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EUROPEAN CENTRE
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MINORITY ISSUES

Group 4: Real and Imagined Borders that Exist in our Countries

Student summaries submitted for the
Group Work

European centre for Minority Issues (ECMI)
19-29 August 2013

Real and Imagined Borders that Exist in our Countries

Establishment and collapse of two empire-like formations, the USSR and Yugoslavia, had significantly redesigned borders in the regions. Existence of two melting pots of Soviet and Yugoslav people had washed some mental borders away at the same time sharpen others. Please discuss and provide examples of the wide varieties of the borders, existed/established in your societies, focusing not only on the geographical and state borders, but more on ethnic, mental and any other that played important role in formation of your society.

I. CORINA AJDER: Case of Moldova

I spent my Sunday in Flensburg with a good friend who lives here. As Mariana told me she plans to take me to Denmark, pointing to a hill nearby, I recognized the same jokingly tone from the voice of my father during my childhood, pointing out to the other side of the river Prut, saying that Romania starts there. This sense of ludicrous toward the division lines always interested me: how can a country end here and another start five meters further? How come countries don't have clear shaped contours in reality as they do on the maps?

On this pleasant occasion, we crossed a little bridge, at the end of which Mariana and I started laughing: we are in Denmark now! But why were we smiling? In a physical sense, when confronted with the reality of a border, it was easy to recognize such simplistic territorial divisions as pure social constructs, especially in cases when no customs control is there to reinforce them and give them social meaning. Basically, crossing a bridge between Germany and Denmark or from Moldova to Romania is no different from crossing any other bridge on Earth: geographic borders are just a physical manifestation of human psychological dualities; an unsuccessful and amusing attempt to translate to linear, material terms the complex, immaterial and ultimately impossible to materialize content imagined by our minds an elephant in a glass store. In that sense, all borders are prone to make people smile.

Eastern Europe, and in particular Moldova and Ukraine, have been abundant in psychological borders and divisions. Some of them remained immaterial - others took geographic shapes; in all cases, the mental reality of these borders have influenced the region on virtually all areas of social life in the past 25 years.

Psychological borders that took physical shape

Romania-Moldova border

After the fall of the Soviet Union, many expected Moldova and Romania to reunite. This never happened as Moldova continued on its path as an independent state. With Romania's ongoing policy of issuing passports for Moldovan citizens who can prove Romanian ancestry, - and an estimated number of 40% of Moldovans who already received a Romanian passport, the Moldova-Romania border over river Prut is in process of dissolving.

Transnistria

This border is contested by the Moldovan Government and reasserted by the unrecognized separatist region created in the aftermath of the Soviet Union collapse. Inhabited mostly by ethnic Russians, Transnistria now has its own customs zone and political institutions, a flag and an anthem and functions as a de facto separate state.

Gagauzia

Ethnic Gagauz people were granted regional autonomy by Moldova's 1st president Mircea Snegur. The regional authorities co-operate with the Government in virtually all areas and is, insofar, a functional entity integrated within Moldova.

Palanca (Ukraine)

The village of Palanca was the most southern point in Moldova and was de jure ceded to the Ukrainian state under the Border treaty of 2001 in an attempt to complete the demarcation process between the two countries. The sovereignty to that land is still disputed and the new Moldovan Government now claims that the land in Palanca is an alienable part of the territory of Moldova.

Immaterial borders

Russian-Romanian

Tensions between Russian speakers (Russians, Ukrainians, Armenians, a.o.) and Romanians have been common since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In most cases, Romanians blamed Russians who descended from populations settled in Moldova during the Soviet Union for refusing to learn and speak the local language. Pro-Russian communistic authorities (2001-2009) were met with mass pro-Romanian protests, asking for reunification with Romania, public condemnation of deportations and other Soviet crimes against the Romanian majority, etc. Language clashes were common (campaigns for subtitling movies in Romanian in public cinema instead of dubbing movies into Russian; campaigns for taxi services in Romanian; etc)

Moldovan-Romanian

Throughout the Soviet Union, Moldova underwent a period of organized Russification and Moldovenisation - with parts of history related to Moldova as part of Romania excluded or altered. The Romanian language was replaced with Moldovan, a type of Romanian spelled in the Cyrillic alphabet. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Latin alphabet was reintroduced. However, the official legal name of the language was inscribed in the new Constitution as Moldovan. The highly contested name of the official language is still under debate. Due to political charge, many people refer to it as 'the state language', in order to avoid debates about its correct designating name.

Roma-Gadze

Roma are seen by the majority of the population as lazy, uneducated, dirty and dangerous (Calarasi region) OR rich, criminal, eccentric and vain (Soroca). One segregated school for Roma children exists in the north of Moldova, in Otaci. On the other hand, Gadze is a Romani word designating all non-Roma and implies negative connotations.

II. DAVID MATSABERIDZE: Case of Georgia

Establishment and collapse of two empire-like formations, the USSR and Yugoslavia, had significantly redesigned borders in the regions. Existence of two melting pots of Soviet and Yugoslav people: Had washed some mental borders away at the same time sharpen others; Please, discuss and provide examples of the wide varieties of borders, existed/established in your societies, focusing not only on the geographical and state borders, but more on ethnic, mental and any other that played important role in formation of your society;

1. The Georgian case – three autonomous regions: Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Adjara. religious difference can be depicted only between Georgians and Muslim Adjarians, but as they share language and historical memory, thus forming one and the same mnemonic entity, the conflict was absent between them. On the other hand, [South] Ossetians, like majority of Abkhazians, are Orthodox Christians, although they differ from Georgians through ethnicity, language, etc. and were formed as different mnemonic entities, thus there could be driven the “conflict line.” Emergence of Mirroring Nationalisms [S.E. Cornell]. Agencies played a crucial role in fueling ethnic conflicts through manipulation of ethnicity via national movements and ideologies. In the case of Georgia, it is interesting to look at the policies of presidents Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili towards national minorities;

2. Orientation Border-Lines: In the fight among the pro-Western, pro-Russian and pan-Caucasian and/or isolation directions, there is an ongoing painful process of formation of foreign political priorities of Georgia, as well as internal priorities [state-church relations; relations between different ethnic and religious communities] among the political parties and society at large; Democracy building or going back to the strong vertical structure of decision-making (decisions taken by the rulers and followed by the society without any criticism); In this respect one should have in mind:

- Reinvigorated border lines within ethnic Georgians with different religious practices: First of all, Christian Georgians and Muslim Georgians colliding on the issue of conducting their religious practices; A part of political parties point out these differences for gaining political scores, and not in vain, as it was demonstrated during the Parliamentary Elections of 2012;
- State-Church Relations: Georgian Orthodox church periodically becomes active and tries to get influence over and have a say in the political life of the country, mainly in terms of foreign political orientation of the country and in relation with minorities (and not only religious one); Collision between a part of society and participants of demonstration dedicated to the International Day Against Homophobia [May 21, 2013], with participation of the representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church; Some representatives of the Church tried to use the incident against the western orientation of the country and to portray it [the event] as a face of the western society, which was evidently in conflict with the local traditional and national values. This is quite a dangerous precedent, as this fact becomes the subject of manipulation with the foreign policy orientation of the country and in the diverse society in general.
- Pro-Western and moderate foreign policy line supporters – Euro-Atlantic line on the one hand, and the Russian policy line for the solution of the conflicts;

Additional Question(s) for Each Group to Answer:

Q1. What are the positive mechanisms to be used to deal with existing problems (referred and discussed in your presentation)?

Q2. How do you see implementation of those mechanisms, what are the obstacles that prevent from their implementation, how to overcome these obstacles?

III. DORA KOMNENOVIC: Yugoslavia: From Reality to Virtuality and Back

Ever since the violent break-up of the country and the end of its last, «mutilated» version, the name Yugoslavia, combined with numerous prefixes and suffixes, continues to be used and abused by many to indicate all kinds of cooperation and exchange between the countries of the region. In fact, except for a couple of years of fervent nationalism that obstructed a vast number of interactions, the latter continued to flourish. It needs to be said, however, that even in the worst war years brave groups and individuals engaged in inter-republican anti-war and peace activities.

Even if the country ceased to exist as a geo-political reality, there is still a Yugoslav socio-cultural space in which many people consider themselves members of one single community. New state borders have proven to be much more permeable than one could expect: the end of Yugoslavia did not break the links between people in the region; on the contrary, it is possible to speak of a common area, of a «Yugosphere» (Judah 2009). Cultural and linguistic affinity and simple market rules certainly had their share in sewing back broken ties. The phenomenon has not much to do with yugonostalgia, but it is rather a socio-economical occurrence with political implications. The current economic cooperation between former Yugoslav countries is expected to become even tighter, which would include establishing a common airline, railway and stock exchange. Similar examples come from the Visegrad countries (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland), the Benelux Economic Union (Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg), the Nordic Council (Scandinavian countries), or perhaps the cooperation put into place between the Baltic States.

Once (and if) all former Yugoslav republics join the European Union, this cooperation will be facilitated and it is in the best interest of the region itself. The Schengen regime will once again abolish borders in the area. Yugoslav children were thought at school that their country is surrounded with worries (okružena BRIGAMA), a catchy expression indicating the initials of countries bordering with Yugoslavia (Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, Greece, Austria, Hungary, Albania), until the State became a «worry» itself and disintegrated. As a result, previous administrative borders became state borders.

In two years time, the border between Slovenia and Croatia will cease to exist and this will hopefully be the case with other borders as well.

Apart from these more or less realistic considerations, the virtual space of the Web allows many «Yugoslavias» to coexist. These (web) representations of Yugoslavia are unified through a yugonostalgic discourse (Mazzucchelli 2012). Such spaces provide a «meeting place» for retro Yugoslavs, who tend not to notice that Yugoslavia is gone and post-Yugoslavs in search for a cyber version of what used to be a geo-political reality (ibidem). These sites rarely (if ever) mention the war and the trauma that ensued.

In the course of group work and presentations, I hope to address the above mentioned, as well as other issues with my colleagues. In particular, what challenges do disputed Kosovo and «daytonized» Bosnia and Herzegovina pose to future co-operation in the area, how to accommodate memory conflicts in light of European integration, all sorts of «-algias» from a generational perspective etc...

IV. RASHAD SHIRINOV: Case of Azerbaijan

The whole concept of “border” started indeed to be more appealing after Soviet republics became independent.

In Azerbaijan the frontiers appeared as uniting as well as dividing factor. The idea of unification with the Southern Azerbaijan (North of Iran inhabited mostly by Azerbaijanis) has become a first mental “violation” of the traditional borders set by Russian empire and later by Soviet regime. The national-liberation movement at the end of 80-s and beginning of 90-s was focused mainly around several issues: resistance to Russian rule, unification with the south, and conflict with Armenia over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh etc. Many of those issues had to do with borders: physical and mental.

In 1989 some people crossed the border between Soviet Azerbaijan and Iran. Those people also destroyed border posts and claimed new era in unification of Azerbaijan. This provoked major discontent of the Iranian government and Iranian state has put strong efforts to undermine the independence of the newly emerging Azerbaijani state. Hence, Iran’s unanticipated support to Armenia, while many in the world would expect that Iran supported its fellow Muslim nation, Azerbaijan, in this conflict.

The dividing social borders started to also show-up at the verge of Soviet collapse. First of all, claim (and subsequent occupation) of Azerbaijani lands by its neighbor Armenia started a whole series of events and tendencies that shaped solidly the borders of Azerbaijani ethnic identity. Notably, the formation of Azerbaijani identity was some sort of reaction to the conflict with Armenia and Armenians. Baku, once the most cosmopolitan city of the USSR, has found itself in the middle of ethnic dividing lines between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Russians etc. That “Armenians claimed part of our land” was something incomprehensible for most of the Azerbaijanis and the narrative of “unthankful Armenians” started to grow and widen in Azerbaijan. This story was aggravated further by abrupt physical violence on both sides of the ethnic dividing line. Following years were marked by war, ethnic hatred, and miscommunication partially reinforced by the ruling elites. The government propaganda on both sides appeared to be copying each other, repeating similar narratives.

Another border that has emerged was the border between Azerbaijan and Russia. Majority of people in Azerbaijan were in favor of independence and some saw Russia as a colonial power, which has evil plans about Azerbaijan (not necessarily an overstatement). Many saw and continue to see Russia as a force backing up Armenia within the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In the context of Russia, the issue of language seems to be especially noteworthy. During Soviet era Azerbaijani language was held inferior to Russian. Russian was a language of elite and this is still a trend although in a different manner. After independence it was also a sort of revolt of disempowered layers of the society against the Russian-speaking elite. The state and society that was emerging turned out to a nationalistic one and it perhaps could not be otherwise. Also, the emergence of such public constructs as “state” and “politics” required better and qualitatively new communication with masses, hence another need in national language.

Speaking of politics, it is also important to highlight the major new dividing line between ruling party (elite, force) and opposition – a phenomenon unimaginable during Soviet times. The opposition transpires as a fundamentally new category of social and public life after independence, as the whole idea of a social group struggling to attain power (no matter how productively) through institutional mechanisms of democracy was absolutely contradicting to Soviet system.

V. IVANA STANOJEV: Case of Serbia

I was born in Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. We knew of no borders, as we were holders of famous Tito's »Red passport« that allowed people to travel freely and more importantly, we were recognized internationally as a good example of diversity management, at that time. I remember my childhood as a last generation of Tito's pioneer, wearing red scarf and blue hat with a red star. Our anthem was Hey Sloveni that cherished our joint Slavic heritage. In the school we were thought our mother tongue, officially called Serbo-Croatian, and our literature consisted of books with Macedonian, Slovenian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin folk tales, that were developing our sensitivity to multiculturalism. I remember going for summer holidays to Croatia, skiing in Slovenia, and visiting relatives in Bosnia.

Then the times changed. My friend recalls how, just before the outbreak of war, she started hearing elders talking »but they are Croats« or »they are Muslims« in negative connotation, blaming the Other for failures of the federal system and increasing poverty and instability. To her, it was something new, people being defined on national basis, as she grew up identifying herself as a Yugoslav. Together with many people who died for the wrong cause, SFRJ died too. Borders changed, leaving many generations to question why we failed as a state. My new country was called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but the puzzling issue was, who were the Yugoslavs it represented?

FRJ (composed of Serbia and Montenegro) also didn't fit to the needs of political forces that were pulling Serbia towards nationalism. Having »Yugoslavia« in the official name of the state was a constant reminder of wars, losses and political ideology that didn't fit to current agenda. How can we be Yugoslavs, if being Serbian meant being different from Croats or Bosniaks? Finally, decision was made and we became Unity of Serbia and Montenegro. This time border didn't change, but all national symbols together with anthem did, leaving vast space for historical revisionism and additional decaying of the value system.

Once again, history repeated itself in 2006, when Montenegro and Serbia respectively declared their independence, thereby ending the last remnants of the former Yugoslav federation. We became Republic of Serbia, and although with a new name the burden of the past remained. At that point, I already officially changed 4 states, without ever leaving the same apartment where I was born, in Belgrade.

When someone asks me if I identify myself with Serbia I have hard times responding. With border shifts, ideologies have shifted too; who once was our fellow compatriot now became our neighbor, and those who believed in Yugoslavia became traitors. Coming from a family with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, I found myself on the side of the latter. However, high percentage of youth in Serbia thinks differently. Latest research has shown that period of cultural and economic transition from socialist Yugoslavia to half-way-done democratic and capitalistic Serbia, left a trace mostly in generations born between 1980s and 2000. Aggressive nationalism together with historical revisionism, brought the wave of traditionalism as a main value promoted »from the above« and in public through media. Anti-westernization and anti-modernization found it's promoters among youth who, seeing only decline of Yugoslavia, could constitute personal »historical remembrance« only through contents that were represented by nationalistic parties.

However, there are processes that cannot be controlled by political forces - language and cultural heritage, shared traditions and customs among inhabitants of the Balkan. Although physical borders exist, we surpass them on daily level, by being able to understand each other or by having same cultural patterns. Although in the meantime EU enlargement put additional borders between former Yugoslav countries, I can't help but wonder - what borders will we have one day when (and if) the whole region enters EU? We are already linked by the language, history and the fact that we are on the European periphery.

Some people find it hard to imagine even the real borders. Yet, for majority real borders are easier to erase than the mental ones.

VI. IRENA MNATSAKANYAN: Discovering Mental Borders in Armenian Society

Introduction

Armenia is a landlocked country situated in the South Caucasus bordered by Iran, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Due to its mono-ethnicity, Armenia has more conflicts at its external borders rather than inside its society. The massacres of 1915s led Armenia to close its borders with Turkey in 1993. The closure has generated high costs to Armenia, disabling the country of having access to the world market.

In addition the escalation of Nagorno Karabakh ethnic conflict in 1992s posed another barrier between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The only countries through which Armenia could establish a connection with the world market remained Georgia and Iran.

The purpose of the paper is to observe how the collapse of the USSR affected the situation of ethnic minorities: Yezidis and Russians in Armenia. The weight of national minorities in Armenia counts within three percent of the total population. There are about twenty ethnic groups in Armenia: Yezidis, Russians, Greeks, Assyrians, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Kurds, Georgians. Most of those have their own mother states, except the Yezidis, Assyrians and Kurds, which belong to the Iranian language group.

Armenia is the only state in the Caucasus which is almost mono-ethnic. The mono-ethnicity is mainly driven by Karabakh war with Azerbaijan, which led to the deportation of 80,000 Azeris (which represented the largest minority group in Armenia) and 2,500 Muslim Kurds from the country. Another reason was the economic crisis caused by the war, which caused many minorities to emigrate from the country. During 1993-1994 there was a real wave of Assyrian, Russian, Yezidi and Greek emigrants. That trend continues and people generally leave forever. But apart the socio-economic reasons, there are also other barriers which make the minorities leave Armenia, such as language and education.

As the Yezidis and Russians form the largest group of ethnic minorities in Armenia, the paper will mainly focus at the main issues and problems they face in the society today.

After the collapse of Soviet Union Armenia adopted the policy of integration in the International and European structures. The precondition for that is the compliance with the international standards in the sphere of protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The framework Convention⁴ for the Protection of National Minorities signed by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages was adopted by Armenia in 2007. As part of the European Charter in Armenia, Assyrian, Yezidi, Greek, Russian and Kurdish languages gained a status of national minority languages. However since independence (1991) the Armenian language has dominated in all spheres of public life. In most cases the shortage of teachers and the difficulty to purchase the necessary textbooks created obstacles for the minority groups to receive education in their mother languages. Similarly there are very few TV or radio programs in minority languages, except the Russian in few cases.

Yezidis

Yezidis settled in Armenia in the early 1915s. Yezidis are mainly rural and only 8% live in urban areas. Most live in Oktemberian and Echmiadzin provinces and are engaged in cattle-breeding. Levels of education among the Yezidi community is much lower than among the Armenian majority: in 1989 only 1,3% had higher education and over 20% didn't have primary education. There is a little incentive for the Yezidis to study due to the shortages of textbooks and travel costs, as Yezidi villages are located in remote areas. Since the collapse of Soviet Union, the situation of Yezidis worsened. Firstly, the Yezidis have a limited opportunity to participate in policy making and promote their identity. Today there is no parliamentarian representing interests of ethnic minorities in the National Assembly of Armenia, which would allow ethnic minorities to present their problems at the highest legislative level, as well as would facilitate the approval of new laws and their further implementation. Yezidis and other ethnic minorities have such right and it seems that there is no obstacle since Constitution of Armenia provides equal rights. But 97% of country populations are Armenians and it makes the election of ethnic minorities' representatives impossible.

The Soviet regime was ensuring minority quotas and guaranteeing participation in public life to minorities. The Yezidis in Armenia insist on their separate identity based on their distinct religion which includes the elements of sun worship, Christianity and Zoroastrism⁷. The latter has somehow created a social and cultural distance between Armenians and Yezidis. A good example is the absence of mixed marriages between the two communities. Other Yezidi concerns include the absence of registration of ethnicity in the new Armenian passports which produced fears of gradual assimilation. All the mentioned barriers caused the Yezidis to migrate for economic reasons, mainly to Russia and to Germany where Kurdish Diaspora exists.

Russians

Russians are the second minority in Armenia⁸. They consist of two different groups: those in the cities, mainly in Yerevan, many in mixed marriages; and those surviving religious communities of Molokans, a sect within Orthodox Christianity, who entered the Caucasus at the time of religious intolerance in Russia in the 19th century. During the Soviet system the Russian language was used widely in Armenia, and all ethnic minorities except Yezidis and Kurds received Russian education. The total number of Russians living in Armenia in 1989 according to Soviet- wide census was 51, 0009.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Russians living in Armenia faced restrictions of using a Russian language in all spheres of public life. Russian schools were closed and teaching of Russian as a second language diminished, with an expectation that English will be more useful. When Russian schools were closed the Russians started to migrate from Armenia to find the prospects of further development. The largest migration wave was between 1993-1994. According to 2002 census data the number of Russian minorities was reduced to 14660 people.

According to Yuri Yakovenko¹⁰, the member of Coordination Council on National Minorities (Russian Community), the problem with the majority of national minorities living in the Republic of Armenia is that Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Poles are oriented towards Russian, rather than Armenian, culture. As a result, Russians migrating from Armenia are motivated by the fact that it's impossible to get a good Russian education in Armenia. In addition Shavarsh Kocharyan, the member of National Assembly (Parliament) of Armenia noted that the ethnic minorities in Armenia are interested to study Russian rather than their mother tongue. The reason is that the better knowledge of a foreign language will prepare them and their children to easily cope with the new environment.

Conclusion

Although Armenia was able to integrate into several international and European structures, one can notice that after the collapse of Soviet Union the Yezidis and Russians began facing mental barriers in most spheres of public life. It is worth to mention, that the situation of minorities is strongly related to the country`s progress in democratic development and improvement of the human rights situation in Armenia. Although Armenia has ratified the Framework Convention, I think it is still in the embryonic stage of fulfilling its main commitments to the EU (Council). The country should be able not only to agree to the international and European standards on paper, but also insure their effective implementation, that is the protection of the minority rights inside the country.

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