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Globalization And Identity in the Trans-Caspian Region

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Globalization has become a loaded term, inspiring loyal proponents as well as fierce protest. In his seminar *Globalization and Identity in the Trans-Caspian Region*, Dr. Blum defended the argument that globalization does not have to be defined in strict black and white terms, and that in fact there does exist a middle ground between “Jihad and McWorld.” Fieldwork Dr. Blum conducted in the Trans-Caspian region utilized youth culture as a prism through which to understand the effect that globalization will have for future social cohesion. Three developing cities proved particularly useful as illustrative examples: Almaty, Kazakhstan; Astrakhan, Russia; and Baku, Azerbaijan. In all these cities, youth culture betrayed both a fascination with imported global trends, as well as a reversion to traditional values and national identity.

Dr. Blum’s study examined popular discourse such as local newspapers, radio, and magazines on the state, local, and sub-state levels. Personal interviews were conducted with people from organizations such as the Ministry of Youth, Ministry of Culture, and Government NGOs (organizations that operate similarly to NGOs, but are funded by the central government), as well as youth NGOs. This discourse was used to frame emerging policy issues in a social context.

What Dr. Blum discovered was a tremendous fascination with western cultural advances in the fields of economics, science, and technology, coupled with a tremendous revulsion towards the unmanageable influx of particularly western notions. The youth in the three cities in which Dr. Blum conducted his fieldwork expressed a great deal of consternation at the hegemonic and individualistic nature of western culture, seeing it as terribly hedonistic. And while they demonstrated a tremendous desire to cultivate the western skills conducive to marketization (such as entrepreneurship), traditional values and national patriotic sentiments were becoming increasingly important. The developing hybrid culture documented in these cities has become a typical pattern in the developing world at large.

In all three states studied, Dr. Blum noted two primary governmental responses to the allure of western culture and the concomitant backlash against certain aspects of western culture that globalization entails: direct control of culture, and delegation of authority in managing cultural activities. Through these two tracks, states try to build national identity. Directly, the state uses Soviet-style techniques and formulates a national identity doctrine directed at youth culture. This is supported by establishing official youth units essentially modeled on the Soviet Union's Komsomol [Communist Youth Union]. This allows youth movements to be controlled from above. Then, the state incorporates local governments and organizations by delegating authority and sponsoring festivals, songfests, business training, and other youth events. Local groups that lack the economic resources of the state can propose events that would not otherwise receive funding. Simply funding these events is not enough, however. Organizers realize they have to encourage youth participation by appropriating their interests, specifically western-style interests. For example, western rock and roll performances are sandwiched between traditional music performances (based on the premise that western culture loses its novelty and allure when it is not forbidden).

The same pattern of attitudes and values apparent at the state level is apparent within the self-led youth movements as well. These movements demonstrate very little distrust of the state, and a willingness (leaning towards enthusiasm) to engage the state and participate in official state events. Schools, after school programs, libraries, and the like all act as an extension of the state and uphold the same values and standards. They interact with youth NGOs to put on events and act as an intersection between state and society.

Dr. Blum then broached the question of why the state would pursue this dual pattern of state control and delegation. First, there is an ambivalent political culture that evolved from the Soviet legacy. Decades of Soviet rule tied the political notions of this region to a certain path dependency. Second, the state is operating under a number of constraints. There has been an increase in the proliferation and internalization of social-structural norms and a growing awareness that popular culture cannot be dictated from above. At this point, the Soviet brand of totalitarianism has been completely discredited. Independently, there has been an exogenous economic globalization that has exposed the incompatibility of marketization and central state control. Third, this dual pattern is simply an opportunity to which the state is responding.

In the reverse direction, there is the question of why youth NGOs are seeking the state. There is a popular demand for Soviet social order, and a yearning for the social cohesion that disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is enhanced by a subtle deference to the state's agency and authority. The NGOs also sense that there is a common dilemma that can be confronted united more effectively than separate.

In his final thoughts, Dr. Blum emphasized some points that struck him during the experience of his research. He was struck by the collective demand for both a state and a nation, and also by the importance of individual actors. Agency is extremely important in when confronting globalization and development. In conclusion, Dr. Blum pointed out that his findings suggest the emergence of a civil society, but one that is intrinsically different from western civil society. This society is statist in direction, where society completes the state rather than diminishing it.

Seminar participants discussed the stability of this system and questioned the ability of the hybrid system to endure in the face of inequality. Dr. Blum responded that currently, most of the inequality is attributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the legacy of constructed inequality. As globalization occurs, however, some individuals will be more able to access the benefits of globalization, thus creating inequality on the basis of economic conditions. This future inequality could develop when a middle class arises from the market economy and poses opposition to the government using their economic power for leverage.

The question then arose as to whether there was a distinction in state efforts between titular and non-titular youth, i.e. Russian and Kazakh or Azerbaijani youth, and what impact such a differentiation would have on the ability to build a cohesive national identity. The response was that most Russians living in Kazakhstan have proven willing to go along with “Kazakhization” because they consider themselves part of the Kazakh culture, much in the same way children born to immigrants in America consider themselves part of American culture.

The existence of religious sentiment among the youth movements was also discussed, and it was brought up that there is little religious sentiment among youth movements, although some in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are interested in the secularization of a traditional form of Islam.

Summarized by Anastasia Handy

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