

TRANSITIONS TO AUTHORITARIANISM: THE CASE OF THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS

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The article explores the peculiarities of state-building, nation-building and democratization that impaired a successful transition in the Southern Caucasus. It first discusses mass mobilization and the rise of ethno-nationalism. Secondly, unresolved territorial issues in Abkhazia, Nagorny-Karabakh and Ossetia and a resulting securitization of politics around military core interests. Finally, it concludes with the reproduction of totalitarian structures and the emergence of hybrid regimes.

Keywords: Southern Caucasus, nation-state building, Post-Soviet studies, nationalism, elite fragmentation.

1. Introduction:

A quick review over literature on modern state transition suggests strong similarities of the post-Soviet case with what Huntington describes as the third wave of democratization, namely the transition in Southern Europe and Latin America¹. Yet in order to truly understand the dynamics of the post-Soviet transition period it is essential to shed light on the contextual factors that accompanied state-building in the aftermath of the Soviet Union. In fact, processes in the post-Soviet space are distinctly different from previous experiences in Southern Europe and Latin America. While the latter illustrates a case of re-democratization, democratization in the realm of the former Soviet Union often meant a full-fledged building of new democracies endowed with new institutional structures². Hereby, the underlying (internal) reasons for the collapse of the USSR are of paramount importance: a thorough failure of centralized economic planning, political exhaustion, state decay and public apathy as well as a decline of state power in the periphery³. Unlike most of the countries of the third wave, post-Soviet transition was dominated in several countries by an “implosion of

¹ See Bunce: pp. 167.

² Bunce: 2003, p. 168.

³ For explanatory models and literature on the collapse of the Soviet Union, see e.g. Tishkin, Valery. 1997. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame* (International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Dawisha, Karen & Parrott, Bruce (ed.). 1997. "Conflict, cleavage, and change in Central Asia and the Caucasus". Cambridge University Press, Conor, O'Clery. 2011. *Moscow December 25, 1991: The Last Day of the Soviet Union*. Transworld Ireland, Suny, Ron. 1993. *The revenge of the past. Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford University Press.

the state, civil war and the rise of power contenders whose aim is state disintegration rather than state building”⁴. Although externally-triggered by the reforms of ‘glasnost and perestroika’, liberalizing reforms implemented in this framework soon gained its own momentum, leading eventually to the disintegration of the Soviet Union instead of its reform. In the end, it was less a well-formulated reform plan of the communist politburo in Moskva but rather the socio-political and economic peculiarities of the former titular republics that shaped an open-end road map for the newly-emerging nation-states. In the following paper I will explore these very peculiarities to make sense of the major shortcomings of the transition process that stalemated policies geared towards democratization, justice and economic prosperity.

In face of the limited scope of this paper, I will limit myself with singling out and briefly discussing three peculiarities that impaired a successful democratic transition. In the beginning, I will critically reflect upon the link between popular protest, mass mobilization and the rise of ethno-nationalism. Secondly, I will show how unresolved territorial issues in Abkhazia, Nagorny-Karabakh and Ossetia resulted in a paralyzing securitization of politics around military core interests. Based on this, I will discuss the reproduction of totalitarian structures and the emergence of hybrid regimes. In this regard, I will benefit from research in the field of authoritarian learning to show how undemocratic or partially democratic regimes can equally sustain their power. Finally, I will conclude with addressing the current environment of inertia and political stalemate with Gallina’s notion of *elite fragmentation*.

2. Literature review

There exists a vast scope of academic literature on democratic transition processes in an environment of inter-ethnic conflict such as e.g. Dankwart Rustow’s “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model” (1970), Renee de Nevers’ “Democratization and Ethnic Conflict” (1993) or Alfred Stepan’s “Modern Multinational Democracies: Transcending a Gellnerian Oxymoron” (2001) to name only a few. Works like Stuart Kaufman’s “Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War” (2001), Roger D. Petersen’s “Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe” (2002) and Rui. J.P. de Figuerido Jr. and Barry Weingast’s “The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict” (X) provide a good framework for understanding the rationality behind ethnic conflict.

In order to sketch the contextual framework of ethnic conflict in the Southern Caucasus De Waal’s monograph “Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war” (2003) still serves as the main historical overview for the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict. However, further works such as Panossian’s paper on “The Irony of Nagorno-Karabakh: Formal Institutions versus Informal Politics” (2001) and Marutyan’s paper on “The Memory of Genocide and the Karabagh Movement” (2011) complement the first with a stronger elaboration on the domestic context. Research on

⁴ Grugel: 2002, p. 192.

violence and territorial disputes in the Southern Caucasus is complemented by academic scholarship such as e.g. Cheterien (“The August 2008 War in Georgia: From Ethnic Conflict to Border Wars”), Coppieters (“The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict”), who document well the territorial disputes and ethnic conflicts in the Georgian case. Works by Wheatley (2005, “Georgia from national awakening to Rose Revolution: delayed transition in the former Soviet Union”) and Tudoroiu, T. (2007, “Rose, Orange and Tulip: The Failed Post-Soviet Revolutions”) further shed light on the domestic dimensions of revolution and reform in the Georgian case.).

The cases of post-Soviet transition in Azerbaijan are covered by Ergun (2010, “Post-Soviet Political Transformation in Azerbaijan: Political Elite, Civil Society and Trials of Democratization”) while Suny (2001, “Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations”, “Looking toward Ararat. Armenia in Modern History”) enriches our understanding of the Armenian case. Gallina complements this with a comparative study in “Puzzles Of State Transformation: the Cases Of Armenia And Georgia” (2010) while Suny (2000) explores the transition period in a larger geographical context encompassing whole Eurasia in “Provisional Stabilities, The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia”.

2.1 Mass mobilization and the rise of ethno-nationalism

In regard to the analysis of the most successful examples of post-soviet transition, i.e. Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia, it is striking to see that - with the exception of Hungary - mass mobilization always emerged as a crucial element, initiating democratic transition in the young nation-states. In this regard, mass movements had a significant symbolic meaning as they not only highlighted the break-down of authoritarian regimes but also elicited confidence in the existence of feasible alternatives. Moreover they urged regime change and constituted a resource advantage for the oppositional leader against the authoritarian leaders of the ancient regime to accept negotiations for bargaining the transfer of state power.

As a matter of fact, mass mobilization often ensured crushing victories for oppositional leaders in the first elections of the newly-established nation-states. Upon disintegration of the Soviet Union mass movements arose throughout the Southern Caucasus, from Armenia over Azerbaijan to Georgia. Yet outcomes should remain far from what was optimistically expected due to both political and economic reasons. In the case of Georgia, mass mobilization was brutally stifled under repressive measures of the Russian army that crushed peaceful protests in Tbilisi in 1989. This event, commemorated on 9th April should emerge as a traumatic experience with a radicalizing impact on Georgian policy. In the case of Armenia, first demonstrations in 1997 “aimed to close down a nuclear power plant and a synthetic rubber factory exploded (...) early the next year in a more militant political movement that called for unification of Karabakh with the Armenian republic”⁵. An apparent “sense of national

⁵ Suny. 2001. Constructing Primordialism. Old Histories for New Nations, p. 30.

danger”⁶ that overshadowed the path towards independence paralyzed attempts to liberalizing and democratizing state and society. In the wake of political tensions and military conflict, multi-faceted and highly heterogeneous popular movements embracing wide-ranging topics from environmental protection over human rights to national self-determination coalesced into monolithic movements for national liberation. Hereby, as Ron Suny notes, “in place of the tattered and discredited Soviet ideology, many in the political and intellectual elite espoused a fervent and increasingly intolerant nationalism”⁷. Under these conditions, mass mobilization reprobated as a vehicle for a pre-eminent and increasingly more aggressive propagandistic rhetoric.

In addition to that, the dire state of a collapsing late-Soviet economy aggravated by the aftermath of destructive inter-ethnic warfare frustrated hopes for short-term economic progress and further discredited a political agenda promoting liberal democracy, social welfare and state of law.

2.2 Territorial disputes and the securization of politics

Another joint pattern that can be observed throughout the Southern Caucasus are territorial disputes framed by its supporters as a struggle for national self-determination yet castigated by its adversaries as a separatistic and/or terroristic agenda⁸. In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the aftermath of the still unresolved Nagorny-Karabakh conflict causes a deadlock in terms of political progress.

As a matter of fact, territorial conflict comes at high costs on the domestic level for both countries. In general terms, any political agenda that does not prioritize aforementioned territorial issues is bound to failure due to lack of popular support and vulnerability to populist propaganda – depicting even the most modest attempt to shift politics away from this quagmire as a betrayal of the 'national interest' . In accordance with this, we note that democratization and economic prosperity requires a previous settlement of national and state questions, in particular on regard to territorial borders . In addition to this, as a result of territorial disputes we witness a securitization of politics throughout the Southern Caucasus. In consequence, this again brings one actor of hard policy back into the nexus of state politics - the military. Militarization of society and state comes at high costs. As a result we note a deterioration of already fragile relations with neighbouring countries further exacerbated by mutual threat of

⁶ Suny, 2001. Constructing Primordialism. Old Histories for New Nations, p. 30.

⁷ Suny: 2000, p. 836.

⁸ For more literature on national self-determination and the rationality of secession, see e.g. Buchanan, Allen E. "Self-determination and the Right to Secede." *Journal of International Affairs* 45, no. 2 (1992), pp. 347-365, Kampelman, Max M. "Secession and the Right of Self-determination: An Urgent Need to Harmonize Principle with Pragmatism," *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 1993, pp. 5-12, Spencer, Metta. "When States Divide," in *Separatism: Democracy and Disintegration*, Metta Spencer, ed., Rowan and Littlefield, 1998, pp. 5-41, Schaeffer, Robert K. "Separatism: Rationality and Irony," in *Separatism: Democracy and Disintegration*, Metta Spencer, ed., Rowan and Littlefield, 1998, pp. 43-68.\

military action. In addition to that, high military budgets deprive the countries in the Southern Caucasus not only from efficiently tackling poverty and dilapidated infrastructures but also remove the basis for a successful realisation of wide-reaching, urgently-needed economic reforms.

In the case of Georgia, attempts have been made to forestall ethnogenesis in regions, where ethnically Georgians constitute the minority, by forming a more inclusive civic identity.. . However, reckless policies adopted by Saakashvili vis-a-vis ethnic minorities - culminating in the eruption of the August war 2008 - provide little evidence that there was any considerable shift away from an overriding ethno-nationalistic Georgian identity. In this context, John Wheatley notes that under Saakashvili “there was a new emphasis on ‘civic nationalism’, based on the notion that all citizens, irrespective of their nationality, have the right to participate fully in public life. However, this policy led to fears amongst some members of national minorities that what the Georgian government really had in mind was forced assimilation of minorities”⁹.

2.3 Reproduction of totalitarian structures and the consolidation of hybrid regimes

As a matter of fact, unlike examples of Southern Europe and Latin America where coexistence with the ancien regime marked an important stage for democratization in the transition process, severing ties with the ancien regime has proven to be the most successful model in the post-Soviet process. However, in the Southern Caucasus against the background of a state apparatus unable to provide sufficient security para-military groups such as for instance the *Mkhendri* in Georgia have emerged in an environment of political uncertainty and filling a power void and seriously challenging state sovereignty. On the other hand, we note the example of Azerbaijan and Armenia, where oppressive totalitarian rule (Azerbaijan) and corrupt state oligarchies (Armenia) succeeded in sustaining relative stability - albeit under exclusion of the majority from the political decision making process. More than two and a half decades after the formal declarations of independence the prestigious independent watchdog organization *Freedom House* still ranks Armenia and Georgia merely as ‘partly free’, while passing the judgement ‘not free’ to Azerbaijan¹⁰. This is also partly reflected in the *2015 World Press Freedom Index*, where Georgia (69/180) and Armenia (78/180) gain rather modest rating, while Azerbaijan brought up the rear (162/180)¹¹.

We see hereby, in stark contrast to what modernization theories suggest, that political transition is not a linear process with consolidated democracy as a final and inevitable destination. Instead, the case of post-soviet Southern Caucasus has proven that unconsolidated democracies are not per se less sustainable but instead, can reproduce itself in undemocratic structures and consolidate authoritarian regimes that withdraw their political and economic power from informal networks. This aspect is

⁹ Gallina: 2010, p. 20.

¹⁰ See <https://freedomhouse.org/about-us#.VX2R4lLre6Q>.

¹¹ See <https://index.rsf.org/#/>.

closely linked up with what Ambrosio (2009) coined with reference to the Russian case as ‘authoritarian learning’¹². The idea of ‘authoritarian learning’ contends the wide-spread perception of rigid authoritarian regimes that are doomed to decline in time but instead argues that authoritarian regimes like their democratic antagonists can like-wise reciprocate and learn tactics to overcome democratic protests and oppositional demands.

This may account for why Eduard Amvrosiyevich Shevardnaze – former Soviet foreign minister under Gorbachev and first secretary of the communist party in Georgia (1972-1985) - in 1995 and Heydar Aliyev – first secretary of the communist party in Azerbaijan (1969 - 1982) and full member of the politburo – in 1993 succeeded in having a come - back in the post-Soviet period. In both cases we see a continuity of authoritarian rule where “some communists (were transformed) into nationalists, who then used nationalism to maintain authoritarian control and constructed illiberal successor regimes while deconstructing successor states.” Solely, in Armenia direct return of the old communist elite was forestalled when Robert Kocharian defeated Karen Demirchyan - first secretary of the Armenian SSR (1974 – 1988) – in the 1998 presidential elections.

2.4 Elite fragmentation and political stalemates

Finally, in the case of the Southern Caucasus we witness a wide-reaching elite fragmentation that rendered impossible the emergence of a regime both capable and willing to embark on a path towards a democratic transition. Nicole Gallina describes elite fragmentation as a state “in which there are strong differences apparent within the governing elite and serious problems between the governing and the oppositional elites. This includes trench-mentality and the positioning of elites into enemy-categories. Elite fragmentation poses serious challenges for transformation toward democratic systems, and generally efficient state institutions”¹³. In fact, this applies to all of the democratically-elected first, national presidents, where we see a large-scale failure of Ter-Petrosyan (Armenia), Zviad Gamasakhurdia (Georgia) and Ebulfeyz Elchibey (Azerbaijan) to secure sufficient elite support necessary to successfully implement envisaged reforms. As a result of this prevailing political stalemate, economic crisis, deteriorating social conditions and widespread political corruption persisted. In the light of an overall failure of bringing these nation-states on the track towards democratization leaders of the ancien regime (in Georgia and Armenia) or political stakeholder (the Karabakh group) asserted political power, bringing the democratic transition process to a halt. In the Armenian case, this elite fragmentation exacerbated already prior to the election of Kocharian at the question of how to approach the status of Karabakh in January 1998. While then President Ter-Petrosyan and his elite group advocated a step-by-step approach in line with the immediate

¹² See Ambrosio, T. (2009). *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*. Farnham and Burlington (VT): Ashgate Publishing.

¹³ Gallina: 2010, p. 22.

economic benefits possibly resulting from such an agreement, then Prime Minister Kocharian along with the Karabakh elite rejected any settlement of the issue “that might undermine the independent status of the enclave.” This struggle for supremacy among different key actors of the Armenian elite entailed a political deadlock with a paralyzing impact on policy-making in Armenia.

Conclusion: A Parajanovsque Southern Caucasus

The nature of the post-Soviet transition in the Southern Caucasus was marked by hardship, political stalemate and ethnic conflict. In this regard, policies that failed to reconcile territorial disputes such as Nagorny-Karabakh, Southern-Ossetia and Abkhazia overshadowed and finally stifled ambitious agendas for democratic reform. Moreover, the pre-eminence of military conflict suspending like the sword of Damokles over South Caucasian politics upsets the balance in budget making in favour of military expenditures. This again deprived the first leaders of the newly-established republics of room to manoeuvre their countries out of a state of aggravating economic crisis as they failed to allocate state revenue for urgently-needed economic reforms. This observation is in line with Bunce’s remark:

“Instead, uncertainty was higher, and the best result was a compromised democracy, capitalism, and state. Nonetheless, this did not necessarily mean that leaders in these contexts adopted the wrong strategies. Rather, they merely faced the "wrong" conditions”¹⁴.

In face of an overt failure of governing conflict and tackling corruption, dilapidated infrastructure and economic regression the first elected national leaders were soon ousted out of office and, in the case of Georgia and Azerbaijan, replaced by former communist elites from the ancien regime.

Is there a way out of this quagmire? I would argue that it is due time to understand for all three countries that the pathway to national sovereignty means less a military superiority against the enemy country but an internal struggle against corruption and for the rule-of-law, against political isolation and for international collaboration, against oligarchic structures and for economic prosperity for a wider part of the society. The external enemy must not be the excuse for not addressing the grievances of one’s own country. On the contrary, resources must be allocated to create a deeper awareness that these very grievances are in its essence issues that may unify rather than separate societies across the trenchworks of the Southern Caucasus.

However, such an awareness can only flourish in an environment where belligerent rhetoric, military provocations and the recurrent demonization of the purported hostile other are abandoned. Here I would like to end and leave the last words to two artists which the rich cultural dwells of the Caucasus have brought forth and whose works illustratively surmount today’s national borders. One is the artist and film director Sergej Parajanov, who eternalized Azerbaijani, Armenian and Georgian folkloric culture in his surreal works *The Colors of the Pomegranates* (1968), *The*

¹⁴ Bunce: 2003, p. 190.

Legend of Suram Fortress (1984) and *Ashik Kerib* (1988). In regard to the end of reason in war times, he warned in 1988 of the cruel logic of warfare that dictates: “Perhaps you're our brother who's trespassing the land of the enemy, but that makes you our enemy”¹⁵. These words should reverberate in almost two decades later in the work of contemporary Azerbaijani writer Ali Akbar who writes in *Artush and Zaur*¹⁶ (2009): “No choice was left to the ones who did not want to become enemy with each other, to the ones who did not even know what hating the other meant, the judgment was merciless – separation”¹⁷.

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Դեվիդ Լյուպով

*Բեռլինի Հուլիոսի անվան համալսարանի ասպիրանտ,
Եվրասիա միջազգային համալսարանում
Էրասմուս Մոնդոս ծրագրի մասնակից*

Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում են պետության, ազգի և ժողովրդավարության կայացման այն առանձնահատկությունները, որոնք խանգարում են Հարավային Կովկասի բարեհաջող վերափոխումներին: Հոդվածում քննարկվում են մասսայական շարժումները և էթնո-ազգայնականության վերելքը: Նրանում անդրադարձ է կատարվում այնպիսի տարածքների չլուծված հարցերին, ինչպիսիք են Աբխազիան, Լեռնային Ղարաբաղը և Օսեթիան, որոնց արդյունքում, հիմնական ռազմական շահերից ելնելով, առաջանում է անվտանգ քաղաքականություն: Հոդվածի վերջում ներկայացված են տոտալիտար կառուցվածքները և խառը տիպի ռեժիմների ծագումը:

Բանալի բառեր. Հարավային Կովկաս, ազգային պետության կառուցում, հետխորհրդային ուսումնասիրություններ, ազգայնականություն, մեկուսացված էլիտաներ:

¹⁵ Interview with Sergey Parajanov by Ron Holloway alongside the *Filmfest München* (“Munich film festival”), 1 July 1988.

¹⁶ The novel “Artush and Zaur” published in 2009 narrates the fictional love story of the two men Artush Saroyan and Zaur Jalilov from cohabitation in late-soviet Baku, over times of war until their separation and reunion in the post-Nagorny-Karabakh period. Addressing homosexuality (a prevailing taboo in all Caucasian societies) in a highly sensitive political context publisher houses in Azerbaijan declined to print and publish the novel.

¹⁷ Թեքբար (2009), „Düşmən olmaq istəməyənlərə, düşmənçiliyin nə olduğunu bilməyənlərə də seçim haqqı verilmədi. Hökm ağır oldu – ayrılıq! Halbuki bu nifaqa onların nə dəxli ola bilərdi? Torpaq iddiaları, silahlar, axan qanlar – çox uzaqdı onlardan. Çox uzaq” (translation from Azeri).

ПЕРЕХОД К АВТОРИТАРИЗМУ: ДЕЛО О ЮЖНОМ КАВКАЗЕ

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В статье исследуются те особенности построения государства, нации и демократизации, которые мешают успешному переходу в Южном Кавказе. В статье обсуждается массовое движение и подъем этно-национализма. В ней также затрагиваются вопросы неразрешенных территорий в Абхазии, Нагорном Карабахе и Осетии, в результате чего возникает секьюритизация политики вокруг основных военных интересов. В конце статьи представлены тоталитарные структуры и возникновение режимов смешанного типа.

Ключевые слова: Южный Кавказ, построение национального государства, постсоветские исследования, национализм, обособление элиты.