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Research Report for the Work Completed in the Open Society Archives in Budapest April 20 – May 31 2011

Research aims

The goal of the research at the Open Society Archives was to study the relationship between political autonomy and violent conflicts during the period of transition from the USSR to independence. The case studies for this research were taken from the South Caucasus; more particularly between the late 1980s and mid 1990s – the period of the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the emergence of the new independent states.

The idea to study the relationship between the institution of autonomy and the occurrence of violence is not new – in fact, practically all studies that deal with the modern South Caucasus note that violent conflicts occurred in the areas where political autonomy existed. This should come as little surprise given that in all three cases where ethnic groups were equipped with autonomy this was a result of violent conflicts during the Russian civil war (1918-1921) and the Bolsheviks granted autonomies as a solution to these conflicts. The link between the existence of ethnic groups equipped with autonomous institutions and violent conflicts therefore seems quite evident.

I here wanted to distance myself from this approach and focus more on the institution of autonomy per se. I wanted to understand how autonomous institutions behave in the situation of collapse of the state and during the transition to independence. I also specifically wanted to avoid the analysis of autonomous institutions in areas of ethnic minorities as such cases are inherently conflict-prone.

The South Caucasus offers the possibility of a comparison between violent and non-violent cases. There were two autonomies that were not created for the ethnic minority groups – Ajaria within Georgia and Nakhichevan within Azerbaijan. Comparison can be made with the situation in ethnic autonomies (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia) during the period of late 1980s and mid 1990s. This comparison would reveal how the autonomous institutions functioned in the situation of state collapse

Sources used

During my research at the OSA I was looking for two types of sources. First, I wanted to find indications of how each group (Republics and Autonomies) perceived the other during the Soviet period. This was partially done through the analysis of historical literature produced during the Soviet period in the Union Republics and their autonomies. These historical works usually point to tense interethnic relations.¹ I also wanted to complement this by the analysis of Samizdat works produced in the region to see how ethnic relations were seen by dissident intellectuals. The OSA contains a large collection of Soviet Samizdat and I was hoping to find some relevant documents. The samizdat related to interethnic relations in the South Caucasus can be grouped in two main categories – Georgian and Armenian sources. The Georgian intellectuals were concerned by alleged discrimination of Georgians in the autonomous republics (notably Abkhazia) and the status of Georgian language, overrepresentation of non-Georgians in the political institutions of the autonomous republics. The Armenian intellectuals were predominantly concerned about perceived discrimination policies pursued by Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. The complaints included the destruction of Armenian cultural monuments in Nagorno-Karabakh and petitions to transfer Karabakh to Armenia.

Interestingly enough there were no samizdat documents originating from Azerbaijan, and the autonomies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. One possible explanation is that most complaints were addresses to the central Soviet authorities rather than through samizdat channels.

The second type of sources was made up of the daily reports from the South Caucasus for the period of 1990s. I needed to check the detailed development of events in the union republic and their autonomies in order to establish the cause and effect relation of the decisions leading to the outbreak of violence. The secondary literature that deals with the modern conflicts in the region tend to overlook certain details which are important for the proposed research.

At the OSA I focused on the RFERL research reports, Report on the USSR and The Caucasus and Transcaucasia Media News and Features Digest. I also studied the local regional newspapers available at the archive. Particularly useful were folders related to the situation in Nakhichevan and Ajaria as developments in these two regions are extremely poorly covered in the secondary literature. I also was able to check some facts related to the developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (the precise dates of several legal and political decisions that in secondary literature were mentioned without precise date). Finally I found a fact that contributes to my other article on the creation of the Abkhaz autonomy.

In terms of amount of work done at the archive during my research at the OSA I have studied documents and scanned around 2000 pages from some 45 boxes located in the Funds 300-5-180; 300-80-1; 300-81-5; 300-85-09; 300-85-46; 300-85-48; 301-0-3; 318-0-3.

¹ See excellent work of Victor A. Shnirelman, *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka 2001).

Expected outcome of the research

The research findings will mainly be used to supplement the argumentation of my article on the role of autonomous institutions in the violent conflicts in the Caucasus. I found a large number of documents related to the situation in the three ethnic autonomies in the Caucasus (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia). Particularly valuable and useful are parts dealing with the situation in non-ethnic autonomies of Ajaria and Nakhichevan. Generally, the materials related to these two autonomies are very scarce and largely unavailable (even in terms of OSA holding this discrepancy is quite visible: I was able to find and copy around 50 pages related to these two autonomies while materials related to ethnic autonomies amount to nearly 2000 pages I copied).

The materials of the Open Society Archives related to these two autonomies demonstrate that autonomous institutions assumed different roles in cases of ethnic and non-ethnic autonomies. In the case of ethnic autonomies the following variables were present – there was a history of violent conflict and the mutual perception of the autonomy and the union republic was largely antagonistic. At the time of the disintegration of the USSR the autonomous institutions assumed an interesting dual role. On the one hand, their existence was a source of constant annoyance for nationalist leadership in the Republics and at the same time they served as a tool for national mobilisation.

In the cases of Ajaria and Nakhichevan the conflict-prone variables were absent (no history of previous conflict and no mutual antagonistic perceptions). As a result the role of autonomous institutions was different but in many ways very similar to those in the ethnic autonomies. When the central authority collapsed the autonomous institutions in Ajaria and Nakhichevan assumed a life of their own – both of these republics functioned as independent entities but despite that did not attract violent response from the central authority. Leaders in both Ajaria and Nakhichevan challenged the authority of their host states on numerous occasions by sabotaging presidential elections, conducting independent economic and foreign policy and refusing to pay any taxes to the central authority.

The preliminary conclusions of my research show that, in a situation of transition to independence and collapse of the state authority, the autonomous institutions begin to function as a state institution. The violent or non violent transition is determined by the existence of previous conflict and pre-existing mutual perceptions. The autonomous institutions per se play a secondary role in triggering the violence.