

Educational Resources and Developments

Teaching Central Asian Politics in Comparative Perspective

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The challenges of teaching post-Soviet Central Asia in some ways mirror the problems facing policymakers in those states. On one hand, no transition will be successful if it is not well grounded in a country's own political context. Both policymakers designing state institutions and professors creating syllabi, therefore, need to devote great attention to Central Asia's unique history and culture. On the other hand, the transformations taking place there are unprecedented in the region's history. From this perspective, then, it makes sense for both decision-makers and course designers to consider carefully the experiences of countries outside the region that have encountered similar problems, weighing Central Asian developments in light of the reasons for success and failure in those other cases.

These considerations about course design developed out of my experience of dissertation research in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the mid-1990s and were reinforced by career patterns of students who took the course when I first offered it as a seminar on the politics of Central Asia and Transcaucasia in 1998 for Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Given the Fletcher School's international policymaking orientation, several of my students went on to positions in governmental or non-governmental agencies which involved providing advice on reforms in the region. My subsequent experience at Indiana University has confirmed that one should expect at least some students whose study focuses on Central Asia to go on to policy-relevant work in the region. This is especially true now that such employment opportunities have expanded in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Even undergraduate courses on the region, then, should consider how best to prepare students to understand both the challenges these countries face and how they might be overcome.

The central concept of my course, entitled "Comparative State-Building in Central Asia and Transcaucasia," is to provide students with an understanding of how Central Eurasians are addressing the challenges of state-building in light of their own history and culture while simultaneously sharpening their analytical skills with an international comparative perspective. After three introductory weeks covering the comparative method and tsarist and Soviet-era Central Eurasia, the course devotes each succeeding week to one major task involved in creating an independent country out of what had effectively been a totalitarian empire. The policy questions addressed each week are the following: Would the state be based on ethnic or civic nationalism? How can order be attained and ethnic or civil wars averted? Would the political system be democratic or autocratic? Would a market be introduced gradually or a "shock therapy" approach adopted? How would natural resources (notably oil) be developed and what would be the implications of these decisions for state-building? What would be the country's strategy for developing its military? How would the country structure its relationship with its erstwhile overlord, Russia? With major international powers? With other Central Eurasian states? How would leaders define their styles of rule and how great would their personal influences be on their countries' transitions? While Central Asian leaders have each embarked on unique answers to each of these questions, most of these issues have been faced in some form by other countries emerging from empire or authoritarian rule.

About one-third of each week's assigned readings, therefore, are "comparative perspectives," works examining how other countries of the globe have tackled (or failed to tackle) these same kinds of issues and, very importantly, explaining why these countries underwent the experiences that they did. The remaining two-thirds of the week's readings,

which the students are advised to do after considering global experience, are devoted to how the different Central Eurasian states have been dealing with these state-building tasks. Discussions then focus not only on what the Central Eurasians have been doing, but on why they chose the paths they did and to what extent their experiences can be considered similar to those of other countries in other times and places.

For example, the week on natural resource development begins with three comparative readings on "rentier states," states such as Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela that rely overwhelmingly on the "rent" derived from a single natural resource. Students then read seven articles on Central Eurasian energy development strategy, including perspectives from such different experts as Pauline Jones Luong and S. Frederick Starr, as well as one produced by the U.S. Department of State. As it turns out, the rentier-state literature argues that many patterns of politics visible in Central Asia and Azerbaijan (top-heavy authoritarianism, clientelist practices, non-diverse economies, weak government infrastructure, passive populations) are common to countries that depend heavily on oil exports in a variety of cultural and historical contexts. This provides fertile ground for student discussion of Central Eurasian reality. Some, tracing the workings of energy and politics in Central Asia, could argue that the rentier economies of many of these countries are playing a large role in creating many of the region's problems

independently of historical traditions. Others, however, could find broad similarity in the kinds of problems faced by almost all states in the region, including those whose economies could not be called "rentier" in any meaningful sense of the term. From this second perspective, contextual factors would seem to provide the better explanation for outcomes of policy decisions. The overall result is a very deep discussion of Central Eurasian dynamics informed by important comparative insights into the experience of the rest of the world. Some of the questions which emerge might not have been provoked if students had looked at Central Eurasia only through its own lens.

There are many possible permutations of such a comparative course design. While I have run the class as a seminar, lecture courses could also be structured in this way. In fact, a few weeks into the semester, students asked me to lead off each week with a short lecture, which I subsequently did and which worked well to frame the key issues I wanted students to discuss. While every teacher must find the approach that best fits his or her style and philosophy, my experience with this course leads me to recommend this kind of comparative approach for other courses on Central Eurasia. For those who are interested, the syllabus can be found online at: http://cesww.fas.harvard.edu/syll/Hale_Henry_1998_Comparative_State-Building_in_Central_Asia_and_the_Caucasus.pdf