

# *Economic Autonomy and Democracy: Hybrid Regimes in Russia and Kyrgyzstan*

by Kelly M. McMann, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 278 pp.

## **Bogusia Puchalska**

McMann's book explores the link between individual economic independence from the state with proclivity to engage in politics in opposition to the state. The author argues, and her findings confirm, that citizens' willingness to engage in 'civil activities that enable institutions to function democratically' (p. 183) is determined by the degree of personal economic autonomy, by which the author means 'the ability to earn a living independent of the state' (p. 4, 28). The more general objective of this book is to contribute to the studies of uneven development of democracy by comparing two 'hybrid' regimes in four provinces: two in southern Russia – Samara and Ul'ianowvsk, and two in the Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan) – Osh and Naryn. The choice of these two regions is justified by the author's contention that 'Economic autonomy from the state is most important to democratization in post-communist countries' (p. 168) as well as by the stark differences in levels of economic development and maturity of democratic institutions.

The author's hypothesis of the positive correlation between political engagement and economic autonomy is introduced as an alternative to a more conventional model, where the criteria for comparing levels of democratisation between Russia and Kyrgyzstan are the existence and functioning of democratic institutions, the level of economic development and culture. McMann proves the validity of her approach by demonstrating that inferences drawn from the conventional model led to empirically false results, whereas findings based on her approach confirm the reality of democratisation in the two regions. More specifically, she argues that the conventional approach suggests a greater likelihood of democracy in Russia than in Kyrgyzstan, whereas her model offers an explanation of the confirmed, opposite finding that Kyrgyzstan is more democratic than Russia.

The introductory issues outlined above are dealt with in chapter I. Chapter II provides an exposition of the concept of economic autonomy. This is followed by an attempt to evaluate the democratic process in the four post-Soviet provinces by applying Dahl's criteria of democracy, and using *multiple measures* and *multiple sources of information* in chapter III. Multiple measures offer the possibility of

capturing the degree and not just the extent of certain phenomena. For instance, participation in democratic institutions can be judged not just by their number, but also by the degree of contestation, which in turn can be related to the frequency of self-censorship and government harassment. The multiple sources of information included printed materials, observational studies and interviews, of which 252 were conducted. This type of qualitative data is useful for providing ‘a window into the opinions, fears and everyday lives of average citizens’ (p. 68). Given the nature of the data (qualitative, hence less amenable to statistical analysis) it is less clear how McMann arrived at the conclusion that Samara is more democratic than Ul’ianovsk and that Osh is more democratic than Naryn. Table 3.3 repeats information already contained in the text albeit in a more structured manner, giving the types of measure under investigation and the sources used. However, there is little by way of explaining the meaning of measures such as the independent media or illegal harassment, or degree of self-censorship practiced by the media or the possible types of correlation that can exist between those measures and levels of democracy. It seems that some direct correlations are tacitly assumed in drawing inferences from the data.

Chapter IV links the measures of democracy with the empirical evidence collected by the author. The vivid snapshots of political life of the four regions are probably the most interesting parts of the book, though the author’s comments, interspersed with description, do not always succeed in adding anything new, though: ‘Electoral periods are typically the busiest time for political parties and movements’ (p. 88).

In the remaining part McMann confirms the soundness of her thesis that economic autonomy is a necessary condition for individual involvement in oppositional political activity. She does so using categorical language; ‘Without economic autonomy individuals *will not* (my emphasis) engage in the civic activity’ (p. 183). Her solution is to make economic autonomy a priority, best achieved through market reforms which would reduce the number of workers dependent on the government. If we follow this logic, the inevitable conclusion will be that facilitating democracy by encouraging individual engagement in political activity will be best achieved by shrinking the public sector to zero.

McMann’s argument raises many issues. I will comment on just a handful. The initial assumption that economic autonomy is necessary for people to engage in politics might be true in relation to the case-studies covered in the book, but I doubt if it can be extended much beyond this. Post-communist countries owe their

status to millions of people who lacked economic autonomy in the sense suggested by McMann. When they engaged in political activity which led to the downfall of communist regimes their jobs depended on the state as the private sector barely existed, and where it did it was in some ways controlled by the state.

On the other hand, the question should be asked about the degree of economic autonomy (in the sense suggested by McMann) enjoyed by the employees of private companies who are not paid a living wage and, as a result, are subsidised by the state through a system of tax credits and other public support. This is the case in some European countries such as the UK, where such systems of support exist. In post-communist countries, where such support is either non-existent or weak, people in low-paid jobs in the private sector, with little job security in the context of high unemployment, are left to fend for themselves or emigrate. I can't comment on the willingness to engage in oppositional politics of those groups of people, but I think it can be safely assumed that their priority will be to demand better pay and better working conditions. Yet the unionisation of the private sector in some post-communist countries is very low, hence their most pressing interests cannot be represented. I doubt, therefore, if McMann's model can be helpful in explaining the position of both the underpaid Tesco worker subsidised by the UK state, and the Polish worker earning too little to survive and who has nowhere to turn, neither to the state nor to the trade unions, as they are unofficially banned by the majority of private employers in the post-communist market economies.

In Ch. VI the author claims that the concept of economic autonomy and the model of interaction developed in this book can shed some light on the reasons for the proliferation of hybrid political regimes. Hybrid regimes, to which the four provinces under investigation belong – otherwise known as 'illiberal democracies' or 'electoral democracies' – are problematic since the illusion of democracy that they create fools the international community, and, in turn, leads to people losing their faith in democracy. McMann does not add much new to the existing debates on the problematic nature of hybrid regimes, even though she is right to focus on them. However, the way she goes about explaining what they are is rather simplistic. Missing from her analysis is a wider context and realistic comparison with the so called established democracies such as Britain and the US, which would reveal that not only hybrid regimes are based on '...the false promise to citizens that government leaders will respond to their needs and wishes.' (p. 175). This is a symptom of general crises of democracy and people's diminishing faith in democracy (p. 175) is a more universal experience than McMann admits.

This leaves me doubtful about whether the concept of economic autonomy, central to the theoretical framework of this book, is indeed as useful as the author claims in providing insight into democratic developments in some of the post-communist societies. It is questionable whether the link between economy and politics, central to this concept, holds as well in contemporary societies as it did historically, when the largely unregulated private sector was the main source of mass employment. But even in the nineteenth or early twentieth century the private economy operated within the legal and political environment largely regulated by the state. Ever since, the degree of state and international regulation of the economy has increased immeasurably, even if the nature of regulation has changed. Hence, the engaged and at least partly enabling role of the state historically, but more so contemporaneously, seems undeniable. Yet, it is difficult to get a sense of this from McMann's book, which is firmly based within a framework of two polar opposites: the state and private economy, and no less extreme value judgements passed on both. There is hardly a neutral, never mind positive, reference to the state, whereas capitalism and private economic power are portrayed as liberating, enabling forces and the only source of economic autonomy for individuals. Surprisingly there is no reference to Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999, OUP) which offers a much richer and more reflective view on the relation between economic development, democratic politics and individual freedom, a concept which can be related to McMann's economic autonomy.

The section entitled 'Capitalism and Democracy' (pp. 2-4) raises the reader's hope for a more balanced approach in statements such as: '...capitalism...both supports and undermines people's capacity to exercise that right [to democratic participation]' (p. 2). But this hope is quashed throughout the book, where the state/local authorities are referred to in an uniformly negative manner, as 'harassing,' 'interfering' or 'punishing' political activists or of threatening to do so. The Kafkaesque reality encountered by the author is one where the authorities fire activists or punish them by '...disconnecting their utilities, ending leases, denying access to equipment...' (p. 28). This grim picture of reality is compounded by the claim that '...in these regions, government punishments are more effective, and thus officials have a greater incentive to employ them' (p. 29).

The private sector, on the other hand, is portrayed as the only possible repository of economic autonomy, a source of democracy, and a liberating force from the state/local authority oppression. Private businesses are, following McMann, the best guarantors of independence of the media and guardians of freedom of expression.

Presumably, even when it costs lives, or when the monopoly of media ownership raises a possibility of other outcomes. Let me illustrate:

After purchasing shares in two newspapers, businesspeople in Samara city of Tol'iatti had one editor beaten and another killed because their staffs refused to work under the new owners. *Nonetheless, on balance, businesses typically serve as a positive counterweight to the government through their backing of activism.* (p. 149) (my italics)

McMann stops short of offering any explanation for the killing, which is a pity as it could have lead her to adopt a more critical perspective on the private ownership and control of the media, including the possibility of bias or corruption. This could also inspire a more balanced reflection on the historical role of capital in the establishment of the democratic right. Although it is useful to note that 'Capitalism has directly contributed to the creation and maintenance of democratic rights' (p. 2), surely the mass struggle against capitalist oppression should be acknowledged here as well. Most social and welfare regulations were the result of the threat of communism and not the benevolent nature of market economy. The total lack of acknowledgement of this confirms the extreme standpoint adopted by the author and undermines, to a considerable degree, the validity of her core argument.

McMann's book does not fare much better when dealing with theories of democracy underpinning the main argument. Inclusion of Churchill's overused comment on democracy ('Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried') or the observation: 'The size of modern democracies necessitates voting for representatives instead of serving in government itself' (p. 54) are examples of many trivial statements. The author enthusiastically endorses large private companies purchasing media and funding political campaigns and presents this as the best bulwark against the malicious power of local authorities. But his is to imagine the motives of such businesses are to bolster democracy by contributing to the pluralism in society and to support the independence of the media. What the author leaves out is the possibility that independence of the media from local or central government will not necessarily mean independence from the moneyed interests of the owner, while the plurality which the business ownership of the media facilitates can be distorted by the pursuit of interests not always aligned with the development of local democracy.

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