TITLE: CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN THE POST-SOVIET CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA: "Self" and "Other" and "Amerika"

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Summary

This report focuses on the construction of the image of America as "other" complementing definitions of "self" in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The definition of "other" and "self" is one of the integral aspects of the process of national identity formation. We argue that the process and the results will influence international relations, and the definition of the United States as the "other" will inform the future possibilities and limitations of the relationship with the new republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this context, we look at the current debates about the United States and the changing imagery of America as the new "big brother" and as a model for a "healthy and happy" society in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Introduction

Stereotypes, overgeneralizations associated with a category that exaggerate or go beyond existing evidence, are tools to rationalize opponents' positions in a relationship. They are a key to subjective reality, produced by social relations. These types of images are integral aspects of how we define our own society and those of others. A complex process of definition of "self" and "other" is also an aspect of formation of national and ethnic identity. What makes this process complex is that as the definitions of national "self" and national community evolve, the "other" is multiplied, as an aspect of globalization. Studies of national identity in the Caucasus and Central Asia have shown a tendency to concentrate on Russia as the "other," because of the colonial relationship, and have only occasionally and separately integrated the images of China, Iran or the Ottoman Empire as participants in this process. Yet, "other" is never a single entity. It is an antagonistic unity of multiple images interacting and conflicting under changing circumstances. During the Cold War, and since the collapse of the Soviet Union, America has also entered the imagination of Muslim Turkic intellectuals as a contrasting and ever changing aspect of definition of the "other."

In this report we examine how images of America as the "other" are entering into the debates of intellectuals of the Caucasus and Central Asia in this new era. This preliminary
report is an extension of our study of the discourse of Muslim Turkic intellectuals on America as the "other" in the process of global identity making. We are interested in how these images influence, and are influenced by, domestic and international relations.

Formation of the "Self" and the "Other" in International Relations

The "other" evolves along with the "self" according to historical experiences. As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue, "societies have histories in the course of which specific identities emerge." Yet, these identities are not just about the "self" and "other," but are about the relationship between the "self" and the "other." In the context of international relations, popularly accepted and politically legitimized stereotypical images of "self" and "other" are produced according to global complexities. These basic constructs personify complex and encompassing relationships, and are utilized as tools to bring them to a manageable, comprehensible level, from a symbolic universe of international relations to everyday life. These images, negative and positive alike, serve to reduce complicated international relations to basic phrases, locking them into familiar paradigms. Furthermore, the multiplicity of these images, as well as their alteration, reveal the intricacy of their construction and the infusion of historical developments into this created universe. Changes in images indicate changes in power relations. For example, the Cold War created windows for societies to view differences and similarities, and to rank each other's position of power. Legitimization and de-legitimization of power in international relations is reflected in the construction of images. The multiplicity of images stems not only from the multifarious aspects of international relations, but also from political struggles on domestic issues and the making of foreign policy. Overall, the images generated in this process reveal the past and future of the relationship and most importantly, its limits.

For example, in Turkey and the United States, the experiences of World War I and World War II became central to the construction of images of each other; and these images entered into the production and legitimization of political, economic and cultural relations during the Cold War. In fact these images are very much a part of the political discourse, cultural production of stereotypes, and, moreover, the formal diplomatic relations between the United States and Turkey, even today. In particular, the negative images, which emerged and solidified in the period surrounding World War I, were reinforced during World War II and the Cold War, and became paramount to the construction of the "other," reflecting prejudice on an international level.
Prejudice, in this sense, has both emotional and cognitive aspects. As an overgeneralization, prejudice is directed towards a nation as a whole or towards individuals because of their membership in that nation. For instance, American press coverage of Turkey tends to concentrate on an assumed threat of Turkish expansionism or Muslim fundamentalism, often portraying the Turkish government as incompetent and hopelessly corrupt. Turkish press coverage of America often focuses on the shortcomings of presidents, such as Bill Clinton's alleged sexual misconduct, corruption in Congress and the administration, and the apparent double standards of American policy makers, who ignore Chinese human rights abuses or racism at home even while demanding that Turkey change its policy towards the Kurds. Overall, American images of Turkey reflect longstanding stereotypes of the "terrible Turk," lustful, bloodthirsty and fanatical, while Turkish images of America paint the profile of the "ugly American:" a swaggering, hypocritical, unprincipled bully.

These media images reflect longstanding negative constructions on both sides. But, Turkish-American relations have survived despite these negative images which also serve to highlight the absence of cultural ties, historical affinity or a common language between the two societies. In the context of international politics and economics, the relationship between Turkey and the United States is one of expediency, a reluctant alliance cemented during the Cold War. Any positive construction is usually offered by politicians attempting to seize the moment for their own ends. For example, the bravery of Turks during the Korean War or American "big brotherliness" towards Turkey are images meant to facilitate positive feelings. Yet, both are still built on negative stereotypes. Reports of the bravery of Turks are laden with images of the excess and fanaticism that are aspects of the "terrible Turk," while the "big brotherliness" of America in terms of providing aid to Turkey such as the Marshall Plan, conjures up images of a swaggering and domineering "ugly American."

In the Caucasus and Central Asia "Amerika" as the "other" was a construction dictated by Moscow, first during the Russian Empire in terms of American oil interests and later as a contrast to Soviet ideals, and as an enemy during the Cold War. In this context, America was meant to be a singular image, but it was blurred because America was part of a broader image of the West for Muslim Turkic intellectuals. It has only been during the period of independence that politicians and intellectuals of the Caucasus and Central Asia have begun to exert control over their own production of the image of America.
Expectations from the "New Big Brother:" Hope and Disappointment

In this new era, many Muslim Turkic intellectuals look at the United States as a new "big brother," which will provide guarantees and security for the future. Yet some criticize the United States for not matching up to expectations, making the image of the "source of hope" into one of disappointment.

The image of the "source of hope," paradoxically, comes out of the Cold War imagery of the United States as the major enemy of the Soviet Union. As Muslim Turkic intellectuals' dissatisfaction with the Soviet system grew, they began to look at the United States as an "ideal" opposite. This construction overlapped with the Cold War propaganda of the United States, so that in people's minds the Soviet imagery merged with America's construction of itself. The result was a problematic synthesis. As one intellectual summarized, "one imagined America as a land of democracy and freedom - that is the people were also free to be hungry and unemployed." After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this imagery is still part of the construction of the United States as the "other." Yet, with independence, the Cold War imagery of the American-Russian struggle led Muslim Turkic intellectuals to begin to conceptualize America as a new "big brother." For example, in Azerbaijan, America has come to be looked upon by many as the only power that can guarantee Azerbaijani independence against Russian domination, and American interest in oil is seen as the key to a secure economic future.

While expectations from America are growing, one Azerbaijani diplomat complained that the American government does not understand the situation that the former Soviet republics are in, or that Azerbaijan is looking to the United States for support. But many intellectuals criticize Americans for continuing to see the republics through the vantage of Moscow, and for being unwilling to extend the same support to the republics they seem willing to give to Russia. One Azerbaijani academician argues that the Russians are still trying to maintain an empire, now ironically with American help. He argues within a construct that could be called "cascade theory," that if republics such as Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan are taken under the control of Russia, all of the other republics will follow, and new Russian imperialism will restart the Cold War, which is already in evidence in Bosnia. Therefore, some intellectuals are hoping that the United States will take a stronger posture in the region politically as well as economically, becoming the new "big brother" for the Muslim Turkic republics.

This position is not without opposition. Pro-Russian intellectuals argue that they prefer the "big brotherliness" of Russia over that of the United States because they feel that they can more accurately predict and control interaction with Russia. In this context, it seems that
doubts about America are further complicated by the Russians’ own ambivalence towards the role America should play in the former Soviet Union, especially in Russia. Pro-Russian Muslim Turkic intellectuals see American aid and investment to Russia as humiliating. Furthermore, pro-Russian intellectuals criticize Russia for what they see as the Americanization of Russian business, culture and everyday life.

But according to some intellectuals, while Americanization is problematic for Russia, it is good for Kazakhstan, because it puts Kazakhstan and Russia on a similar plane. One Kazakh economist, working in a joint venture, argued that it is essential to receive American advice and project the image of America as a model for the future, because Russia itself is changing and searching for new models. Thus looking to Russia means looking to the past, since the present provides distorted images. In this context, the past image of Russia as the "big brother" is in struggle with the new image of America as "big brother," as an aspect of the republics’ uncertainty about themselves and their future.

Besides the image of the "big brother" as a reflection of past and present international relations, a commercial image of the United States is reflected in American business interests. One example is the office of the Houston-Baku Sister City Organization, which claims solidarity through oil, love of horses and love of independence. Above the door of the office is a panoramic view of an open prairie, with a man in a cowboy hat looking at a horizon of cacti. It conjures up more images of a Marlboro ad than sisterhood, freedom or independence. In a city full of American cigarette ads, from Lucky Strike to Marlboro and Kent, Azerbaijanis have a tendency to think of America or Texas as a land of commodities, rather than the "land of the free."

In fact, some European goods are sold in the markets as American, as a testimony to their expected quality. American cigarettes sell for 1,500 to 4,000 Manat in Baku, where the monthly minimum wage is 5000 Manat. Because of the price, cigarettes are frequently sold from the open pack individually, but they still represent luxury, a signal of status. Coca-Cola and other soft drinks, which are sold for 1,500 to 2,000 Manat in Azerbaijan, are given to children on weekend outings as something special. This experience of "luxurious" American goods is fortified by advertising showing healthy, good-looking Americans happily consuming the same goods. The advertisements also reinforce a view of the West as a "healthy and happy" society in contrast to the Soviet world. And this contrast even further opens channels of Western influence, facilitating an idea that Western culture, lifestyle and commodities are prerequisites for a "healthy and happy" society. People in the Caucasus and Central Asia have a tendency to interpret Western culture and American culture as the same, and they consume
movies, music, gadgetry, appliances, and clothing to actualize their new "self." As a result, the lifestyle of the West is sold, and Americanization is consumed, and the "healthy and happy" future is framed as a life full of commodities that everybody is free to purchase.

Many intellectuals are bothered by this emphasis on consumption rather than creation of a responsive, politically alert community to establish the foundations of civil society. They criticize the United States for not helping to teach the complexities of democracy, but instead encouraging consumerism. As one intellectual joked "the Russians came and painted the Caucasus and Central Asia blood red. Now we are independent, so the Americans have come to paint 'Coca-Cola' on the red background."

Unfulfilled expectations from the United States have led to further challenges to America as a "big brother" and a model among Muslim Turkic intellectuals. In both Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, people and intellectuals talk about Israel as a more balanced model of development for the region. For those intellectuals, Israel represents an attainable development level in a country that was created anew by its citizens. In contrast to multi-cultural immigrant America, Israel represents a single dominant culture fortified by people who migrated back and reclaimed control of their land. America is still part of this imagery, because many intellectuals point out that Israel could not have survived without American support. The parallel is that some intellectuals are hoping to create a critical mass to redefine their national "self" within the context of their national culture, and exert their own dominance over the land. In this picture, Russians and other minorities are marginalized in favor of an united community working together for a stronger future. In this construct, America is perhaps still a supportive "big brother," but not the ideal model.

The images of Israel compete with those of Turkey and Iran as a model. Yet both intellectuals and people are more aware of the problems of Turkey and Iran due to their closeness, while Israel remains a distant imaginary land for many. Iran as a model is attractive to those who support an Islamic state and who advocate isolation from both Soviet and American camps in favor of closeness to the Muslim countries. On the other hand Turkey, as a secular model, represents too many problems regarding a dependent economy and fractured political system, to be an exclusive ideal to shape the construction of "self." Many intellectuals have had the chance to interact with Turks, and have heard critiques of "Turkish realities." The people also see Turks as similar to themselves, struggling to survive in a world dominated by the West. Only the governments of the Muslim Turkic republics, when they were first established, tried to use Turkey as a political "ideal." But for the most part, the honeymoon
phase is over, and even though Turkish officials frequently visit the Muslim republics, the relationship is sliding into routine, and both sides seem aware of its limitations.

Conclusion

In August, 1995 American companies in Almaty, Kazakhstan sponsored the first Little League baseball game ever played in Central Asia. The companies not only supplied the uniforms and equipment, but company managers also worked as coaches and umpires. It seems that they saw baseball as a way to teach American principles and morality, and to introduce America to the people of Central Asia. Now, baseball is becoming part of the complex imagery of America that includes commercial goods, freedom and democracy, and security and strength. Baseball becomes a symbol of American culture, aimed to provide favorable imagery, but ending up providing additional stereotypes complementing the perception of American culture in Central Asia.

Stereotypes are products of relationships. The first step in constructing positive imagery includes reexamining Caucasian and Central Asian stereotypes that American policymakers and intellectuals foster. Existing imagery was designed during the Soviet period under the influence of Moscow, reflecting both American policymakers’ Moscow-centric focus and Moscow’s desire to dominate all affairs of the Soviet Union. These images are laden with prejudicial constructs regarding the backwardness and static characteristics of Caucasian and Central Asian societies.

As much as American images of the Muslim Turkic republics, the imagery of the United States as “big brother” is also an extension of the Soviet period. Different interpretations of the role of “big brother” as a "source of hope" and disappointment indicate not only changing realities of Central Asia and the Caucasus, but the multiple perceptions of those realities as interpreted by politicians, intellectuals and the people. The question is how to avoid the dichotomy of the "Terrible Turk" and "Ugly American" which is now a solidified, institutionalized imagery influencing American relations with Turkey.

The multiplicity of stereotypes and the ambivalence of images reflects the transition period in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Not only are the new republics in the process of defining who they are, they are in the process of defining who will provide their complimenting, as well as opposing images. The Soviet and American Cold War rhetoric influenced Muslim Turkic intellectuals’, politicians’ and people’s perceptions of the United States. Since the relationships are changing now, the imagery has the potential to transform.
The definition of the United States as the "other" will inform the future possibilities and limitations of the relationship with the new republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

ENDNOTES


4. For example, see Henry Kamm, "Turkey's Crises: Rebellion, Recession and Religion," *New York Times*, May 20, 1994, p. 3.
