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A Methodological Note on Researching Central Asia's Ethnic Minorities: Why Studying 'Non-Events' Matters

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The lack of widespread mobilization along ethnic lines in post-Soviet Central Asia has surprised many, scholars and analysts alike. A season of ethnic conflict was expected to break out in the region. Remarkably, instead, very little mobilization has taken place and what has defined post-Soviet ethno-politics in the region can rather be referred to as 'non-events'. Once we move beyond this consideration and an event-based approach commonly used in mobilization studies, however, it is possible to find a highly diverse and heterogeneous situation among ethnic minority groups in Central Asia. A study of groups rather than events can shed much light on how and why groups behaved in the way they did.

Reconciling state and national identities has proved remarkably complex in post-Soviet Central Asia, given that all the five republics in the region are home to a largely heterogeneous population. Initial predictions (Olcott, 1992a and 1992b; Carlisle, 1995; Rumer and Rumer, 1992) and later warnings (Lubin and Rubin, 1999; Khamidov, 2000; Tabyshalieva et al., 1998 and 1999) posited that that un-addressed political and economic grievances and the presence of ethnic minorities spanning across contested borders would constitute a potentially explosive combination in the heart of Central Asia¹. This turned out not to be the case and instead a 'quiet politics'² of identity and ethnicity

¹Nick Megoran was one of the rare observers in counter-tendency at the time. Megoran notes how emphasis on the conflict potential of the region – parallel to a downplay of positive developments – risks turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy (2000).

²By 'quiet' I mean both non-violent and characterised by low mobilizational level.

followed. In fact, this was so quiet and un-eventful that many came to regard the case of Central Asia's minorities as the arch-type of the Gellnerian 'dogs [of nationalism] that did not bark'. The questions arising here are therefore the following: if identity politics in Central Asia was not 'noisy', then what was it? And how does this matter?

Due to space constraints this paper can only begin to provide a brief attempt to incorporate the study of non-events in the mainstream of mobilization studies. The paper does not cover the extent and depth of Central Asia's many minorities, their strategies and forms of mobilization. It has a more modest aim: to reflect on the methodological flaws of the dominant approaches to the study of mobilization and emphasise why the study of apparent 'non-events' matters. The paper is structured as follows. First, I briefly summarise the way in which independence affected the condition of ethnic minority groups in Central Asia, pointing to the fact that despite un-addressed grievances, the region's minority groups have not resorted to protest, let alone rebellion. Next, I review the main approaches to the study of ethno-political mobilization and emphasises their flaws when it comes to accounting for the apparent lack of mobilization in the region. Finally I propose a how the study of non-events could be incorporated in mobilization studies and suggest this may make a significant contribution to that field of enquiry.

The new others: Identity transformation among post-Soviet ethnic minorities³

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought with itself the stranding of millions of co-ethnics, large communities of people sharing a common ethnic bond with others living 'on the wrong side of the border'. Over seventy million people (out of nearly three hundred

³ I am using the term 'minorities' for simplification purposes. I am not suggesting that all groups in the region see themselves as minorities. In fact, some such as Uzbeks living outside Uzbekistan openly reject this label (Fumagalli, 2005 and forthcoming).

million), nearly one in four Soviet citizens⁴, turned out to be in a country where they constituted new minorities. The driving force behind this phenomenon was a mismatch between borders and peoples: these new “beached diasporas” as Pal Kolstø labelled this new category of peoples, were not the product of mass migrations (movement of peoples across borders), but, of ‘*movement of borders across settlements*’ (1999). The archetypical example of these ‘new diasporas’ is represented by those Russian communities scattered all across the fourteen non Russian former Soviet republics. Neil Melvin (1995, p.9) correctly emphasises that that this broad group of peoples does not include ethnic Russians only; it comprises Belarusians, Ukrainians, Germans, Poles, and Koreans, that with the time have abandoned their native tongue to become linguistically and culturally Russified. In most cases the group includes communities of non indigenous populations that forcibly or voluntarily have re-settled away from their region of origin, hence the more appropriate terminology of ‘Russified settler communities’ (ibid.). These are by far the most visible, though not the only examples of post-Soviet diasporas. Armenians, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Tatars, among the others also existed in the Soviet Union as officially recognised titular nations and un-recognised ‘internal diasporas’ (internal to the Soviet Union)⁵. The absence of real borders between Union republics made the geographical distribution of ethnic groups somewhat irrelevant in Soviet times, but particularly problematic in the post-Soviet era. The changes that have affected these communities are far-ranging and impacted on their identity self-perception, legal status, psychological conditions, and also their political and economic situations in the new countries. In most cases all the individuals residing in a given Union republic were granted citizenship. This was not the norm everywhere, though. In a radical act of redress of perceived past injustices Latvia and Estonia denied the large Russian-speaking communities living in their territory the status of

⁴According to the 1989 Soviet census the number of people residing outside the borders of their alleged homeland (internal or external to the Soviet Union) amounted to a stunning 71,191,055 (*Vestnik Statistiki*, 1990-1991).

⁵External diasporas included, for example, Uzbeks living in Turkey or Saudi Arabia, Ukrainians in Canada, and so forth.

citizen of the political and civil rights entailed in this status (Melvin, 1995 and 1998). Legal parity did not grant absolute equality in practice, though, and this constitutes the starting point of this study: understanding how the profound changes in boundaries, status, policies and practices brought about by the collapse of the Soviet order have affected those who overnight became the ‘new others’, those against whom the new polities defined themselves in search of their own new post-Soviet identity. Furthermore, the creation of new education systems and curricula, the radical changes in language policy and the establishment of barb-wired borders put a halt to a regular flow of bureaucrats, politicians, tradesmen, students and academics across republican borders⁶. If being Uzbek in Turkmenistan or in Uzbekistan mattered only to some extent in Soviet times, being part of a non titular group in a post-Soviet state carried significant consequences in terms of status as well as employment opportunities and even just communication possibilities. How did all these ‘new others’ react and adapt to these changes? Following Hirschman’s tripartite typology (1970), would they air their demands (voice), would they ‘vote with their feet’ and leave the country (exit) or would they express their support for the ruling authorities (loyalty⁷)?

Mobilization in post-Soviet Central Asia: Dogs [of nationalism] that bark, dogs that bite, and silent dogs

Scholars of ethno-national mobilization have become increasingly interested in explaining the various cases of ethno-national mobilization in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet era in post-communist Central Eurasia (Beissinger, 2002; Critchlow, 1991; Schatz, 1999; Smith and Wilson, 1997). To the surprise of many, when nationalist mobilization led to demonstration effects all throughout the

⁶ I am not suggesting that the flow entirely stopped. In fact, not only shuttle trade continues, but also does cross-border human trafficking. Despite a tightened visa regime I managed to rely on local expedencies and practices to pass through Uzbekistan’s various borders in more than one occasion.

⁷ Attitudes may vary within the group and differences may not be clear-cut of course.

former Soviet Union, Central Asia was not shaken by mass-scale demonstrations or street protests. In striking contrast to what happened in Central-Eastern Europe where the fall of state socialism ‘paved the way for political participation and contentious collective action’ (Ekiert and Kubik, 1998 p.545), public participation in Central Asia, already low in Soviet times, continued to be so in the post-independence period.

The case of enviro-nationalist movement such as the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement in Kazakhstan shows that some form of popular mobilization did take place (Schatz, 1999). Environmental protection and language revival became the foci of intellectual attention and the frames through which the wider population became mobilised in Central Asia. Indeed from the 1986 Alma-Ata riots to the 1990 June events in Osh and Uzgen a series of episodes of small-scale violence took place in the region. Though these could be seen as manifestations of socio-economic grievances (with ethnicity being the way the conflict manifested itself rather than the root thereof), they did not seem to bode well for Central Asian republics and societies. Overall, Central Asia remained at the margins of the various waves of mobilization and as a consequence so did research on mobilizational processes in the region.

The migration from Central Asia was significant, particularly in the early stages of independence. It was particularly non indigenous communities that left the region, such as Russians, Poles, Koreans and Germans. Central Asia’s indigenous communities remained, but often moved across the border. Several factors contributed to the decision to migrate⁸. Those that stayed, out of choice or lack of alternatives, did not resort to noisy forms of nationalism. Without assuming that mobilization is somehow a natural condition for groups, one obviously wonders what these groups did next. Did they support the new state policies? Did they withdraw from politics tout court?

Conceptualizing ‘non-events’

⁸ See Radnitz (2006) for a review and an empirical discussion on migration from Uzbekistan.

I do not dispute the fact that a study of successful examples of mobilization is heuristically useful, and perhaps even of more immediate interest than the case of the ‘dogs that did not bark’, all those groups who, expectedly or unexpectedly, did not mobilize and seemed to remain inertial, passive or sought to mobilize, but failed. However, I fully agree with Pauline Jones Luong that a study of mobilization should account for cases where it occurs and for those where *it does not* (2002): the ‘silent dogs’. Mis-predicted or unexpected cases of mobilization/failure thereof can shed significant insights on how the mobilizational process works, the intra-group variation and the dynamics of group behaviour. In short, it shifts attention *from* the events themselves *to* the group, the agent in the mobilizational process.

In a seminal work on nationalist mobilization in the late Soviet era, Mark Beissinger considers both successes and failures of nationalist mobilization, although he primarily discusses the former. None the less, Beissinger acknowledges that an explanatory and predictive model can not neglect the ‘anomalous or mis-predicted cases’ (ibid., p.203 and 222). These include cases of unpredicted successful mobilization (i.e. Abkhaz, Gagauz, Bashkir, Tuvans, and Turkmen), but also the ‘failures’, examples of groups expected to mobilise that actually did not (Belarusians, Uzbeks and Volga Tatars). As Beissinger’s research shows, Central Asia remained by and large quiet in the eve of the Soviet collapse and in the early post-independence phase. The problem is here that scholarly attention has thus far concentrated almost exclusively – with the notable exception of the Russian diasporas, as already noted – on the mobilization of titular groups: Kazakhs in Kazakhstan (Akiner, 1997; Schatz, 1999), Uzbeks in Uzbekistan (Carlisle, 1991; Critchlow, 1991) and so forth. Ethnic minorities have remained at the periphery of scholarship on post-Soviet mobilization and this can be well ascribed to the low mobilizational level of these communities. This is partly correct, but does not explain one crucial gap in the literature: if (especially some) minority groups were expected to mobilize, but did not, *what exactly did they do?*

As noted above, minority groups did not seem to develop mass forms of mobilization against the state. Neither did they gather in mass street demonstrations in defence of cultural rights or advancing political

and economic demands. Though fortunately large-scale violence did not occur this paper argues that non-event did not equate to total inertia as an event-based approach would suggest. Indeed by inferring inertia from a lack of mobilization one risks missing out a great degree of variation across Central Asia's minority groups. This is well illustrated in the few empirical studies conducted on the topic. Diener notes how Germans to a large extent looked at Germany as their homeland and opted for out-migration (2005). Koreans by contrast seemed to adopt a more territorialized type of identity (Diener, 2006; Khan, 1999), whereas a higher degree of internal variation emerged among the Russian community (Commercio, 2003; Gorenburg, 2001; Kolstø, 1999). As shown in Fumagalli (2005), Uzbeks living outside Uzbekistan sought to advance their demands by co-operating with authorities rather than by confronting or antagonising them. The means of claim-making were non violent, and their attitude towards state authorities less confrontational.

It is important to note that ethno-political mobilization in Central Asia cannot be studied in the same way that, for example, Estonian, Georgian, or Ukrainian or even Kazakh mobilization were approached in the late Soviet era, let alone mobilization in entirely open political systems (i.e. Basque, Catalan, Scottish, Flemish, north-Italian ethno-national mobilization). This is because the former represent instances of collapsing polities opening windows of political opportunity, whereas the latter are in fact examples of already 'open' societies (with all the imperfections of the case). This leads to two considerations, one theoretical and the other methodological. On a theoretical level the main difference to be taken into account lies in the authoritarian nature of the Central Asian states. The political opportunity structure is subject to stricter controls than that of countries like Spain, Scotland, or the late Soviet Baltic republics. A closed or semi-closed opportunity structure means also a more controlled flow of information. Reliable information, as emphasised by Horsman (1999) is a 'rare commodity' in former Soviet Central Asia. This affects the type and quantity of information available on such as sensitive issue as ethnic minority mobilization and has obvious methodological implications. Second, this means that an event approach to nationalist mobilization such as Beissinger's or a political claims analysis (as in Giugni and Passy, 2004) is impractical in

contexts where open claim-making is not possible or is severely restricted. In the case of Uzbek co-ethnics outside Uzbekistan episodes such as demonstrations or other episodes of contention have been sporadic since independence and a coding and analysis thereof would not capture the complexity of the process of Uzbek ethnic mobilization, which would appear at a little more than inertial state.

Mobilization is more likely to occur in times of opening political opportunities, as political opportunity structure theorists argue. This has lead a large number of authors to analyse waves (Tarrow, 1998), cycles of protests (Tilly, 1991), tides of nationalist mobilization (Beissinger, 2002) as manifestations of mobilization. This is one way (in fact, the most common) of approaching the study of mobilization. It may not be the most appropriate to account for the behaviour of Central Asia's minorities. It is the paper's main contention that instead of assuming that non-events should be seen as evidence of non mobilization (failure), the rare empirical studies of ethnic minority groups in Central Asia (Diener, 2006; Kim, 2001; Kim and King, 2002; Khan, 1999; Commercio, 2003; Fumagalli, 2005) suggest that we should strive for a more in-depth and qualitative understanding of what particular communities actually did. It is time to go beyond the 'non-events'.

A concept which may come to help to account for the minorities' political behaviour since independence is that of *de-mobilization*. Discussing the policies of the authoritarian junta in Chile during the 1970s, Karen Remmer (1980) is among the few theorists concentrating on de-mobilization as main object of study rather than as a default category. De-mobilization can be defined as the process through which subordinate groups lose their capacity to pursue collective goals (ibid., p.276). Remmer's contribution is important as she focuses on authoritarian contexts (Latin America) and does not assume mobilization as a one way irreversible process. Uzbek communities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were more vocal in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period than later on (Fumagalli, 2005). Remmer correctly notes the mutability of participation, organization and consciousness within a given group and contends that sudden shifts from passivity to activity (or vice versa) occur in response to changing political conditions (1980). The study of de-mobilization is important as it underscores two

important dimensions: social control (Lustick, 1979), as operated by the state attempting to cage channels of political participation, and the costs of such an operation. De-mobilization is actually a double-edged sword. Built on strategies of repression and coercion by the Chilean junta, one aim of the de-mobilizing strategy lies in eliminating potential sources of political opposition. This is just one side of the coin, Remmer observes (1980, p.293-94). De-mobilization carries significant costs as well. The regime's base of support is thereby narrowed and opportunities for channelling and institutionalising political control limited (ibid., p.296). This can potentially lead to further alienation and higher resistance of the excluded or marginalised groups. Where de-mobilization might appear as deliberate state policy to control opposition, in the long term a by-product can potentially be increased mobilization and instability. Rather than opting for a noisy politics of nationalism (Beissinger, 2002 p.26), ethnic minorities opted for a quiet politics of identity. Kathleen Collins defines this form of ethno-national mobilization as a '*non event*' (2003 p.172). Though perhaps the term non event may appear too stark and suggest lack of action and passivity, however it well captures a form of mobilization that escapes from the traditional quantitative analysis of mobilization, thereby requiring a different theoretical and methodological framework. Lack of 'noise' (Gellner's 'barking') does not imply total inertia. Other activities are performed far from the centre of the political stage and in a low tone/volume. Hence, a study of authoritarian regimes can shed important insights on what the dynamics of political participation and mobilization are when opportunity structures are narrow or subject to strong institutional constraints. It is in such circumstances that it appears more useful to explore the everyday, routine, manifestations and practices of political behaviour rather than focusing on exceptional events or more conventional expressions of political mobilization.

On a methodological level one should note the limited insights that can be drawn from electoral politics in semi-closed societies. Studies on voting patterns among national minorities in East Central Europe (Hungarians, Roma, Russians, Turks), and among non-Russian communities in the Russian Federation have built on vast amounts of

data, i.e. opinion polls, election surveys, and especially voting patterns and electoral politics. This is not feasible in post-Soviet Central Asia, where opportunities for electoral politics are limited at best and in fact close to non-existent except for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In fact, ethnically-based political parties are not permitted in those countries, and minority groups have to look at other forms of political organizations (cultural associations, as noted) to channel their demands. The fact that in any case this might be one of the few, if not the only, official mobilising structure available in some polities calls for an inclusive understanding of what constitutes a political organization. The practical difficulties involved in collecting data on the topic deserve to be mentioned here. This is due to both the irregular nature of the publications in the region (missing issues, suspended publications), but also and especially the politically sensitive nature of the topic (inter-ethnic relations) that is less amenable to public discussion. All this suggests that conducting research on ethnic minorities in the region might require substantial rethinking of the methods used, moving away from a quantitative study of events and claim-making toward a more in-depth qualitative methodology aimed at understanding group perceptions, choices and strategies.

Conclusive remarks

This paper has sought to outline some of the problems arising from the study of the behaviour of Central Asia's ethnic minorities and has begun to sketch a way to address them. This was but a brief reflection on a key methodological problem encountered in the study of ethnic mobilization, namely making sense of the 'dogs that do not bark'. The main point that the paper has tried to emphasise is the inadequacy of the dominant approaches in mobilization studies to account for the types of and variations in the behaviour of Central Asia's ethnic minorities. Two main flaws have been identified: theoretically, the lack of appreciation of the differences between closed and open political opportunity structure. While overwhelming attention has been paid to mobilization in the 'West', not enough space has been dedicated to the

study of mobilization, and its own peculiarities, in non western, particularly non democratic settings. Hence, mobilization studies a whole field of study would benefit from paying more attention to contexts where groups may adopt different forms and strategies to air their demands and grievances. This may lead to different types of behaviour, not involving open protests, let alone rebellion. Second, the presence of a closed political opportunity structure significantly constrains (though does not pre-determine) the range of choices available to the group. Much empirical research remains to be conducted among the ethnic minorities across the former Soviet space. Data seem to point to the fact that while no widespread mobilization has occurred, much has still taken place during this *quiet* phase, and disregarding this (and the understanding thereof) may lead to losing important dynamics unfolding in the region.

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