

Ten Years After the Soviet Breakup

DISILLUSIONMENT IN THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr.

Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., is director of the Central Asia–Caucasus Institute and research professor of international relations at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University. His most recent contribution to the Journal of Democracy was “Russia Under Putin: The Feudal Analogy” (July 2000).

When the Soviet Union fell into shards, it was as if Western liberal democracy—at least on the level of words—suddenly vaulted far to the east, into the traditional heartland of “Oriental despotism.”

Ten years later, all the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia now have parliaments, elected presidents, and (Turkmenistan excepted) multiple parties. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) extends across the steppes two-thirds of the way to the Yellow Sea, and the North Atlantic Cooperation Council includes the homeland of Genghis Khan. When Western forms sprang eastwards, so did the hopes of Western democrats and the interest of Western businesses in the Caspian basin. Today, however, in response to the region’s authoritarianism, corruption, and limited oil, disillusionment has set in. It is an appropriate moment to take stock.

A serious taxonomy of Caucasian and Central Asian regimes must separate out three political patterns. In the first, which predominates in most of the region, the ruler is a powerful president who typically was the Communist first secretary during Soviet days. There is no effective power sharing, whether with parliaments, local governments, or independent judiciaries. (Tajikistan is a special case. The Russian government forced its local allies into a fragile power-sharing agreement with Islamist guerrilla fighters.)

Yet despite these elements of continuity, there are striking differences from Soviet times. First, the major role that the “center” in Moscow played in the government of the republics has disappeared. Because the center had directed most of the economy, the selection of officials,

foreign policy, and the military and KGB, its replacement by the independent republics represents a major achievement of state-building. Second, although these republics typically have government parties, these are personal followings with none of the organizational or ideological capacities of the old Communist Party. Government parties no longer carry out provincial and city administration, and the distrust of all ideology is pervasive. This is the situation in Armenia; Azerbaijan and its secessionist Nagorno-Karabakh region; Georgia and its three “entities” of Abkhazia, Ajara, and South Ossetia; and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The countries we are considering are very different from the democratizing societies of Southern Europe, the Southern Cone, and Central America that faced inherited tastes for ideological extremism, authority, and violence. The reaction to Communist politicization of life has bred an exhausted tolerance and moderation suspicious of all authority. In the absence of efforts to organize and mobilize society, or to disguise the nature of rule, there is a yawning chasm between the rulers and the ruled.

Third, the basis for free elections provided by civil society, a free press, and a real multiparty system is at best no more than partly present in the southern states of the former USSR. While presidents and parliaments alike are chosen through multiparty elections, chicanery and vote-rigging are common. Parties other than successors to the Communist Party are mostly small and focused on personalities. A February 2001 poll showed Azerbaijanis thinking, by 57 to 26 percent, that voting did not give them “a say in how the government runs things.”¹

Yet in none of these states are elections a mere formality. There are always opposition parties and movements, generally headed by ousted officials, but sometimes by real democrats. One president, Armenia’s already unpopular Levon Ter-Petrosyan, demonstrated that there can be too much election fraud when he was forced out by the armed forces in early 1998. In my judgment, no president in any of these lands who does not reach office through a multicandidate election will be judged legitimate. Thus, while all of these countries do not qualify as what Larry Diamond calls “electoral democracies,” some are more than just “pseudo-democracies.” I will argue that the weakness of the state and the presence of democratic culture often allow the diversity of society to intrude into political space.

Fourth, in abrupt contrast with the overly strong Soviet state, all the states in this group are weak or weakening; several have wavered in and out of the “failed state” category. In the winter of 1993–94, for example, the Georgian government could not manage to defend the country, keep order on the streets of the capital, pay state workers, collect taxes, or print the currency in common use.

In such states, people usually have more to fear from local bosses

(whether actual government officials or their allies) than from direct abuses by the central government, although it is the latter that tend to draw Western attention. Currently, Tajikistan seems to have the weakest state. There, army units dissatisfied with their share of productive assets have simply fought it out, with the loser being quietly deleted from the order of battle. Armed Chechen war refugees in the Pankisi Gorge expose Georgia to fearsome Russian threats, but Georgia sent no policemen or soldiers there for years. Instead, as I found in August 2000, the police are blocking nearby roads, shaking down motorists for imaginary violations. These states cannot perform essential tasks of self-preservation because they have given their intermittently paid officials the right to live off the population. Some state structures, as in Georgia and Azerbaijan, have grown stronger since independence, but others, such as Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, have become weaker. Weakening of the state is a distinctive characteristic of postcommunist transitions, equally found in former Yugoslavia, Albania, and Cambodia.

The weakening of the Soviet state meant the breakdown of state-run economic enterprises and social-welfare programs. Next came the end of subsidies from Moscow, the interruption of intra-Soviet trade, civil and ethnic conflicts, weak administration, Western-sponsored “reforms” that often made things worse, and blockades from ethnic conflict or Russian ambitions. Together, these blows have reduced most people to deep poverty.

Because most nonspecialists do not know the depth of the economic crisis, let me cite a few figures. A 1998 survey found that Tajiks are consuming 71 percent less meat and 45 percent less cooking oil than they did in 1991. Farm animals per household average less than half the 1991 figure.² In Georgia, average real wages had fallen to one-tenth of the Soviet level by 1995; most countryfolk live by bare-subsistence farming, as their ancestors did hundreds of years ago.³

Most of the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia are trying to make the transition to democracy amid conditions that resemble the Great Depression—or worse. Accordingly, there is much regret about the collapse of the USSR—most in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, least in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Polls show far lower support for the new democratizing regimes and far higher approval of the old dictatorial regimes than one sees in comparable bodies of survey data from Southern European, Asian, and Latin American transitional states. Broadly speaking, the post-Soviet public feels that it lost and the ruling elites gained from the transition.

Seizure of state assets disguised as “privatization” has feudalized the state. Since they are not dependent on the budget, officials can afford to ignore public policy and use their offices as private interest dictates. The “weak” state will be hard to overcome because it feeds on itself.

For the elites, the totalitarian past survives less in authoritarian attitudes than in the ever-present question, *Kto kogo?* (“Who shall exploit whom?”) Politics is zero-sum, ruthless, and sometimes murderous. It is therefore understandable that people should see their rulers as selfish, unpatriotic exploiters even when some, such as Levon Ter-Petrosian of Armenia, Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia, Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan, and Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan have defied long odds to save their countries from dissolution or reabsorption into a new Russian empire.

In these circumstances, the moderation of ordinary citizens is astonishing and surely betokens leftover Soviet-era passivity, as well as the debunking of ideology and violence. But amid so much misery and discontent, how long can such moderation last? This raises in turn a large question about the future of democracy, which the West has tended to identify with the present political order and with many of its leaders. If, at any point, a democratic leader wished to reintroduce the politics of class conflict and mass mobilization, public discontent could also be a mighty source of energy for democratic change.

The abolition of the Communist Party and the shrinking of governmental power have opened a wide space that civil society could potentially fill. Currently it is filled by clans, ethnic groups, clientelistic networks, and criminal gangs; more usefully, it has been filled in a number of republics by quasi-private businesses and by NGOs.

These last form promising features of the political landscape in places where formal democratic institutions are badly compromised. With their Western financing, they create a political sector where the struggle for property is not the primary concern. They tend to draw their members from the elite and can produce an intermingling of the democratic intelligentsia and undemocratic governments, as we see in the three Caucasian republics and perhaps Kyrgyzstan. In Georgia and Armenia, flowerings of NGO activity followed the dubious elections of 1995 and 1996, suggesting that the NGOs were at least partially replacing more formal channels of political activity. In Georgia, NGOs working with one faction of the government party, the Citizens’ Union, were able to block an undemocratic press law.

Strong-State Autocracies

A very different pattern often confused with the foregoing exists in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as it did earlier in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and perhaps Abkhazia. There the old communist system persists. The center in Moscow is gone and with it the parallel Party apparatus, but all else remains, with the state harnessed to the old ideological, organizational, and mobilizational wagons that the Party used to pull. In Uzbekistan, Tamerlane has replaced Lenin, and the government

intrudes into neighborhoods not only through the police but also through the neotraditional *mahalla* or urban-quarter organization. In Turkmenistan, hortatory slogans reminiscent of the Khrushchev era pervade the land, as does the personality cult of President Sapurmarad Niazov. In neither republic is there much privatization.

Yet in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—as nowhere else in Central Asia and the Caucasus—the state remains strong and cohesive. Although both governments are shot through with corruption, their presidents maintain tight control over lower officials, and ordinary citizens are not, as elsewhere, completely naked before elites who wield public power for private ends. Instead, the average Uzbek or Turkmen gets about as much predictability, discipline, and public-spiritedness as his father or grandfather got from the Soviet apparat under Khrushchev. While statistics from these republics cannot be wholly trusted, their economies appear not to have collapsed to the degree seen in their neighbors. The chasm between the elite and ordinary people is no wider than it was in Soviet times, and the sense of victimization seems less than elsewhere. Western observers have hardly noted, in their doctrinaire enthusiasm for “reforms,” the complex tradeoffs between this model and the foregoing, more prevalent one. To be an Uzbek or Turkmen is to give up all freedom, but to belong to a state capable of furnishing order and protection.

The relative predictability that the Uzbek government can boast of is increasingly threatened by its bitter struggle with a small number of extremist Muslim fighters who have exploited the weakness of the Tajik and Afghan states to find sanctuary. There can be little doubt about the existence of a threat, but the Uzbek government is making its own nightmares come true by identifying Islam with political dissidence, thereby channeling antigovernment feeling into politicized Islam.

Stateless Communities

This third political pattern is the one exemplified by “governments” that lack such essentials as sole control over organized coercion, a regular revenue-collection system, and administrative institutions that function everywhere in the territory. Rebellious Chechnya, internationally recognized as part of Russia but Caucasian in culture, is at the moment the only case. During “independent” Chechnya’s interludes of peace with Russia (1991–94, 1996–99), it was teeming with private armed groups, never controlled all of its territory, and paid for public services by ad hoc levies on wealthy Chechen individuals or enterprises. Many parts of the “government,” including its “ambassadors” abroad, have been expected to raise their own operating expenses. In these respects, Chechnya resembles classic “failed states” such as Sierra Leone and Liberia. Yet Chechnya is different, for it boasts a powerful sense of communal solidarity that enabled it to win its first war against a vastly

more powerful Russia, a victory secured by a centrally coordinated military effort at the August 1996 battle for Grozny.

We could call this pattern the *stateless community*. It resembles the segmentary tribes that still evade government control in a few places such as Yemen and Somalia. Like these tribes, stateless communities present a united front against outsiders even as they seethe with internal strife. They are coordinated by culture, not by formal institutions.

Such formations are obviously limited in size, internal diversity, and life span; Ibrahim Rugova's stateless community in Kosovo (1989–98) collapsed with the rise of the competing Kosovo Liberation Army. It is worth adding stateless communities to a taxonomy of post-Soviet political patterns, however, because they make the prevalent post-communist weak state look very different. Chechnya is one end point of a continuum along which Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan have all oscillated. In such states, the preference for the community over the state emerges in polls showing that not very religious peoples, who have little confidence in political institutions, leaders, or parties, have great confidence (66 percent in Georgia in 2001) in the national church, or in Islam.⁴ Perhaps these states are weak, not only because they are poorly crafted out of poor materials, but also because their people have known impersonal modern (read "Soviet") institutions, and at some level crave a stateless community instead—a problem that earlier democratic transitions did not face.⁵

Toward the Future

The ex-Soviet political patterns that I have just sketched cannot endure. Throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus, communist institutions and ways are aging and declining along with leaders formed by the Party apparatus and its distinctive ethos. Further change is coming, though it remains to be seen whether it will be sudden or gradual. Leadership successions, already beginning in Azerbaijan and Georgia, open up the easiest path to sudden change. Here democratic change is entirely possible. The decisive moment will be the "free" elections without which no successor president can claim legitimacy. The elites that have ruled will attempt to manipulate these elections, and the question of how much fraud is too much will become decisive. Popular reaction and Western pressure may decide whether elections are in fact free and fair, and whether the winner is accepted. Democracy, pseudodemocracy, or stateless community could be the outcome.

If officials cannot retain communist attitudes indefinitely without communism, neither can the population. The collapse of the economy has already forced young people to unlearn Soviet-style quiescence. If anything, weak states breed criminality rather than passivity. In a few places, ordinary people are organizing spontaneously to deal with

weak-state problems such as lack of services or illegal apartment construction.

But will the decay of communist survivals clear a gradual path to full democratization? That depends on factors too numerous to name. However, we should emphasize “the primary role of ideas. Whether or not [leaders] really believe them is secondary in defining the nature of political regimes.”⁶ The key reality is that after communism’s collapse, there is no principled alternative to democracy left. Sunni Islamists can propose a “caliphate” for Central Asia, but a close look at their activities in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Chechnya, and Daghestan suggests that, like many extremist movements in Islamic history, they have a symbiotic relationship with stateless communities.

Civilizational identities will have an important impact, though we must understand them in a more dialectical way than Samuel P. Huntington has done. For more than two-hundred years, Georgians and Armenians have sought a “third force”—some great but distant power that would save them from their alien and dominant neighbors.⁷ For Georgians, this force has been for 140 years the West; for Armenians, Russia or the West. The Azeris, shunning a past many of them see as Persian and medieval, have long looked to secular Turkey and behind it, the West. All three peoples regard themselves as emphatically European. Thus they display the historic attraction of small peoples to universal principles. (Consider the Jews.) Together with the ideological monopoly that democracy now has, these civilizational identities will over the long term pull each of these countries toward democratization.

Central Asia is more complicated. Its peoples do not regard themselves as Europeans, although urban Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, like Baku Azeris, mostly speak Russian at home, and seem European in many respects. The Russian government would like to revive the shattered Soviet identity in a different form, but has neither the power nor the tolerance to achieve this over the long run. The larger populace throughout the region has a Muslim identity, but the elites fear and hate Islam. Central Asian elites are also trying slowly to oust or outbreed the remaining Russians and free themselves from Russian hegemony. Central Asian states have toyed with “Asian” as an identifier and “Asian authoritarianism” as a model, but have little in common with East Asia. Tajikistan, the remaining island of Persian language and culture in Central Asia, is likely to be opened to much more intensive influence from Iran in the next few years, as Iran’s Islamic regime begins to fade.

While Turkey has tried to emphasize its cultural connections with Azerbaijan and Central Asia through pan-Turkic policies, it does not loom large enough on the cultural map to be very successful outside of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. Yet there remains some potential for the future. The civilizational connection with Turkey tends to reinforce Western orientations, including a democratic direction. The Central Asian

governments' fear of Islam closes them off (except to a degree in Tajikistan) from the most credible anti-Western and antidemocratic alternative. Thus democracy becomes the object of imitation, however insincere.

What imitation and civilizational choice can do is shown by the history of Italy. After the Risorgimento in the mid-nineteenth century, Italy became formally democratic, but with few of the usual democratic "prerequisites." Intractable problems went unsolved: the poor and unruly *mezzogiorno*, the Mafia, the authority of an antimodern Church hostile to the Italian state, a small middle class, vast corruption, and the apolitical clannishness of the peasantry so well portrayed in the *Godfather* movies. Some of these problems, such as the Mafia, fester still.

These difficulties are similar to the disillusioning conditions now on display before Western eyes in the Caucasus and Central Asia. What seems to have worked most powerfully in Italy's case were civilizational identities and, still more, aversions. In retrospect, it was less the presence of democratic prerequisites than sheer aversion to the political claims of the Church, to Austrian absolutism, and—once the Fascist alternative had failed—to Soviet communism that slowly led Italy toward consolidated democratic rule. Perhaps the civilizational aversions of many peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia will eventually push them into the same mighty current.

NOTES

1. U.S. Department of State, Office of Research, "Azerbaijanis Allege Election Fraud and Government Corruption," *Opinion Analysis*, M-122-01, 30 May 2001.

2. Payam Foroghi, *1998 Socio-Economic Survey of Households, Farms, and Bazaars*, unpublished paper for Save the Children Federation, January 1999, 34, 32.

3. Ruslan Yemtsov, "Labor Markets, Inequality and Poverty," in the World Bank, *Georgia: Poverty and Income Distribution* (2 vols., Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1999), 1:35, 2:9.

4. U.S. Department of State, Office of Research, "Georgians' Faith in Their Government Wanes, As Pessimism Mounts," *Opinion Analysis*, M-16-01, 30 January 2001.

5. See G.M. Tamás, "Ethnarchy and Ethno-Anarchism," *Social Research* 63 (Spring 1996): 147–90; Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., "Party, Ideology, and the Public World in the Former Soviet Space," in Arthur Meltzer, Jerry Weinberger, and Richard Zinman, eds., *Politics at the Turn of the Century* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); and "Wars of Hatred and the Hatred of War," *National Standard*, 19 April 1999.

6. Ghia Nodia, "How Different are Post-Communist Transitions?" *Journal of Democracy* 7 (October 1996): 15–29.

7. Rafael Ishkanian, "The Law of Excluding the Third Force," *Haratch* (Paris), 18, 19, 20, and 21–22 October 1999, trans. in Gerard J. Libaridian, *Armenia at the Crossroads: Democracy and Nationhood in the Post-Soviet Era* (Watertown, Mass.: Blue Crane, 1991), 9–38; and Ghia Nodia, "Konflikt v Abkhazii: Natsional'niye Proyekt I Politicheskiye Obstoyatel'stva," in Bruno Coppieters, Ghia Nodia, and Yuri Anchabadze, eds., *Gruziny I Abkhazy: Put' k Primireniyu* (Moscow: Ves' Mir, 1998), 21–23.