



BRILL

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Book Reviews

Françoise Companjen, László Marác, Lia Versteegh (eds.), *Exploring the Caucasus in the 21st Century: Essays on Culture, History and Politics in a Dynamic Context*, Amsterdam: "Pallas Publications" (Amsterdam University Press), 2010, 254 pp.

This book represents a valiant attempt to present to scholars, students and other interested leaders the kaleidoscopic histories, (political) cultures, ethno-linguistic characteristics and provenances of the diverse peoples and states in both North and South Caucasus. It especially seeks to explain how these aspects account for the persistent authoritarianism, nepotism, and underdevelopment in the region, and for unresolved "(semi-)frozen" conflicts, such as those in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South-Ossetia, with Russia as either one of the warring parties or a decisive supporter of one of the parties.

The editors Françoise Companjen, affiliated to the Free University of Amsterdam, and László Marác and Lia Versteegh, both affiliated to the University of Amsterdam, as well as seven other contributors from Amsterdam and beyond, bring their own expertise to bear on particular peoples, states, topics and events in the Caucasus (such as the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008). They succeed in collectively presenting the richly textured Caucasus. They do so through analyses from multiple, mutually enhancing disciplines and perspectives; these range from ethno-political history (René Does, Marc Jansen), civil society and democracy building (F. Companjen, Max Bader), state(-and-nation) building, conflict resolution, human rights and international law (Charlotte Hille, L. Versteegh, Oliver Reisner) to (often politicised) linguistics, religion and art (L. Marác, Michael Kemper, Eva Navarro Martínez).

However, the book's very attempt to describe and explain the rich cultural and political tapestries of the Caucasus from diverse disciplines and perspectives compounds the problem that a co-edited publication typically faces: how to formulate a common theme to which all contributors adhere, despite their differing specialisms, topical interests and descriptions geared toward either general readers, students, or fellow-scholars. Thus, the book contains advanced yet solitary, self-contained investigations by Marác on the origins of the Hungarian language

through the example of the works by a late 19th-century Hungarian linguist (Chapter 1),¹ by Kemper on the classical Arabic language and script (marginalised by Soviet persecution, but still surviving) in Dagestan (Chapter 3), and by Martínez on conformist and non-conformist art expressions in Armenia and Azerbaijan (Chapter 11).² There are relevant and well-presented but quite “introductory” summaries by Does on the ethno-political histories of the peoples of the Caucasus (Chapter 2), and by Jansen on the recent history of the Russo-Chechen confrontation (Chapter 4), that can be informative only to students and general readers unfamiliar with the region. This multiplicity of contributions is intended to emphasise the complexity of the Caucasus by offering a kaleidoscope of topics and approaches to (the satisfaction of) all audiences. This is fine, if it can attract the interest of scholars and students who until then have paid little or no attention to the region, or so far have studied this or any other region from a single discipline or theoretical approach only. Nevertheless, if the editors have intended to analyse, jointly with all contributors, the Caucasus through a more particular, clear-cut framework, then this eludes me. Or it must be the concepts of *transition* and *transformation* of the region’s countries from communist to post-communist societies, which Françoise Companjen introduces and applies on the Transcaucasus, i.e. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Chapter 5)—concepts that most if not all contributors apply or at least refer to.

¹ Marác clearly supports the Turkic-Mongolian origin-thesis of Hungarian by the Hungarian linguist Gábor Bálint de Szentkatolna (1844-1913), who considered Kabardian (like Adyghe a contested dialect or separate branch of Circassian) a crucial intermediary, as opposed to the Finno-Ugrian origin-thesis supported by most (pro-Austria-Hungarian) linguists at the time and arguably today. Marác also appears to support the contention by Szentkatolna and other Hungarian nationalists that Hungarians are “descendants of the Huns” (pp. 29, 35). Yet, he refrains from explicitly declaring himself an adherent of both propositions.

² Martínez’ analysis of non-conformist versus social-realist art in Soviet and post-Soviet times is insightful, and her account of the painter Javad Mirjavadov (1923-1992) through his widow and fellow-artist Luvob (‘Luba’) Mirjavadova in Baku is intriguing. However, Martínez’ apparent or partial adoption of R. Barthes’ “pure-and-true-art” thesis—quoting Azeri art critic D. Vahabova (proposing that Time and History are “unyielding phenomena”) that “it’s impossible to lie in art, and... an art object... is the most... truthful document of its time” (p. 237) may lead to misunderstandings, as terms like “truth” and “purity” have quite different meanings and connotations in other disciplines. Social scientists may easily read in those terms essentialist, primordialist or Hegelian propositions, and criticise these accordingly. Thus, one may wonder whether the pure-and-true-art thesis overlooks the unavoidable variety of interpretations on any of work of art—and the artist’s motives, subconscious workings and environmental (Zeitgeist) influences.

Unfortunately, Companjen initially somewhat fuddles the distinction between transition and transformation in the Introduction, confusing the reader unfamiliar with the concepts. To abstractly define *transition* as a “passage from one condition to another, without stressing the necessary change even though heading towards a specific goal” (p. 16) seems to clash with the preceding empirical circumscription of transition as one “from a closed, dictatorial society towards an open democratic society with a free market economy” (ibid.): are democratisation and privatisation not the very “necessary changes” that the concept stresses or at least implies? Moreover, to state that *transformation* means “changing from one form to another without alteration of value” (p. 16) makes it indistinguishable from transition as abstractly defined—and clashes with the subsequent observation that transformation “implies an actual and collective normative change” (ibid.). Companjen suggests that transition is too simplistic and optimistic a concept to account for persistent authoritarianism and ethnic strife in the region, and “needs to be adjusted” or replaced by a transformation that requires a “more active participation by the people (“the nation”, civil society)” in the state (p. 20). Yet, the precise differences between transition and transformation still remain obtuse.

Fortunately, Companjen clarifies this transition-transformation muddle in Chapter 5, in which she recapitulates and subsequently attacks the basic presuppositions of Thomas Carothers’ transition paradigm (presuppositions, which Carothers criticises himself³ by showing their non-validity in the three Transcaucasian states: 1) all post-communist and other post-dictatorial countries are moving towards democracy; 2) democratisation unfolds through a “set sequence of stages” (opening, breakthrough, consolidation); 3) elections are of “determinative importance”; 4) structural, i.e. societal factors like political-ethnic, socio-cultural and socio-economic traditions and cleavages are “not major factors” affecting transition or its (un)successful outcome; and 5) democratisation implies and “improves” an already functioning state (p. 112, incl. quotes). In essence, *transformation* reverses the transition paradigm’s fourth assumption, by hypothesising that societal traditions and cleavages are major factors determining and above all hampering (the degree of) democratisation, thereby “problematizing” all the paradigm’s other assumptions. Indeed, these structural features “do play a role in the onset and outcome of the transition process, or after twenty years...

³ See T. Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13/1 (2002): 5-21, esp.6-8 (paradigm’s core assumptions).

Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia would have been more democratic, viable states than they are today” (p. 126). Successful transition plausibly hinges on true transformation, i.e. a fuller sense and realisation of democracy through societal pluralism, i.e. a vibrant civil society, not just the superficial procedures and trappings of democracy through (a set sequence of) electoral, constitutional, and judicial reforms and procedures. Yet, elections in Transcaucasia have never, rarely or insufficiently been free and fair, and the reformed constitutions and laws have never, rarely or insufficiently been honoured in practice—as shown by the systematic violations of the freedom of expression (Article 10, European Convention on Human Rights) in especially Armenia and Azerbaijan (the most autocratic of state in the region) despite their membership of the Council of Europe (and the said Convention), a worrying state of affairs, which Lia Versteegh lucidly describes in Chapter 10. The hampered, and even still-born democratisation (in Azerbaijan under the Aliyevs) is simply and mainly due to the “political clan structure, corruption, and the shadow judicial system (the thieves in law)” that these countries inherited from the Soviet Union (Companjen, p. 124). Still, the nepotism and patrimonialism characterising the confrontational “zero-sum” politics between programmatically and ideologically hollow, elite-(and-clan)-driven parties in government and opposition (as Bader revealingly explains in Chapter 6) are arguably based on ethnicity (see Reisner’s Chapter 7 on the heated if short-lived debate in Georgia during early 1999 on whether to indicate ethnicity on identity cards)⁴, clan and extended-family networks and loyalties that predate the Soviet and even Tsarist eras. In that sense, Soviet nepotism (creating ethnic hierarchies through its territorial-nationality policies: Reisner, pp. 163-64) constitutes just one of the more recent, if highly salient, traditions frustrating transition.

Interestingly, Companjen suggests (pp. 20, 127) that transformation towards truly tolerant, pluralist and democratic societies in the entire Caucasus can occur only through a strengthening of both civil society and the state, not just of civil society against or at the expense of the

⁴ This debate “continued throughout February, but then ended as abruptly as it began at the beginning of March 1999” (p. 160). However, I have not come across any sentence or paragraph in which Reisner unambiguously indicates if and when either the “nationalists” or “cosmopolitans” won the “ID card” debate. Apparently the latter won: “the paragraph about nationality is abolished in Georgian passports and identity cards, and only citizenship is indicated” (M. K. Kobaidze, “Mother tongue and language use in Armenian and Russian Schools in Georgia”, *Working Papers*, vol. 48, 2001: 150).

state as happened in the West (where states had more time to develop and thus absorb and “stomach” democracy and civil groups agitating against their (excessive) powers). Regarding the testy issue of state formation in the Caucasus, Hille intriguingly argues in Chapter 9 that the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia (and Nicaragua) right after the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia have made them legal states, despite their non-recognition from all other states: there “are no rules in international law, which state how many states have to recognize [a state]..., which means that two recognitions are sufficient to speak of a recognized state” (p. 198). This legal fact alone gives a “new impetus for *de facto* entities to aspire *de iure* statehood” (p. 206) — a potentially destabilising development.⁵

Finally, it must be said that the book suffers from some subsidiary drawbacks that constitute a “multiplicity problem”: though chapters 1 to 4 primarily cover the North Caucasus and chapters 5 to 11 the South Caucasus, a discernable logic accounting for the order and connections between the chapters seems lacking – particularly among the first four chapters. Perhaps the general overviews of chapters 2 and 4 by Does and Jansen should have preceded the specialist investigations of chapters 1 and 3 by Marácz and Kemper. Furthermore, Companjen’s description of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war centred in South Ossetia (Chapter 8) seems hastily written, with repetitive and shoddy sub-titles, and paragraphs that seem to peter out in mid-stream, while the reader is left stranded, yearning for elaborations and clarifications of the points or observations being made. Thus, this chapter appears and feels like an early draft; whether this is due to a strict submission-deadline by the publisher, a last-minute requirement to include a chapter on the Russo-Georgian War or any other complication, this is a part of the book that requires some revision and improvement in a new edition. These drawbacks notwithstanding, I recommend this book, especially to those who wish to enhance their knowledge of (and interest in) the Caucasus, and to those scholars who wish to acquaint themselves with topics, approaches and disciplines that have hitherto escaped their attention. In due time, *Exploring the Caucasus in the 21st Century* deserves a new edition,

⁵ Still, the recognition-by-any-number-of-states principle is and has been contested. In common-law practice, the four criteria of the 1933 Montevideo Convention—territory, population, functioning government, and recognition (or rather capacity to form relations with other states)—are augmented by the (near-)jurisprudential proviso that a *significant number* of states must recognise the aspirant state (certainly needed to become member of the UN and other bodies) (see e.g., R. Higgins; R. McCorquodale, *Self-determination in international law*, Ashgate, 2000).

if only because co-edited publications with contributing scholars from different disciplines, rather than those with a multitude of contributions from scholars within the same (sub-)discipline holding a self-centred, myopic discussion, are all too rare.

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