systems of the past had led to confusion among many Muscovite Muslims, both native to the city and newcomers. The second big chapter deals with Central Asia, mostly with Uzbekistan. Rubin visited the country several years ago and, at that time, Uzbekistan was ruled by the harsh Karimov regime. Islam hardly fit into the nationalistic ideology of Karimov's Uzbekistan, where Timur, the brutal medieval ruler who created an enormous empire with its center in Samarkand, was proclaimed the forefather of the country. Consequently, Karimov's Uzbekistan and Islam were at loggerheads and the local population tried to downplay their interest in Islam.

Another chapter deals with Tatarstan. Here, the author deals with local Tatar interlocutors who make it clear that Islam was not actually essential for Tatar identity and that Volga Bulgars, Tatar ancestors, flourished long before the appearance of Islam in the region. It was the national or ethnic identity that was much more important than the Islamic identity. Other chapters deal with Chechnya and, in the view of the reviewer, is one of the more interesting parts of the book, for it provides insight and facts which might not be known to either Western or Russian observers. The author provides a brief, but useful for the non-specialist,