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The Process of Nation Building in Central Asia and its Relationship to Russia's Regional Influence

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The Process of Nation Building in Central Asia and its Relationship to Russia's Regional Influence^{1, 2}

Francesc Serra Massansalvador³

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in late 1991 left us a new world map with significant amount of problems to solve. The most important was the re-design of the international order. The disappearance of a world power was supposed to restore the balance of the global system to a new structure, placing power relations between states such as to allow the maintenance of international security. This new design of the world map affected the whole world, and in the short to medium term both the Western and the Asian powers had to reconsider their role in the world. But in the area that had been the Soviet Union, political and strategic engineering had to work harder, not only to draw new borders, but to define a new set of loyalties, cohesion and patronage in direct contrast with a system already established over the past centuries.

The former Soviet space, and most notably Central Asia, has witnessed the beginning of a process of nation building, which had already occurred in many other parts of the world in the past two centuries. The interest in the process of this region lies in the fact that it happened relatively late, without a previously defined strategy coming from the political and intellectual elites and under adverse conditions (economic crisis, lack of popular enthusiasm or external support). Moreover, in Central Asia there is a lack of nationalist traditions not only in the classical sense which we give to the term in Europe, but also as an identification with any established national group. The nationalities which we know now as established administrations had been set artificially by a Soviet administration, and only partially assumed by the affected populations. The concept of nation as usually defined is barely relevant to the reality of Central Asia in 1991.⁴ In any case, it can hardly be identified with the situation of the region seventy years before, when political events forced to draw not only boundaries between the differences among peoples, but also often boundaries between spoken languages and other cultural features, and in some cases the ethnonyms of the respective groups had to be improvised even. The achievement, *volens nolens*, of new states by the peoples of Central Asia triggered a process that tended to complete the social cohesion of indigenous peoples in the arena of the international system. Nations with a cohesion process, which was not completely finished or defined, were

¹ This article is based on two conference papers: "Nation and Nation-Building in Central Asia", co-presented with Sophia Tipaldou at the Congress *Eurasia in a Shifting Global Context: Building Interdisciplinary Bridges*, held at Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey, on June 19, 2009, and "Rusia y su rol en la historia de Asia central" at the Congress *Retos y desafíos de seguridad en Asia central: el papel de España y de la Unión Europea*, organized by the University of Zaragoza on October 27, 2009.

² The author wishes to thank Charles Sabatos for his very useful help of in the linguistic advise and edition of this article in its final English version.

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⁴ One classical definition is Ernest Renan's spiritual emphasis on the concept that a nation is "a grand solidarity, constituted by the sentiment of sacrifices which one has made and those that one is disposed to make again" (1882), while for Max Weber, a nation is "a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own; hence, a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own" (1922). More recently, Anthony Smith defines the nation as "a human community with its own name which covers a traditional and common myths have a shared history and a common public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all its members" (1986); Benedict Anderson sees it as "an imagined political community -and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (1991), and Rogers Brubaker distinguishes "the Nation as a category of practice, Nationhood as an institutionalized cultural and political form, and Nationness as a contingent event or happening" (1996). None of these definitions, either classic or modern, fully applies to the cases of Central Asia.

converted into full-fledged states, so that the process of administrative consolidation was accomplished (or is still being accomplished) simultaneously with the process of social cohesion, with all the involved difficulties and risks.

How a nation is made

The new states which emerged from the dust raised by the collapse of the USSR correspond to the fifteen first-order status Soviet Socialist Republics recognized as such by the 1977 Soviet Constitution, Article 72, granting them a vague and undefined right of self-determination.⁵ The boundaries of the new states, then, were based on internal boundaries established in different phases during the Soviet period, ranging from historical political boundaries (the case of the Baltic States or Moldova), to traditional ethnographic criteria (in Ukraine, Georgia or Armenia). In a third set of cases, new ethno-linguistic boundaries had been established in territories where there was no traditional Westphalian State or national consciousness, as it had been widely used in Europe between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is the case especially in the republics of Central Asia, as well as among largely ethnic-administrative divisions of the Caucasus and other parts of the USSR. The case of Central Asia is particularly enlightening, as it is an area in which the traditional identities of their populations historically had to adapt to the Soviet government's needs to establish a coherent government according to the idea of the Soviet Revolution giving "a home for every people," often in dramatic ways.

As a matter of fact, at the time of the revolution, Central Asia was a territory still in alignment with the Russian imperial state.⁶ Thus the adaptation to the Soviet state and its social, ethnic and administrative structures occurred from some traditional social and identity assumptions, which were deeply complex and confusing for Bolshevik public servants. The peoples of Central Asia, ruled in recent centuries by the elites of the Turkish-Tatar language, maintained a *de facto* cultural duality, in which Persian remained the usual language among high culture and urban classes, while the Turkish dialects were commonly spoken by peasants and herdsmen of the steppes and the delta. With regard to identity, it did not meet European cultural patterns as we know them. The inhabitants of the region could be identified in different grades as "Muslims", "Turks" or even "Persian" or "Russian", but these categories did not necessarily involve an identification link or any stronger social cohesion than the local affiliation, district, tribal, clan, dialect or even religious brotherhood.⁷

We know the procedure used by the former Soviet administration to adapt the complex identity of the vast revolutionary state to a reality, which was more coherent, manageable and understandable, based on the European system of national identification. From a not always indisputable linguistic divide, human groups were grouped according to the language they supposedly spoke. The spoken languages in most cases had not been a major factor of social cohesion beyond the capacity of communication, i.e. identity axes were not the same as were used in Europe. In many cases, moreover, there was not even a model of linguistic unit or distinction, and often the administration had to create a *koine* from a central, major or prestigious dialect, and

⁵ Cf. BAYEFSKI, A., *Self-Determination in International Law: Quebec and Lessons Learned*, Kowler Law International, The Hague, Netherlands, 2000, p. 47, 402.

⁶ Until the mid-nineteenth century the Russian Empire had not developed a serious interventionist policy towards Central Asia, as a result of a failure of the expansionism of the Czars to Persia. It was not until the 1840s that Russia spanned the Kazakh steppes, in 1865 it established a protectorate over the emirate of Bukhara, in 1866 it abolished the Khanate of Kokand (although resistance remained for ten years) and 1873 it established a protectorate over the Khanate of Khiva. Bukhara and Khiva survived nominally until the revolutionary period, with their own administrations and social elites. In the second half of the nineteenth century many Russians and other Europeans installed themselves in the area, lured by the cultivation of cotton and the incipient industrialization of the Ferghana Valley. However, there was no real coexistence or mutual adaptation between natives and settlers. The latter, in fact, never saw themselves as such, they acted as citizens of Russia, with the rights and feelings associated with it.

⁷ Cf. ROY, O., *La nueva Asia Central o la fabricación de naciones*, Ed. Sequitur, Madrid 1998.

build-up a modern codification for these languages. In many cases, especially in the Northern Caucasus and in Siberia, now-recognized languages had no previously known written form, and speakers, who had not even been aware that their own languages were separated from other groups, saw their neighbors converted now to allophones by administrative decisions. Before the Revolution the only written languages in Central Asia were Russian, Arabic, Persian and Turkish in its Uzbek-Sartian variety, although the use of written language was mostly limited to urban and religious elites.

Under the new decisions of the Commissioner for Nationalities Josef Stalin, the languages spoken in the area were set.⁸ On one hand, the Persian spoken in the traditional centers of culture (Samarkand, Khiva, Bukhara) and in the mountains of Pamir was separated and was called Tajik. The Turkish dialects were separated and grouped into several "new" differentiated languages: Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Azeri, etc. Once they had distinguished and coded the languages of the area, Soviet authorities originated a "national" census, in which people were grouped, in principle, according to their personal identification. To avoid overlap, understanding problems and nuisances, cohesive mechanisms were created. Stalin gave precise instructions to the agents of the census of 1924 to reflect the national groups as it should be for the proper functioning of the administration, not by the will of the timid registered citizens, often unfamiliar with their own national groups. Confused or dangerous identity groups, such as Cossacks, Meskhetians or Sartians, were systematically eliminated, and in case of doubt or confusion the individual was attributed to his or her census group by the language he or she had held (or had been given). Once the census had been prepared, and therefore a "national" map of the population created, it was easy to create administrative units in the form of Soviet Socialist Republics, Soviet Socialist Autonomous Republics, autonomous *oblasts* or national *okrugs*. Each of these national identities took shape, and had a new political elite with its mission, among others, the promotion and consolidation of national consciousness within the larger revolutionary project of the USSR.

Thus arises a national identification phase of the peoples of Central Asia in defining the national groups (*natsionalnost'*) from academic and political criteria that overlap with the traditional feelings of cohesion and identification. In a process that would last two decades, Central Asian peoples saw their national reality redefined again and again.⁹ New groups and new administrative institutions were accepted where none had existed, new contradictory criteria of "new cultures", now an instrument of government were created, and borders were capriciously redrawn.¹⁰ Of course, this process could not occur without profound social changes (collectivization/nationalization of land, forced sedentarization of nomadic peoples, the physical removal of bourgeois and religious elites...) or serious resistance from the population. Among these resistance groups we find guerrillas known as *Basmachi*, who would resist the new political order for decades. These "new" forms of national consciousness were built on the popular identification, yet avoiding popular forms of socio-economic cohesion and leadership, or religious traditions. At the same time, they tended to take new values in the socialist political reality, like a new vision of inter-ethnic relations, the generalization of the new national

⁸ It is worth recalling that according to Stalin, a nation "is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture" (1913).

⁹ The most famous and emblematic case is probably that of the alphabets. When modernly codified, these local languages were written in the Arabic alphabet, most used traditionally. In the twenties, following the example of Turkey, the Turkic languages adopted the Latin alphabet. However, in the thirties, under direct command of Stalin, the relevant language schools were forced to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet in their written form. In the 1990s, the reversal of this process began, with the gradual (and extremely difficult) re-adoption of the Latin alphabet for the Turkic languages, and the Arabic alphabet for Tajik. See Roy, O., *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Thus, the Fergana Valley, the demographic, economic and historic heart of Central Asia, was (and still is) divided into labyrinthine borders between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with criteria that are still under discussion. To the Tajiks is incomprehensible why great historical cities like Samarkand, at that time with a Persian-speaking majority, were outside their borders.

languages in education and the press, and the creation of a new political and social leadership, as well as, of course, a shared final cohesion and a common loyalty to the Soviet Union.

But most remarkable was the emergence of a new political elite under the umbrella of the Communist Party and the new administration. This new ruling class sought to perpetuate identity-based administrations “virtually” created by the Soviet policy’s engineering laboratories. The new leaders would be the mainstay of these brand new “national” consciences, with a high content of Marxist rhetoric, where historiography was created to justify the new situation of Soviet peripheral power. The consolidation of this identity-based power would create cohesive loyalties to the new political structures and towards the new “socialist” projects, supposedly shared by the populations of each administration, until with time separate identities were created as if drawn with a ruler.

Towards the end of the Soviet period in the eighties, that “national” consciousness had already taken the shape of a new political consciousness, a part of the Soviet project and reality. Central Asian societies had developed a sense of belonging to the government and its symbols, despite their relative novelty, the overwhelming weight of political rhetoric in these identities, and some contradictions, such as the existence of minorities “within the minority” (Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, Tajiks in Uzbekistan, as well as minority peoples such as the Karakalpak, the Dungans, etc. ...). The existence of the Soviet Union allowed for a certain illusion of coexistence and acceptance of the “local” identity in a larger framework that ensured cohesion and convergence of shared interests of the Soviet peoples, in a kind of dual identity in which, officially, the collective project of each of the villages (*natsionalnost*) was secured by a senior project, common to the Soviet state (*Natsia*), with a strong ideological or at least ideologized content. The identities of central Asia and other parts of the USSR were strengthened in parallel and in complementarity with the *homo sovieticus*, consciousness of belonging to a higher collective identity. When in the late eighties, the national-identity factor emerged as the driving force of change in a decaying Soviet Union, this process did not thrive as assertively in Central Asia as was experienced in other republics of the Union.¹¹ The collapse of the USSR was due to a complex web of internal and external causes, but certainly nationalism in Central Asia is not counted as one of the determining factors.

The second nation-building process: the justification of the State

When the Soviet republics of central Asia were unexpectedly turned into sovereign states, it was the beginning of what we could qualify as a second phase in the process of nation-building in the region. This process and this stage should have adapted those countries to the new situation by correcting a basic aspect of their national structures as they were consolidated. If Central Asian identities were produced throughout the twentieth century as part of the Soviet Union and in harmony with the superstructure, the new situation required a new consolidation of these identities as opposed to the old political power, and in rivalry with neighboring identities.

One of the essential features of the transition produced in the former Soviet republics is the absence of a genuine elite relay. With the exception of the Baltic republics and (temporarily) of Georgia, former local leaders of the Communist Party remained in power and took charge of bringing the new states to their sovereign status and transition to the free market.¹² This is a ruling

¹¹ There were indeed some episodes of violent identity claims, as the riots in Alma-Ata in 1986, but they should be interpreted more in key policy areas internal struggle for power, or even inter-ethnic rivalries, that genuine national claims. In any case, the claims are far less demanding than those from Baltic nationalists and secessionists, or even the movements in Ukraine or the Caucasus.

¹² A rather relative exception was the case of Tajikistan. The President Rahmon Nabyev resigned in August 1992 by the turmoil unleashed in the country after independence and was replaced by the Speaker of Parliament, Emomali Rahmon (then called Emomali Rahmonov), also an *apparatchnik* from the CPSU. In all other cases, the leaders who proclaimed the independence in 1991 have remained in office for a long time: the Turkmen Saparmurat Niyazov until

class used to respond primarily to the political center of the party, very inexperienced in democratic policies and attitudes, but accustomed to democratic populist rhetoric of social content, and largely subject to the dynamics of corruption and patronage. The result is not surprising, if logically derived to continuity in practice, but at the same time there is a need to seek new ideological resources. Given the ill prestige of the former communist rhetoric and the need to justify the maintenance of power with a renewed speech, the appeal to nationalism is almost mandatory, even for a political class that had openly scorned all activity suspicious of nationalism, including local traditions.

The search for symbols and national contents took place in a hasty and somewhat inconsistent rush. With the rare exception of Kyrgyzstan and during the early stage of Tajikistan, the new republics rejected the Soviet and Communist symbolic paraphernalia and replaced it by a proper historiography based on a review process. The national myths are no longer based on "heroes of the people" or "victories over reactionism", but on legendary or semi-legendary origins of the nation and great victories not over oppressors, but against invaders or, if the opportunity arose, over the invaded. Throughout the region, the statues of Lenin and Stalin are superseded by Genghis Khan or Tamerlane (whose glorious role in Central Asia was historically, at least, debatable) or (this would be a crucial feature), by portraits of the ruling leaders.

Local elites, who had shortly before been provincial leaders, and had now become symbols of nations that were struggling to gain respect, developed a strong cult of personality underlying (and supported by) authoritarian regimes. The vacuum left by communist ideology and Soviet loyalty, both in rapid retreat, was filled by the cult of the fatherland, and yet this lacked recognizable or cohesive elements, their political representatives. The speech of these same leaders, previously filled with social commitment and loyalty to the Soviet Union, became, *mutatis mutandis*, an aggressive rhetoric defending the state's role in the world and the duty of its leaders to defend that role. Even the more restrained leaders, such as Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, eventually yielded to those authoritarian and personal temptations.¹³ Central Asia would not come to develop a full Western-style democracy; at the same time, the region would leave behind all the ideological rhetoric of the Soviet period, which would result in regimes that did not pose any real political resources for popular participation in power, not even maintain an ideological discourse to support it. The authoritarian regimes of Central Asia supported a growing nationalism that was fed from the power structures and became the ideological backbone of the new government. The ideological drift of the attitude of political elites is explained by the need for a rallying speech to societies which lack cohesive references.¹⁴

his death in 2006 and Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akayev until the "Tulip Revolution" of 2005, while Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov and Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazabayev have retained their presidencies to the present. In Azerbaijan, the elected president Abulfaz Elçibay was deposed in 1993 by former Soviet leader Heydar Aliyev, who was succeeded by his own son Ilham in 2003.

¹³ Nazarbayev was, in fact, among the most moderate leaders of the USSR peripherals toward its dissolution. A supporter of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, his was the only republic with Russia not to declare independence until the dissolution of the Union was inevitable. Still, for a while Nazarbayev defended the Eurasian thesis proposing the establishment of strong institutions to unite the former Soviet republics, and in domestic politics was at first conciliatory and tolerant. Later, however, he would join the populist and dictatorial tendencies of the region.

¹⁴ In Ernest Gellner's last academic exercise before he died, a debate with his former student Anthony Smith, he brilliantly reflected the adoption process of nationalism by elites:

They are members of ephemeral professional bureaucracies which are not deeply internalised and which are temporary. They are members of increasingly loose family associations. What really matters is their incorporation and their mastery of high culture; I mean a literate codified culture which permits context-free communication. Their membership of such a community and their acceptability in it, that is a nation. It is the consequence of the mobility and anonymity of modern society and of the semantic non-physical nature of work that mastery of such culture and acceptability in it is the most valuable possession a man has. It is a precondition of all other privileges and participation. This automatically makes him into a nationalist because if there is non-congruence between the culture in which he is operating and the culture of the surrounding economic, political and educational bureaucracies, then he is in trouble. He and his off-spring are exposed to sustained humiliation. Moreover, the maintenance of

The adoption process also involved a sovereign entity, of course, through the dynamics of regional rivalry. This has taken place especially among the "greats" of the region, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which have struggled to maintain a leading role in it, without either of them clearly holding this leadership. This rivalry will have dramatic consequences for the region, as it will cause difficulties for necessary regional collaboration. The lack of common policies or any kind of cooperation makes it more difficult, for instance, to monitor common guidelines in the processes of national reconstruction in these countries.¹⁵ Even more serious is the lack of border cooperation; the rivalries among neighboring countries have led to suspicions on security issues, to the mutual accusations of harboring subversive elements (in the passage between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, for instance) which has led to frequent border closures and a restrictive visa policy. Another serious problem arising from this rivalry is the lack of an essential cooperation in urban, environmental and transport policies in the Fergana Valley, with unpredictable consequences for their populations.

But we could point out a more pressing issue of this rivalry and the process of nation-building in the region, as in the case of minorities. The complex and sometimes bizarre drawing of borders in Central Asia left large populations outside of the republics "assigned" to their own national group. Although during the Soviet period this situation tended to be "corrected" by assimilation or migration, since time of independence we still find more than five million Uzbeks in the neighboring republics, more than three million Tajiks and nearly one million Kazakh only in Uzbekistan, to name just the major cross-border minorities. The dynamics of national cohesion of the political process followed in these countries after independence led such minorities towards an uncomfortable situation. Under the Soviet Union, the common state and assignment by nationality led to a life more or less accepted, in which ethnic groups broadly maintained their structure, cohesion and loyalty, regardless of their geographical location. In the new political situation, minorities have become an *allogeneic* element of dubious allegiance to the new States, a situation aggravated, of course, as a result of the regional rivalries mentioned above. The internal and regional instability have fueled distrust of minorities, whose loyalty is questioned *per se*. The elements of political opposition, members of Islamist and social movements, and even participants in armed groups (in the case of Islamic-rooted terrorism or some factions during the Tajik civil war of 1992-97) are often accused of being "foreign" and "traitors," if they maintain a link to these minorities. As a result, both have accelerated assimilation into the dominant nationalities and migration to the "adequate State", so that states tend toward national homogeneity and, therefore, the increasing marginalization of minorities.

The role of the new nations in the world: national identity and identification with the regional power.

If the building of the nation, as we have seen, means the creation of a collective consciousness, it also necessarily bears the identification of relationships with the *other* in terms of cooperation, but also of hierarchy. This aspect was not included in the first phase of nation building in Central Asia in the Soviet era: the people supposedly lived in harmony without distinction or rivalry. However, in practice there did exist clear relations of power, favored nations and punished

the kind of high culture, the kind of medium in which society operates, is politically precarious and expensive. It is linked to the state as a protector and usually the financier or at the very least the quality controller of the educational process which makes people members of this kind of culture.

(In Gellner, E., & A. D. Smith., "The nation: real or imagined?: The Warwick Debates on Nationalism." *Nations and Nationalism* 2, no. 3 (1996). p. 367-368.)

¹⁵ An example is the reinstatement of the Latin alphabet or coding of the languages of the region. Despite the efforts sponsored by Turkish political and academic authorities, lack of understanding between the countries led to the adoption of mutually incompatible grammars and transcripts, which may hamper future understanding and cooperation between the peoples of the region.

nations. Of course, the Russian nation was the cohesive element of the amalgam in a virtually-institutionalized way.¹⁶ During the phase that started with independence, this uniform element disappeared, so that each State established a new relationship with the others. I have noted above the impact this will have on the state's relations with minorities across borders. But it has also implications in determining the relationship of each country, and the region as a whole, with regional powers.

Following Central Asia's accession to sovereignty, several neighboring states pursued decisive influence in the region. The best known and more determinant case is Turkey, which during the early and mid-nineties was experiencing a time of economic expansion and a certain political adventurism. Turkey offered an undeniable attraction to Central Asia; not only did it have common cultural ties, but there was a strong tradition linking the two regions in many historic political projects. Moreover, the Turkish political model was ideal for the new republics: a limited democracy with a strong presidential mandate, where the Islamic religion had a minor role in institutional policy, unlike other Muslim countries. Turkish authorities and companies were not the only ones interested in the region: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and even Japan were prospecting for investment and influence in Central Asia. But it was the Turkish influence that drew more attention to the new/old ruling class with the potential to assist in the process of (re)nation-building.

However, the trends to look for new influences were basically dynamics to reduce the real influence of the effective power in the region, Russia. The Soviet implosion led to the solution of creating an international organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which should have enabled the combination of independence flows with the will or the perceived need to maintain links between the former Soviet republics. The Pushcha Belovezhkaya and Alma-Ata treaties of December 1991 provide for the establishment of the CIS as a way of continuity of the USSR for political and administrative essential dynamics. However, the CIS failed to maintain the cohesion of the Union; no common currency or common parliament, or common customs will be created, as were planned. One of the main reasons for this failure is the opposition between several of the new republics, mainly Russia and Ukraine. In fact, the attempt, promoted by the Kremlin, to maintain the cohesive historical space of the USSR (and of Czarist Russia) collided head-on with the centrifugal dynamics of the new states: When stimulating a distinct identity, one cannot simultaneously promote new links with the basic reference of the old identity. The new/old ruling classes wanted to consolidate their area of internal and external influence based on their disassociation with any other symbol of power, so they created a nationalist symbolism and historiography that foster the native identity and minimize and even deny cultural aspects shared with other states.¹⁷

As noted above, the Russian presence in the region is relatively recent and has remained stable for a century and a half, half of this period under Soviet rule, representing a major influence for the modernization and cohesion of societies in Central Asia, which were subject to a very strong European cultural influence through the Russian presence, both administrative and human. The rejection of the culture of the ancient metropolis, inherent in any process of nation building, in this case involves a search for both symbolic and practical elements that could substitute those representing Russian culture, but are already part of the cultural complex of Central Asian societies. One of the key elements of the nation-building process is the role of the official languages. The language of the titular nationalities became the preferred instrument of communication of new institutions and, indeed, the only official language in most former Soviet republics. In Central Asia, only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan kept Russian as an official language,

¹⁶ Hélène Carrère d'Encausse remains the essential reference for the study of relations between peoples in the USSR, especially *L'empire éclaté* (Paris, Flammarion 1978), *La Gloire des Nations ou la fin de l'empire soviétique* (Paris, Fayard 1990) and *L'empire d'Eurasie. Une histoire de la Russie de 1552 à nos jours* (Paris, Fayard 2005).

¹⁷ The distance of the Central Asian political elites towards Russia is well explained and documented in Djalili, M. & Kellner, T, *La nueva Asia Central. Realidades y desafíos*. Ediciones Bellaterra, Barcelona, 2003, among other sources.

although always in a position institutionally lower than that of the "national" tongue.¹⁸ However, these political provisions have little practical effect, since the Russian language remains a primary tool in the press, inter-ethnic communication, technology, high culture and even in the administration and in education. This has led to a fictitious situation where the official reality (the administration favors the native language as a means of the expression of the state and the nation) collides with the obvious social reality that the Russian language remains in current use even among the non-Russian population in most urban centers in central Asia.

Another dramatic aspect from the human standpoint is that the European communities in the region have experienced an exodus of important dimensions. In 1989 there were about ten million Russians in Central Asia, around 20% of the total population. In Kazakhstan and Tashkent they had come to constitute the largest minority, although in the late eighties it was clear that they could not compete with the high birth rate of Asian peoples. At the end of the twentieth century, the Russian population of the region had been reduced to seven and a half million, 12% of the total. In Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, Russian communities had been reduced to a residual presence. This is mainly due to the large drain of technical and intellectual professionals, but also an economic migration among populations which realize not only an increasingly economic serious situation in the new republics, but also the loss of potential opportunities in a political dynamic that favors the native. To the Russian exodus we must add the proportionately greater exodus of Ukrainians, Poles and Jews, as well as the mass flight of the Volga Germans, forcibly deported by Stalin in 1944, who used to amount to one million people in Kazakhstan alone. In total, the European populations of Central Asia have been reduced by more than five million people since the collapse of the USSR. This human blood-letting continues to drastically shape the economic and cultural development of Central Asia.

In regard to geostrategic issues, Central Asia has experienced a confusing dynamic between the centripetal tendencies towards Moscow, and the centrifugal ones that seek to build a distance from the former political center. The first case includes not only the obvious and declared interests of the Kremlin, but also a strong trend among the Central Asian politicians and cultural elites to identify themselves with Russia and Russian. In the second case, the dynamics of nation building enhance the development of an identity as far away as possible from the Russian. The nationalist rhetoric of the new States not only enhances the detachment of the "colonial" Russian references, but will seek new alliances with Asian powers to assist in the establishment of a separate international identity. However, the relationship with Russia prevails, and not only by the will of large segments of society, or through the influence of the old metropolis, which was actually very weak in this period. Rather, Russia's power is recognized by the international community, and it was granted *de facto* an immediate regional sphere of influence in the space that had occupied the USSR. This space, which is a national reference for the collective mind of Russian society (and, although depending on highly variable parameters, for the rest of the societies of the former Soviet Union) is an inalienable territory in the exercise of Russia as a power, one reason why other powers have generally respected the extreme sensitivity of Russia to its ability to exert influence in this area.

Although the CIS in terms of organization can be considered a useless instrument for the exercise of such influence, Russia has maintained a presence in many different ways, from the armed coercion ("peace-keeping" troops in the Tajik conflict) to the political conditions in the treaties of free movement and trade policies. From the international point of view, this attitude has been supported, as we have seen, by the great powers, which see Russia as a necessary ally whose immediate regional interests should be respected. In fact, the political influence of Russia

¹⁸ Outside Russia and Central Asia, Russia holds its status as an official language only in Belarus, and only since 1994. However, it should be noted that this language recognition has been oscillating in Moldova depending on the government in power, and Russian is the official language in Ukraine's Crimea region, in addition to the self-proclaimed independent republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moreover, Russian remains the language of habitual use and prestige throughout the CIS.

in Central Asia received strong backing after the attacks of 9/11, when the Bush administration chose to strengthen ties with Russia, and foster Russian ties with Central Asia to build up a more effective collaboration in the new fight against global terrorism.

Given this geopolitical situation, the Central Asian states have not had many options. Despite maintaining authoritarian policies and a nationalist rhetoric that sometimes bordered on the delirious, they remained in a strategic alliance with Russia until the mid-2000s.¹⁹ Since the mandate of Putin (2000-2008), Russian influence has been exercised primarily in the energy sector, with preferential agreements for Russian companies operating on the territory of Central Asia, and with prices often set by Moscow.

However, in the last two years we have been witnessing evidences of a possible turnaround in the search for international partnerships in the energy sector. Until then, Russia had managed to thwart the attempts of European powers to extend their supply lines from Baku energy, above the Caspian Sea, to central Asia. The withdrawal of Kazakhstan in 2000 from the proposed BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) pipeline and the Turkmenbashi agreement signed in 2006 between Russia, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are to prevent an energy alliance between European countries and Central Asia due to pressures from Moscow, an alliance that would seriously damage Russia's interests in both areas. But the Russian economy has shown clear signs of weakness recently, partly due to its excessive dependence on exports of hydrocarbons. Between 2008 and 2009 there have been several episodes of tension between Russian companies with strong ties to the Kremlin administration, and the governments of Central Asia, which demand respect for their previous commitments in terms of fuel price increases, or quantities to be extracted. As a result, authorities in the region have shown a growing interest in direct contact with customers in Western Europe to sell gas and oil without Russian control. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in particular have expressed interest in participating in the *Nabucco* gas pipeline and other European-led energy projects.

Which consequences do these movements potentially have? At the geostrategic level, it is difficult to predict, but certainly from now on, it will cost Russia more to maintain its influence in central Asia than in the past. In the area of identity, the tendency to move away from the Russian cultural model can be replaced by an approach to Western values, and especially to the Turkish model, following somehow the Azerbaijani path.²⁰ But in the field of domestic politics, any significant change is doubtful, since the Western powers are unlikely to promote democracy in Central Asia any more than Russia itself, as evidenced e.g. in the Azerbaijan case.

After a long period of politically controlled national formation, and a sudden access to independence which postponed any transition, the nations of central Asia have not yet fully defined their national consciousness and identity values. New geo-strategic developments led by authoritarian political elites can reshape this nation-building process again to bring these countries in line with other political and cultural models. At a time when Russia is restoring the foundations of its own growth and influence, its periphery, both in the Caucasus and Central Asia, appears to reconsider its geostrategic location. The European Union and, especially, Turkey, offer striking models for a region that seems constantly in search of their referents. At the same time, Central Asia can offer an exciting area of strategic expansion and energy supply to Europe. Yet, much will depend on Russia's relations with Europe and the rest of the world.

¹⁹ Thus, the ineffable President of Turkmenistan S. Niazov (*Turkmenbashi*), who came to expel the ministers who did not speak Turkmen well, announced in 2005 that his country would participate in the CIS only under observer status. For its part, Uzbekistan was for a while a member of the group of GUAM countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova), reluctant to accept Russian excessive power within the CIS space. All these movements, generally rhetorical, did not obscure a strong collaboration of these countries with Russia in all fields.

²⁰ Azerbaijan, suspicious of Russia's tacit support for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, has developed a policy of close cooperation with Turkey and the European Union which has enabled European pipelines to reach the Caspian Sea. Within the CIS, unlike the other Turkic countries, Azerbaijan has distanced itself politically from Russia.

In conclusion, we can say that the process of nation-building in Central Asia has been modeled by multiple pressures – internal and especially external - and its renewal process is not only constant, but has not yet completed a clearly defined project. The peoples of central Asia remain under authoritarian regimes and are structurally dependent, so a social or cultural movement to help support a new national cohesion is unlikely. Meanwhile, government policies will remain aimed at strengthening the societies around the established power, thus strengthening artificially constructed identity ties, but this doesn't make them necessarily distinct from other nations. Simply, they are going through this later than the rest of the world, and amidst political and social conditions that are far from ideal for building identities that are worthy of pride for future generations, which might be the goal of any real nation-building process. At a time of great change for this traditionally turbulent region, their national models can probably still be redefined according to the needs of their elites. The coming years will undoubtedly bring us a new image of central Asia. One can only hope that this time that image will be the one actually needed by their populations.

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