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Negotiating Inside/Outside in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Footnotes from Field Research

Cengiz Surucu, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind., USA, csurucu@indiana.edu

In this research note, I will follow a slightly unconventional path and relate individual instances without advancing a coherent story. I believe that in contrast to finished papers, research notebooks contain unexplored paths, surprising anomalies, and unruly footnotes, many of which are destined to die away somewhere between the field and the final product. Such unexpected encounters constitute silent testimonies to the incoherent, fragmented nature of the social subject. While they do not completely defy what we set off to see in the field, they at least resist pretensions of smooth and admissive research sites. Anyway, field research is a complex process and involves many unique contextual instances, discontinuities, exceptions, negotiations, and compromises all the way from the start to the end.

Case in point: at the beginning of my field research in May 2001, I had to spend fifteen days in the registration and immigration offices and three days in the halls of a courtroom in Almatï as a result of a legal controversy.[1] Immigration rules in Kazakhstan require foreigners to register in their locality of destination within three days of arrival. I violated that rule and became a subject of the ensuing legal-administrative proceeding. Naturally, being involved in a legal case in a post-Soviet country has psychological effects; researchers are human beings and they do experience humiliation, deprivation, helplessness and withdrawal in the field. (How did I cope? Almost every night during that period I watched the only DVD I had with me, "All the President's Men."). I also developed small tactics to avoid the police on the streets, although many of them proved to be of little help. Since a radical Islamic insurgency is underway in some regions of Central Asia, Kazakhstani law enforcement authorities seem to have developed a handy definition of terrorist suspects: Middle Easterners.[2] I am originally from Eastern Anatolia and I have a facial appearance of a Middle Easterner, so almost every time I came across a police officer on the street, my appearance made me a suspect. Once I was detained on the Uzbek border by three counter-terrorism agents of Kazakhstan and had a two-hour long no-destination interrogation ride along cotton fields.

Modern states have an undeniable interest in imposing overarching national identities in the formalization, proceduralization, and institutionalization of interpersonal relations. However, there is a whole set of subnational and transnational social, economic and political forces penetrating into this seemingly simple relationship between the state and individuals. Different forces create hybrids: incoherent and fragmented identities

[1] These observations derive from my field research in Kazakhstan in May-December 2001. During this period, I conducted interviews with the cultural and political elite of Kazakhstan as part of my dissertation on ethnic politics and political transition in Kazakhstan.

[2] It was interesting to observe that a similar practice was *de facto* implemented in the United States after September 11th.

and identity practices. In a country like Kazakhstan, where informal practices play a much larger and more burdensome role than laws in individuals' lives, registration (OVIR) and immigration offices become good sites to observe and participate in the practices of inclusion and exclusion.

OVIR not only handles visa and registration proceedings for foreigners; they also deal with the internal movements of Kazakhstani citizens across provinces. As a remnant of Soviet-era internal monitoring, every Kazakhstani citizen who decides to change his/her permanent residence has to obtain advance permission from his/her oblast of departure and re-register at the destination point. Thus both foreigners and Kazakhstani citizens from other provinces meet in the same building for a brief period and become subject to similar administrative practices.

On one of the days when I was pacing back and forth on the third floor of the OVIR building on Baytŭrsïnov Street, I met an elderly Tajik from Bukhara, Abdulrahim, who was brought there because he did not have a visa stamp on his passport. He was in Almatï on the occasion of his son Suleiman's marriage to a local Uyghur girl. For Suleiman, Almatï was a city of many opportunities that they did not have in Bukhara; for Abdulrahim, it was a destination of trouble with the police. Askhat, the migration officer handling our cases, was particularly upset with Abdulrahim and Suleiman because, in Askhat's words, "Kazakhs do not like Uzbeks." He said this in their presence. However, Abdulrahim was not an ethnic Uzbek, though he was a citizen of Uzbekistan. He did not use his ethnicity as a defense, probably knowing that being a Tajik implies no better status in Kazakhstan.

Abdulrahim was denying the fact that he needed a visa for only a short stay in Kazakhstan, but he acknowledged that he had crossed a border since he had his passport with him. Kazakhstan was surely a foreign country for him, but not so foreign that he would bother to get a visa for a month's stay. When Askhat reminded him that he would be charged over a hundred dollar fine in court, Abdulrahim laughed, the ignorance of a wise old man on his face: "Give me my passport, I will return this afternoon." Askhat declined. Abdulrahim did not insist and walked out of the building. He possessed the power of the powerless: no money in his pockets, no influential acquaintance in the country, but he did have cultural capital accumulated over decades of living in the region. "They will leave me alone after a couple of days," he told me at the door, smiling. Abdulrahim's external passport was an affirmation of the post-Soviet reality, his lack of visa a conscious denial. Abdulrahim's behavior raises some interesting questions: Would he set off for Russia without a visa? Where do the borders start for him and where do they end? He seemed to draw comfort from what he knew from his countless interactions with an arbitrary state: to the degree that the state's practices deviate from formal rules, he has a fair chance of negotiating a suboptimal outcome.

In contrast, neither Dinara (a pseudonym) nor her sister had passports or visas (or any other identification paper, for that matter). They were in their twenties and reportedly doing temporary business in Kazakhstan that they were reluctant to disclose. As Askhat needed further information for court proceedings, they registered themselves as Tatars from Tatarstan. I had lengthy conversations with them outside the immigration office in the following days. After I made an effort at confidence building, they confided in me that they had been living in Kazakhstan for several years. Since they claimed to be Tatar, a couple of times I asked them to converse in Tatar — a part of my plan to build trust and goodwill. At last they did, but when they spoke I was unable to understand a single word. I also noticed that they had an apparent hostility towards Russians. So, the third day of our meeting, they disclosed that they were not Tatars. They were in fact Ingush from Chechnya. "Why do you hide your ethnic origin?" I asked. "Because we are at war with the Russians and nobody likes Chechens here," they replied. They were living in one of the Chechen suburbs of Almatï. In their neighborhood they enjoyed the patronage and protection of their close-knit community, but when they crossed the boundaries of that neighborhood, they had to adopt a strategy of denial. Being deprived of collective independence in their homeland, their refuge was forcing them to a similar deprivation at the individual level.

However clear, well articulated, and strong they may seem to the bearer, identities are incoherent, disorganized, and they retain a gray area for compromise and adaptation. A particular identity does not necessarily prompt a certain course of action; it is up to political entrepreneurs to craft *praxis* out of them. Ali was herding horses when I met him outside his village. He was born in Kazakhstan long after the deportation of his family from Caucasia in the Second World War. When I

told him that I was a Turkish citizen, he began to speak in a fluent Anatolian Turkish.

"Are you a Turk from Ahiska?" I asked.

"No, I am a Kurd."

"How come you speak such a pure Anatolian Turkish?"

"I worked for a Turkish businessman in Almatï."

"Do you know Kurdish?"

"No, I know Russian."

Apparently, in the midst of the Kurdish insurgence in Anatolia, he became subject to a rather successful personal assimilation project implemented by a nationalist Turk.

Borderlines are also gray zones witnessing micro-level cohabitation of incoherent and fragmented identities. On the one hand, there are nationalizing states trying to erect borders and impose border restrictions; on the other hand, there is an enormous amount of micro-level variation defying the *raison d'être* and legitimacy of these formal procedures. While there is an observable trend that movement from South to North is becoming harder and harder as time goes on, still, the reality of borders poses a puzzling problem for an outsider. The Uzbek-Kazakh border and the accompanying practices surrounding it constitute a silent reenactment of a belief from the colonial past that modernity moves North to South and traditionalism, vice-versa. For many Kazakh intellectuals, Kazakhstan is qualitatively different from other Central Asian states in that Russian modernization left a deeper imprint on the social fabric of the country. In that sense, the magnificent gate between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is meant to celebrate the demarcation of these two realms. The border contains the traditionalism of the South. At the micro-level, however, there is much room for negotiation and compromise. A lively trade route from Tashkent to Shïmkent and Almatï presents a wide gray area open to different interpretations. On one hand it is a denial of the borders and their impermeability, on the other it owes its existence to those borders and disparate economic spaces contained within them. For the foot soldiers of this dynamic trade zone, borders and regulations are a matter of beseeching the goodwill of the enforcement officials along the 14-hour trip. Crossing back and forth is a daily activity, a matter of sharing some portion of their profits with the police on checkpoints. Boundaries are not sites of exclusion yet; they represent one of those moments when local people encounter the ordering principles of states, which they subtly evade by various strategies of co-optation and compromise.

Shifting Social Networks in Post-Socialist Kazan

Helen Faller, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., USA, hmfaller@umich.edu

While inculcating in Soviet people of all nationalities the notion that they have the right to education in their "own" language and the blossoming of their particular national culture, Soviet nationalities ideologies also put pressure on them to russify, both linguistically and culturally, by punishing and provincializing people who wanted to remain national. The tensions between russification pressures, on the one hand, and the rights of national cadres to local, albeit limited rule, on the other, contributed to both the civil wars and small-scale inter-ethnic violence that occurred during the Soviet Union's demise. These have not, however, happened in Tatarstan, where there has been almost no hostility based on ethnicity. Peace in Tatarstan is no accident, as my research reveals, but rather the result of linguistic negotiations between Tatars, Russians, and others at the level of both policy and practice. Indeed, Tatarstan's political, social, and relative economic stability may perhaps provide a model for the kind of federalism that may sustain Russia.

This report represents a summary of some preliminary findings from my dissertation research. The research was conducted mostly in Kazan, Tatarstan between September 1999 and July 2001. It concerned the social effects of Tatarstan's political