

# Book Review: Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan by Mathijs Pelkmans

*In Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan, Mathijs Pelkmans offers an ethnography of everyday life in a former mining town in southern Kyrgyzstan that focuses on the epistemic and existential crises experienced following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and how this has led to ephemeral faith in different ideologies and religions within the country. Rooted in the author's deep understanding of Kyrgyz society, this is a complex, well-structured and nuanced text, finds Julia Sinitsky.*

**Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan. Mathijs Pelkmans. Cornell University Press. 2017.**

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Mathijs Pelkmans's *Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan* opens with a description of the youthful enthusiasm with which a young woman takes up a revolutionary cause that offers the possibility of change in a corrupt and oppressive republic. As she states: 'I felt full of energy. It was scary when the riot police attacked us, but we managed to push back. Somehow I felt strong, and then stronger still when other groups joined us' (1). She had participated in a protest against the then-president, Askar Akayev, as part of the 2005 peaceful Tulip revolution. The disappointing end to this, however, created a sense of hopelessness and deep disillusionment in the young woman, which would be echoed by similar revolutions in Eastern Europe, from Ukraine to Georgia and beyond.

Within a short time, the young woman doubts not only the purpose of her involvement altogether, but also the motives of other protesters, and becomes distrustful of her fellow citizens. Meanwhile, it becomes clear that the replacement candidate is just as unsatisfactory as his predecessor. This sense of an initial excitement about a new cause or 'savior', followed by a lack of permanence and disappointment, permeates Pelkmans's ethnography of modern Kyrgyzstan. The questions posed by the young woman inspire an existential debate in his work about how much will, enthusiasm and belief must be behind a cause or an idea for it to succeed.

It is clear that Pelkmans had a deep understanding of Kyrgyz society before embarking on his fieldwork for this book, having worked in rural Kyrgyzstan for over a decade as a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) worker, trying to run and promote poverty reduction programmes. What he noticed in this experience was initial enthusiasm towards UNDP and other foreign ventures; however, this quickly faded. In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, it seems no one ideology or political system has flourished or found widespread consensus. Consequently, a lack of stability and faith in any institution or system of belief is a portent of an ever-uncertain future.

*Fragile Conviction* is structured in two parts, the first describing the economic and social conditions of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, mostly focusing on small mining towns and rural areas. The second is full of episodes of men and women trying to navigate not just the difficult social and economic conditions of their new state, but also the myriad ideological and religious choices which opened up before them. The inability of any ideology to replace the all-encompassing Soviet one is a strange and interesting phenomenon.

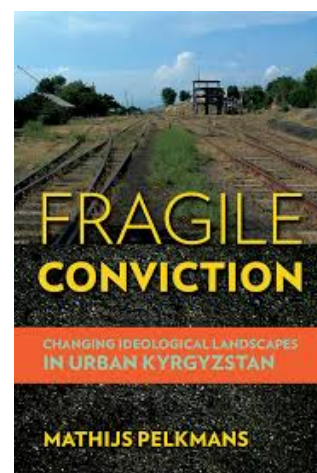




Image Credit: Ala-Too Square, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan ([Dan Lundberg CC BY SA 2.0](#))

While Pelkmans does not fail to mention the disastrous consequences of Western economic reforms, foreign advisors and the influence of the Washington consensus as a whole on Kyrgyzstan and other post-Soviet states, his focus goes deeper than the economic stagnation permeating the country. He notes the existential crisis he finds in much of the countryside, and describes the stark lack of transformation in a specific town, Kokjangak:

By 2008 the Soviet past had become a chimera, with even returners failing to recognize their hometown. In the context of such encompassing transformation, in which the city's infrastructure had collapsed and half its population had left for good, the connections between past and present were tenuous. Kokjangak was a city that was being undone. Even the documents detailing its history had vanished [...] written proof of Kokjangak's soviet history had [disappeared] (52).

This lack of connection to even the very recent past left citizens without a footing from which to move forward. The citizens of the post-Soviet era suffer not only from economic deprivation and a dearth of opportunities, but also from a crisis of identity and constant uncertainty about a future path. The people Pelkmans describes seem as though they are wandering in a wilderness, not sure what instinct to trust or what branch to hold.

Though there have been many works, especially in the 1990s, describing the moral and intellectual vacuum left after the collapse of the USSR, this book, with its focus on religion and ideology, tackles a new angle. It seems in a country almost completely devoid of economic opportunity and with decaying Soviet social institutions, strange, sometimes unlikely, belief systems take hold. These are quickly replaced by other ideas, ideologies and movements as soon as the previous fads fail to bring their deliverables. Given that both socialism and state atheism were first forced onto a population for 70 years then suddenly removed, other beliefs can barely stand the test of scrutiny and time. On this barren soil, new ideologies try to take root, but without a strong or constant connection to the past or to the identity of the local people, most fail in a remarkably short time. In this sense, it is unclear how any cohesive ideological, national or even religious identity is likely to emerge.

The connection between institutions and beliefs is evident in a number of Pelkmans's anecdotes. In one, he describes a Muslim woman who converted to evangelical Christianity after her daughter was miraculously cured of an illness despite receiving harsh reprimands from her family. She describes the experience thus: 'I didn't have any options left. I had taken my daughter everywhere—[the mullah, the hospital] [...] but all they did was take my money. That's when I accepted my colleague's offer to take me to her church' (132). This shows not only the devotion of a particular individual, but the lack of faith in the medical establishment and the collapsed state of the national health service. Later, the woman's faith waivers as her family's situation becomes more uncertain. Others who did not convert to Pentecostal Christianity regularly visit shamans for even minor ailments which a competent doctor should have been able to cure. Yet, in the absence of functioning medical care and a decent educational system, shamans are felt to be the best option for many people.

Other converts whom Pelkmans describes are so because of economic instability. He follows a group of devout and conservative men belonging to the Tablighi Muslim group, a denomination more common in Uzbekistan but not in the historically moderate Kyrgyzstan. Many of these men have found solace in this ideology because of difficulties in their relations with women and struggles with job hunting. This particular strand of Islam justified their unrealised feelings of superiority and dominance in a society where they would otherwise be viewed as failures. Under Soviet rule, their adherence to these ideologies would have been impossible as would their unemployment. As the book shows, in the 'brave new world' of modern Kyrgyzstan, these conservative religious sects also have a place.

Nonetheless, one of the major themes explored by Pelkmans is that of Soviet atheism, and atheism in general. Pelkmans writes:

Disillusionment with the communist project is often—by and large correctly—attributed to the effect of a widening gap between the utopian communist vision and the reality of everyday Soviet life. But how does atheism fit into this picture? Soviet ideology was highly utopian, and the communist idea was accompanied by visions of healthy and affluent workers who achieved self-realization through their involvement in collective labor [...] Atheism in itself did not inspire such visions. Soviet leaders never promised atheism, and citizens never desired it. The lack of a utopian dimension meant that it could not survive as self-standing positive ideology (95).

With Soviet atheism relegated to the history books, all other convictions associated with the Soviet system were also up for question. This included anything from historical facts to the legitimacy of the theory of evolution. For many in Kyrgyzstan, the collapse of the Soviet Union was not just a collapse of an economic, political or even moral ideology: it was a collapse of an entire system of thought, and of a methodology of understanding the world. The forcible promotion of an ideology of unbelief and then its crisis of legitimacy created a strange post-modern, even 'post-truth', atmosphere. In it, citizens were simultaneously willing to believe anything briefly, and later abandon this almost on a whim. The only persons for whom this did not ring true were adherents to the Soviet ideology, still pining for the relative prosperity that the Soviet regime offered their family, for whom the cornucopia of new belief systems was both bizarre and incomprehensible.

Pelkmans states that this lack of cohesive ideology in state and institutional organs can have deadly consequences: 'the most disturbing example [...] is the 2010 conflict, when ideas of ethnic purity, feeding on political and economic tensions, radicalized with such speed that towns and cities across the south erupted in massive violence' (9). Here, Pelkmans is referring to the 2010 second Tulip revolution which had numerous casualties. Such conflicts appear to be just as likely to spring up again.

*Fragile Conviction* is a complex, well-structured text, written with social anthropologists and other academics in mind. Some of the conceptual framework and terminology may be beyond the layperson, yet readers will come away from the book with a very clear understanding of modern small-town Kyrgyzstan and the nuances governing its society.

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**Julia Sinitsky** is an independent scholar with a BA in International Relations and Economics from Boston University and an MA in European and Russian Studies from Yale. She currently works at the environmental non-profit Pure Earth/Blacksmith Institute.

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*