

UDK: 32(574/575)

COBISS: 1.08

## Contemporary post Soviet Central Asia. Tradition and globalization.

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### Abstract

Politics in Central Asia proves that some aspects of the so-called »globalization paradox«: a trend to homogenization is in contradiction with fragmentation processes, which at the contrary represent local and traditional forms. These constraints sketch a unitary politics; the international community exerts a concentric pressure on locale elite's: whatever credit, economic operation and investment require the fulfillment of an international standard, in political, environmental and cultural terms. Other variables are dealt within the same context; they derive from other dimensions and could be defined as »internal«; in fact they derive from cultural processes, which for decades were repressed by the Soviet law. These acts, as *independent variables with respect to external constraints and assume the form of social mechanisms and motivations*; among these variables are revival of tribalism, the new role of religion, not just Islam, but also other traditional religions, and several social processes. Therefore post-soviet elites have to face diverse pressures, from »above« and from »below«, from »outside« and »inside«. Therefore, governmental behavior appear in some extents incoherent and incompatible with long term policies, i.e. development strategies. In some cases these tensions emerge from the political control and could induce conflicts and authoritarian involution of the elites.

**Keywords:** political geography, post-Soviet transition, NGO, transition, political structures, civil society, Russia, Central Asia

## **Introduction: the transition scenario**

On its Asiatic frontier, the post-soviet transition creates a new category of states: these are the »ex-states«, actually states which assume a new face, but maintain characteristics and structures of the past, often incongruent with the present political and international status. Scientific literature and political/geographical literature refer to these states with the initials FSR, that is »former soviet republics«, or NIS, »new independent states«, or even »post Soviet Central Asia« and so on. This kind of classification implies a principle of order, which was destroyed after the end of the competition between the two blocks. The fall of the Soviet - so called - Empire produced a complex situation; on the periphery a vacuum is emerging, which is, particularly, a political, economic and cultural vacuum. New governments have not yet assumed a definite role, this is why they do not represent »states« but »ex-states«.

## **The “divide et impera” politics**

The Central-Asian frontiers overlap the previous Soviet borders, which were drawn, in the twenties and in the thirties, along ethno-tribal lines. Therefore each post Soviet state corresponds to a majority language, ethnic group and religion. But these lines were rather an instrument of »nation building« policies, so that the »national« significance of these lines is questionable. The internal homogeneity is more apparent than real. Also the structural and infra-structural condition shows a confused character: flows of persons and goods, regional organizations and industrial cycles overlap and reflect the previous inter-state network. Now, in fact, the republics are obliged to cooperate for the common management of resources and supplies, such as water, agriculture, hydrocarbons and energy. This is a consequence of the Soviet »divide et impera«, »divide and rule« politics.

## **From the internal point of view**

The new states have to rebuild their internal structure, in terms of economic and supplies facilities, and furthermore in terms of policies, procedures and ideologies. The new national elites try to construct a system of symbols,

rituals and ideals which should represent and make evident a new national conscience, that is a new relationship between people and territory. The political program lists the conditions for state autonomy, including compactness, self-sufficiency and development. But the reality of the first ten years of independent life shows different evolution and development paths; the five post soviet Central-Asian states (Kazak-, Kyrgyz-, Uzbek-, Tajik- and Turkmenistan), although starting from a similar background, follow different and contradictory itineraries. These differences are evident particularly in the internal political scenario. The efforts at state building imply different and contrasting processes: pluralistic disclosure versus concentration of power, liberalization versus despotic involution characterize the political landscape of Central Asia.

### **The pretext of “transition”**

The steps to development have been contradictory; stagnation characterizes all the economies, making more difficult administrative structuration - or destructuration - processes, as well as reform policies. In some cases these processes seem to degenerate, producing instability, impoverishment and social unrest. Often the failures of the government are justified by »transition« motivations; the society and the economy are in a condition of »transition«, and this appear to be the major cause of every problem. Actually state reconstruction is far from being completed and this motivation seems to become a slogan or a pretext for every critical situation and general regression in every field of production and civil life. Different actors are playing in this »game«; each acts on the basis of their own ideology and interest. Of particular importance is the case of external actors, such as multinational companies, NGOs and other institutions of the international community, whose programs and assumptions do not always coincide with the local cultural background.

### **Multinational companies**

Evidently the integration in the international market implies and encourage the activities of multinational companies. These activities are based on ideology of free market and liberalization; but private companies do not have, among their objectives, democratic development but, as is obvious, the obtainment of a profit.

## Non Governmental Organizations

The activities of NGOs could be in contrast or complementary with governmental and corporate behavior; in fact these organizations have no profit objectives, neither in political nor in economic sense. The typical motivations of NGOs are humanitarian or cooperation character, but nevertheless they have a implicit - and sometimes dissimulated - political and economic character. In fact these organizations outline a definite strategy, which is founded on the principles of »interaction«, pacifism and search of dialogue. This is evident especially in some crisis area, but is latent everywhere in the »outside world« of the industrial civilization - namely, outside the West and the North, represented by developed countries. The presence of NGOs in Central Asia is massive: Aga Khan Foundation, Médecins sans Frontiers, emergency and other assistance organizations are present in war areas like in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and in refugees camps, which are spread out everywhere in Central Asia. Of the same character is the policy of international agencies, like UN and OSCE which, although they have public status, act as independent actors; their behavior is not connected with the »national interest« of the states, who they represent and from whom they get financing.

The behavior of these organizations, as well as of multinational corporations, refers to the same complex of values and motivations which are the founding assumptions of the international community. These principles are represented by, among other sources, different »charts« and »declarations«, which are adopted periodically. The intervention of NGOs assume further theories, in a certain sense, cultural and ideological assumptions, not explicitly listed by the conventions. Specifically humanitarian intervention assumes the same principle of integration as a tool to mitigate causes and effects of instability; intervention consists in material supplies, children and medical assistance, interposition among fighting groups and in support of persecuted persons. In other circumstances humanitarian action consists of the distribution of food or other goods or facilities, with which these organizations try to calm the panic induced by scarcity or famine.

In the same manner, through and during these operations, organizations and agencies want to spread a message; just the presence of »blue helmets« or other international personnel, with white uniforms and with white motor vehicles - the color of peace - has a evident significance on the battlefields. This presence wants to solve some critical situation and to communicate a pacific behavior, an ideology of peace and abundance; the tactic to »inundate« bat-

tlefields with food, goods and services, or to keep, simply, a peacefully behavior. The assistance to refugees and then the resettlement of »displaced persons«, that is taking those back home who lost their home and property because of war, are the final steps of the operations. The case of Tajikistan is particularly significant; political, private or public organizations work on a project of »conflict management« which represents also an effort of humanitarian strategies.

In this sense the NGOs programs represent a way of thinking and for this reason, inevitably, they represent the vanguards of official politics. This policy tries to recuperate - or to persuade - those who stay outside the »el dorado« outlined by the globalization processes; in this group there are guerrillas, refugees, the poor and illiterate. This strategy implies direct contact with the populations and therefore could assume a subversive significance: NGOs could bypass local governments, toward whom they do not demonstrate - and they should not demonstrate institutionally - any subjugation. In these cases humanitarian action becomes critical and could be obstructed by local elite; in fact, solving a famine condition or pacifying a war area, these organizations could deprive those elites - often despotic oligarchy - a instrument of rule, namely, the threat of misery and hunger.

## Further international actors

The role of multinational corporations and NGOs should not be confused immediately with institutional politics. But often the role of governments is just filtered by these institutions, with whom they share the same assumptions and ideologies. Indeed governments are indirectly represented by these organizations; this to avoid official intervention being perceived as an imposition by local elites and populations. Other institutions are also operating in this scenario; they are economic and financial institutions, like the IMF - the International Monetary Fund or the IBDR - the International Bank for Development and Reconstruction, and further agencies of international organizations.

The importance of the role of auditing agencies and corporations, which extend their activities from the accounting to the social, ethical and environmental auditing is increasing. This kind of audit regards various standards of certification, like children's work, discrimination against women, discrimination against racial minorities, health standards, and the certification of environmental and ecological circumstances.

## **Different actions towards the same standard**

The action of all these institutions outlines a unique scenario; the objectives are apparently different but the interventions assume similar methods and principles, namely, the same pluralistic culture, openness towards international flows and communications, and the participation of »insiders« in development programs. These assumptions consist in the same principle of the »open society«, a principle which has been assumed as a strategic tool for the development of post Soviet states, as well as for other »transition« states or developing countries.

This vision is inspired by rationalistic principles: the diffusion of the democratic process should make the integration of the local society in its largest context, on a parity basis, possible. The instruments of this policy are freedom of expression, human rights monitoring and freedom of enterprise, as listed in the specifications of international conventions and cooperation projects. Cause and effect of this process should be the formation of a public opinion and of a civil society, which are considered as a natural counterweight to autocratic tendencies of the elites.

The diffusion of these values outlines a stabilization element, and furthermore a control and orientation element. It consists of a set of rules, moral/ethical beliefs, also religious principles or, simply, behaviors, which could be considered as »positive« with respect to the stabilization proposes. From this background should deviate an articulate system, based on a »segregation of duties« and »balance of power« principles. These are slogans and theories which had been elaborated in the context of enlightened ideas; these are the classical principles of the modern states, of pluralism and of democracy. The free election mechanism, as well as the diffusion of political parties and social movements, the construction of a free market should define the premises for a wealthy and stable society, in which anyone diligently does one's duty and respects the »fair play« rule.

## **An obligatory way**

These mechanisms outline and induce a unique way to development; any effort - by NGOs, multinational corporations, governments etc. - goes in this direction, with a concentric effect on elites and populations. It traces, consciously or unconsciously, an obligatory way to development, inspired by

western/enlightened principles. But the rationalistic perspective of development, both in an economic and in a civil sense, can hardly be realized; in reality, elements and mechanisms deviate from the ideal trajectory. An analysis of the real processes show indeed the formation of a vacuum, namely, deficiencies in many aspects of political landscape and of legal procedures of Central-Asian republics. Territorial structures show a dis-equilibrium; the new economies exist on weak basis, such mono-cultures (cotton) or mono-production (aluminum) or, in the future, hypothetical exploitation of hydrocarbonic resources. Everywhere are visible de-industrialization processes, gaps in the supply structure and instability. The elites are vulnerable, both from internal and international levels, and actually the vacuum of power seems to be the first reason for the difficulties facing these states.

In such circumstances these territories assume the characteristics of »weak areas« or marginal states, new peripheries, which become »hostages« of internal or external forces. These forces displaced tensions which could not be realized on their home territory (because they are too dangerous or too destructive). A neocolonial scenario appears, in which the local elites cannot consolidate internal procedures, and cannot elaborate legitimization models. In this vacuum, namely a deficit of political and territorial organization, concentrate tensions which in other territories and states cannot be realized. This fact could provoke crisis, and then a »chain reaction« or a »domino effect«. This effect is exerted on neighbor states or in the internal structure of the same state and in further spheres of social structure, leading to a condition of diffused instability.

Actually these »domino effects« (and these tensions) affect states and areas which are situated along the »belt« which connects the North and the South, or the West and the Eastern part of the Euro-Asiatic continent. Starting from the Caucasus, or even from the Balkan area, through the Central-Asian »traditional conflict« area in Tagikistan and Afghanistan, and to Kashmir and beyond. Tension draws a unique and continuous »belt«. In this »belt«, actually a revival of the ancient silk road, war and social unrest seem to assume an endemically character, namely a structural and a cultural character. These areas or states become targets of official or hidden actors, including other states, multinational companies, international organizations or alliances. They become experimental areas, or battlefields for wars which could not be carried on in other countries; these are not just material wars but also cultural, economic conflicts, and other kind of speculations, experiments and illegalities.

## Free market deviations

Restoring internal democratic procedures is a difficult operation; it consists in obtaining a circuit between different elements, groups and behaviors. This goal cannot be simply programmed step by step; it could arise in a long period under the discrete assistance and support, especially for security purposes, of the world community. Otherwise the degeneration effects could be prevalent. The same discourse could be transposed from a »political and security« level on an economic field. The main characteristic of this situation is the discrepancy between opposite requirements, namely, the disclosure/ integration in the international market and, at the contrary, the protection of home production structures. Theoretically, democratization should result as a by-product of a free market policy. But the free behavior of corporations could provoke cultural »drift« and a degeneration effect: corporations operate in an environment of high stress, due to the other companies' competition. Therefore liberalization, the requisite of international market disclosure, could appear as a cover for aggressive commercial policies or »tout court« for the exploitation.

As the post Soviet landscape demonstrates, the business of multinational companies do not fit necessarily genuine local needs. On the contrary, international commerce induces new needs and new standards, not necessarily connected with local interests and attitudes. The local culture accepts the new products in a passive manner, or simply adapts the imported »forms« to local »contents«. This process, that is the diffusion of a consumer model, implies a mutation of identity structure: changing the way to consume and behave outlines a new way of life and could be perceived as an imposition. Finally it could provoke reactions. (In the same way, but in another context, have the mutations induced by the »sovietisation« been perceived.)

Actually the sudden and unexpected change of the way to consume, of the mercurial nature of supply and products could exert a shock effect on the structure of values. The ideology of this new »invasion« is founded on consumerism: multinational companies represent »global brands«, namely, goods of daily use and consumption, which represent for the local communities extraneous models. These are new models, the western style of life, which diffuse, consciously or unconsciously, through soft drinks, sport shoes, casual dresses, mobile phones, French perfumes (or correspondent imitations and falsifications). All these products and brands were interpreted in a naive manner, in a magic and mystic sense. This has nothing to do with economic development nor the democratization mechanism. In fact the apparition of the



brands and images of the well-off society is incongruent with the status of the majority of the population, which is cut off from this processes and left standing outside the shopping window of a mall.

## **Interference and humanitarian intervention**

Without a cooperative and support policy, the free market mechanism could exert a stress effect on social structures. At the end of the cycles, if not connected to the »insider« actors, namely, the local population, the concept of free market and consequently democracy could become a vain concept, and then a fatuous list of slogans without concrete impacts. Then for the local populations the enlightened and rationalistic ideals could become commonplace and cliché, or, even worse, the signs of a new imposition. In the same way, paradoxically, were considered the communist slogans in different periods of the Soviet era.

In this case the roots of western thoughts were interpreted as an ethnocentric and ethnochratic tool. It would signify the legitimization of a new scenario of predominance, in this case represented by not just the Unique Party, but by multinational corporations (which predicate over-consumption), foreign government or private agencies, which predicate values and distribute material help, but do not solve the contradictions of local civil life. Liberalization would appear, therefore, as an instrument of the strongest societies to maintain predominance on the weakest parts of the globe.

## **Legitimization of cultural change**

The legitimization of these polices derive from the enlightenment paradigm, namely rational thought: the rationalist approach produces automatically legitimization. However, the political action is, obviously, imperfect, since it is derived from different interests, lobbies, errors, etc.; therefore, the assumption of rationality, in the application and operative moment, should be assumed as just a fiction or as a starting point. This question regards the theme of the relationships between local and global, fragmented and standardized, modern and traditional. Modernization and development imply change and destruction of identities, since the mutations, indeed, consist in the superposition of external forms to local attitudes. In the Central-Asian landscape this effect is evident

and particularly effective, because of the unexpected change of the system. Actually, the local life has been suddenly changed and opened to international flows. In every sector of civil life, of political dealing or of cultural activities there are continuous »moldings« among form/content structures. For example, *in occasion of elections, modern parties, or, better, parties with modern names and ideologies, overlap clans, sufi brotherhood, tribes or further social traditional forms.*

This kind of »molding« and confusion of models is interpreted, a priori, as a negative example, but indeed this question should be interpreted in problematic terms. It is not to be excluded that traditional economic and social forms are incompatible with the modern procedures. In any case these forms are spontaneous, and exert a positive role on social organization; rather, these forms should be adapted to some principles, as the rejection of charismatic or violent methods, the free elections mechanism etc. *These institutions, instead to be immediately rejected as antimodern, could be integrated in democratic procedures. A further case of the »molding« effect is political and juridical engineering, which seems to become rather a formal question. The »free elections« consist of an »accountancy« method to ascertain who is for the leader and who is against him; actually, it is a tool through which the leader wants to demonstrate its power. For the same reasons political propaganda assumes the significance of the threat. Instead of its promotion and rational persuasion every public facility assumes the significance of a »gracious« concession. The instructions are ineffective and vain; administration deals with uncertain procedures and contradictory rules; there is space for arbitrary decisions and mismanagement.*

The post Soviet constitutions of Central-Asian states are, from a formal and juridical point of view, perfect, but they are just not applicable; they are juridical games or cover for arbitrary leadership. The opposition parties are succumbs of the president or, in other circumstances, they just dissimulate an opposition; every true opposition become a criminal matter; the opponents became terrorists, religious fundamentalist corrupted managers, and so on. The administrative mechanism occurs on contradictory ways; *functionaries work without rules and directives; the president lets them work for awhile, and then intervenes with periodical »purges« in order to reestablishing his law and order.*

## Conclusion

The local society and system should contain a circuit of equilibrium and procedures, of mutual controls and »segregation of duties«, the essence of democratic and rational state, which cannot just appear as a »planned objective« or as a »miracle« in a certain moment of history and geography. This evolution pattern requires long term processes; wherever risks of cultural »moldings«, counter-positions and declines arise. The actual Central-Asian scenario is characterized by such tension, namely tensions between the international standards and the internal political processes, between concentration and dispersion, and/or between state consolidation and despotic policies. Some circumstances force openness, democratization and the formalization of procedures; further mechanisms induce opposite tendencies, namely a concentration of power, abuse and economic stagnation. Often it seems that local governments have no other chance; the priority is to strengthen their power, to avoid abusing their territories and resources, and to remove from their boundaries ill-intentioned forces. In this context liberalization processes seem, to some extent, a »lush« product, which the local societies could not afford; indeed the first priority seems to be security and continuation of the politics.

Liberalization and democratization could appear as the ideology of the strongest as well as the ideology which is convenient to the well-off and politically strong societies. It is a paradox: the ideology of dialogue, with its enlightenment and rationalistic roots, becomes the ideology of a new majority. This paradox shows further discrepancies, which are to some extent not avoidable, and which are connected with every scenario of »changes«: each social context changes to a different tempo, to a different scale, exerting a schizophrenic effect on individuals, groups or elites. This for cultural and symbolic means or economic technologies and social or political procedures (or rituals). These discrepancies produce, finally, territorial gaps, that is the formation of fragmented societies, marginalized peripheries and new frontiers.

On the contrary, the international community establishes a framework of parameters or conditions, which the local institution must respect, in order to get international support, financing and investments and, in general, integration in the world economic/ political community. These politics have the effect of producing a list of constraints, material and ethical, environmental and human; the world community simply believes to be legitimized by the rational/enlightenment principles. The objectives and, in the same moment, the instruments of these policy are the improvement of life conditions, economic

development, reduction of violence, human rights monitoring, and so on. For this vision the local context, which signifies conflicts, ignorance and scarcity of different nature, is simply not relevant, is anti-modern, and therefore to be destroyed. If this tendency prevails, the international integration will appear, »tout court«, as a concentric pressure on local population and the ideas of democracies will appear as slogans or flags of a new invasion.

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## **Postsovjetska Osrednja Azija danes. Med tradicionalnostjo in globalnostjo.**

### **Povzetek**

Države nekdanjega sovjetskega imperija v Osrednji Aziji označuje tako imenovani »globalizacijski paradoks«. Tradicionalne in fragmentirane oblike družbenega, ekonomskega in političnega življenja so se primorane homogenizirati po zakonih, ki jih predpisujeta tržna ekonomija in demokracija. Homogenizacija je dvojnega značaja: udejanja jo nacionalna politična elita, posredno in neposredno pa jo udejanjata tudi mednarodni kapital in mednarodne nevladne organizacije. Omenjeni dejavniki ustvarjajo pritiske na lokalno prebivalstvo oziroma državljane, predvsem pa na vodeče in lokalne elite v različnih oblikah. Odobravanje kreditov, ekonomsko sodelovanje, mednarodne investicije in, sosledno, možnosti zaposlovanja in drugo so najbolj pogoste ravni na katerih se izvajajo omenjeni pritiski. Poleg eksternih dejavnikov vedno pogosteje pokrajinsko stvarnost preoblikujejo interni, tradicionalni dejavniki. Napetost stopnjuje namreč obujanje klanovstva, verski fundamentalizem in regionalizem. Poprejšnja sovjetska oblast je zatrla vse poskuse v tej smeri, po osamosvojitvi Osrednjeazijskih držav pa so se še posebej razbohotile. Vlade omenjenih držav - Kirgizistana, Tadžikistana, Kazakstana, Uzbekistana in Turkmenistan - zunanjim in notranjim pritiskom niso kos. Dolgoročna razvojna politika države in regij je podlegla interesom posameznih nadnacionalnih finančnih ali ekonomskih grupacij oziroma se je, v želji ohraniti oziroma pridobiti volilne glasove, podredila interesom plemen, klanov in regij. Napetosti so ponekod tako močne, da politični dialog ni več možen. Oboroženi spopadi in avtoritarne oblike vladanja so tipične oblike tamkajšnje sodobnosti.