

How can we use the concept of transition in Central Asian post-soviet history? An attempt to set a New Approach

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The current tensions in the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East and in Western countries, require an appropriate survey of the situation in the post-Soviet republics after almost 14 years of independence and three years of US military, economic and political involvement in this area.

The setting of the problematic

According to my 25 years' experience in Central Asia, I can assume that the major problems that are facing us foreign experts, the local population and the rulers, besides our different targets, are an inadequate estimation of its political, economical, social and mental reality, as well as an inappropriate appraisal of its volatility, strengths and weaknesses. In other words, the Central Asian field suffers from a misunderstanding of the concept of "transition", which has a different colour and various consequences according to the political actors who use it: i.e. the Central Asian elite, Western donors and actors, local and foreign media...

Do we face a new kind of transition from Socialist planified economy to market economy? Or an historical comeback from the "global socialist market" to the local, transforming market under the fashion label of Globalization? Are we the witnesses of post-socialist transformation according to the concept of the French economist Bernard Chavance, or of the persisting syndrome of openness and landlookness which can be said to have characterized the Central Asian territory from Ancient times. Is the concept of Transition an ideological tool for smoothing social and political unrest and mistrust toward the current governments? Or is it a pragmatic means to describe changes brought by modernity, even post modernity, by the use of chronology and political disrupt? Moreover, can we argue that the term "post-socialist transformation" is more appropriate than transition, because it keeps open the notion of continuity and persistency?

So in this presentation I will try to focus first on the two sides of what we could call a slightly over-ideologized

and instrumentalized approach to Central Asian post-independence issues. In the second part, I will argue through seven postulates, which precisely draw the lines of various aspects of transition, that we suffer in our approach of the current situation from a whole set of preconceptions that have led to the unbalanced frame we apply to Independent Central Asia.

Between overestimation and underestimation

It is obvious that our western approach suffers from a good deal of overestimation and of underestimation.

1. Overestimation of its strategic significance. If Ahmed Rashid had declared the 25 March 2001 to an American radio station that Central Asia was vital to the stability of South Asia, the Middle East, China and Russia, in short to the stability of the world, it is no more the opinion of Zbigniew Brzezinski¹, nor what we can read about the new strategic definition of the Great Middle East by the Americans, which exclude Post-Soviet Central Asia and Caucasia.
2. Overestimation of its natural resources, which do exist of course, but implied to solve a great deal of transportation problems. The Economic transition implies huge foreign investments and crucial changes in local legislation.
3. Overestimation of its Soviet legacy. This does exist, but it has to be confronted with the tsarist disruption period in order to better appreciate the continuity and changes through the last centuries. In this matter, my point is to

I am not saying that Central Asia has no strategical significance,

but it has to be articulated with a wide range of factors. On the other side, Central Asia can be seen as the remote courtyard for Russia, China, and India, something like a buffer zone, which can either stop instability, or transmit it further. But I raise some doubts about its capability to directly break the stability of China, Russia or India. Central Asia along its history has always alternated between openness and closeness; centralized empire or part empire and part split principalities; active political participant or passive and land-locked area. In other words, the strategic transition, which apparently might have been very fruitful for Central Asia after the events of 9/11/2001, could now be seen like a dead-end.

1 BRZEZINSKI, Z., "A geostrategy for Eurasia", *Foreign Affairs*, 1997, 76 (5), pp. 50-64.

criticize the western ideological position based on hypertrophy of Soviet involvement in the Central Asian issues as innovation originator. For me, the major changes and modernization came through the tsarist period. The political transition in Central Asia has to be shown from the original trauma caused by the coming of the infidel power into the Turkestan Dar el-Islam.

4. Overestimation of its Islamic factors overwhelming all the others. Indeed, this factor does exist but it is mostly exacerbated since the collapse of the Soviet rule, for different reasons: internal as a political tool for the current rulers, and external, as a political tool for Russia, for instance to maintain its pressure over the region. The religious and political transition combined is not the first by-product of Independency. This trend was born over many decades and openly showed up after 1991. The real period of Transition occurred earlier.
5. Overestimation of Central Asian involvement and real interest toward the global ummah, or the entire world if we consider the traditional retirement within oneself of the post-soviet population. The Transition toward globalization seems not yet to be completely achieved.

Partly, as a consequence of what was just said, we can see a many points of underestimation:

1. Underestimation of Central Asian pre-Russian, pre-modern conservatism, especially concerning the vision of power and opposition, including a typical Islamic vision of power. Nation-States as a structure was a concept imported from outside, but very quickly autochtonized in their “flesh” and social building. That can be one of a number of explanations of Stalin’s repression in Central Asia. The Bolshevik principle, which was suppose to operate in the socialist federative republics, was to be “socialist” in their contents and formally national. What happened in reality was just the contrary: even in Kroutchviev’s time, the central power realized that the Central Asian republics were formally socialist and really national. This became obvious under perestroïka. The political so-called transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union shows many trends of continuity and persistency. The transition could have occurred before, or it will happen after the replacement of the current presidents.
2. Underestimation of central Asian capability to passively resist from State violence against Islam during the tsarist and soviet period. This

is an important point because we can read in recent books that Islam disappeared for 70 years or was totally “suppressed”, and only came back thanks to the renewal of independence. It is interesting to note that this typical anti-soviet argument, that was frequently used in various publications, has become since independence an Islamist argument against the popular and residual Islam that persisted during the Soviet time, but which is considered now as outside the frame of dogmatic Islam. This is creating a clash of generation in Central Asia, which is reinforced by Islamist militants.

3. Underestimation of the nostalgia toward the previous political regime. This is what President Nazarbaev called the “ex-Soviet citizen syndrome”, or in general the status of Second World Power, lost after 1991.
4. Underestimation of the capability of Central Asia to resist from the outside world implication, which occurred in the region suddenly after the collapse of the USSR. If we have to make a difference between the Kazakh economic policy and the Ouzbek one, these two young republics share an equal syndrome of dispossession, which acts as a self-defense tool against mondialisation.

If we consider the balance between overestimation and underestimation and if we try to think about the action of international funding agencies for reforming Central Asian societies, we can easily figure out why and where some failures occurred in this field. We have also to understand that the whole western perception of Soviet Central Asia is slightly inappropriate and should be questioned thanks to the new opportunity of working on archives and conducting field research since Independence. A new perception of the term of transition, more flexible and ideologically open has to be promoted or definitely replaced... It has to confront the term Modernity.

Transition and modernity

In addition to what was just said, I will argue that one of the main questions that has to be solve in understanding the current situation in Central Asia is the problem of the various sources of modernity implied by the concept of transition and their consequences in terms of changing and “incorporating” the scales of time and space in this part of the world.

Modernity in Central Asia was from Ancient time always balancing between East and West, South and North impulses. Sometimes it occurred from China, then from Islamic

Caliphate, later from European Russia. Modernity was not only a matter of economy, the insertion of Central Asia within the global trading set of the time, as during the Mongol Rule or the pre-capitalistic Russian Empire. It was also a matter of intellectual changes, such as reformism in Islam; pan Slavism in Russia, which shaped in a certain way, Pan Turkism among the Muslim Turkic elite.

As a matter of fact, since the Samanide Renaissance and the Timouride one, Central Asia acted as an experimental ground for modernity and innovations which were conceived elsewhere and which had to be reinjected (imported) from outside and then adapted to local conditions. It is true for the reformist (mainly djadid) ideas brought to Turkestan by Tatars; or Turkistanees from Istanbul, at the end of the XIXth century, the Trans-Caspian railway built by Russian soldiers as well as the concept of Nation-State brought by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution. But it is also true that modernity in different times has found quite good conditions to be achieved.

Firstly, I would argue that when changes take place in political, social, and cultural fields, as has been the case so many times in Central Asia, they have their specific path, interfering in the local societies more or less rapidly according to the time, the location,

the conjuncture and others internal and external factors.

So that we need to create a new conceptual frame to integrate time and space and to deal with any topic of micro-history, micro sociology and so on. This would play as a complex multi-parameters system for valuably interpreting local as well as global history, politics, sociology, and anthropology of Central Asia. Numerous scholars are already involved in such a quest, but the pluridisciplinary approach is definitely crucial especially in the context of globalization and Internet accumulative and dispersing process of knowledge.

It imposes the choice and combination of operative concepts available in Social Sciences and even in a wider scale, political, religious, medical anthropology, anthropology of development, of social organizations, as well as urban, rural, judicial, history, sociology of youth and elders, gender studies, history of mentality, psychiatry, and so on.

Second, we would need to select a set of indicators which can point out the various lines of transition within each fields: political, social, economical, cultural spheres, with their numerous subdivisions, linguistic, ethnic, geographic that could be combined and cross-referenced in all directions.

For instance:

- The ideological sphere with the question of time and space, the perception of the Past with the instrumentalisation of History, the “outillage mental” (Lucien Febvre) of populations, the perception of State violence.
- The political sphere: the question of limits and boundaries, and the subsequent question of power and its legitimacy, including the various territorial, judicial forms of management, counter-powers and opposition.
- The social and sanitary sphere: the religious factors (with its political, mental health factors).
- The environmental factors: the ecological security.
- The cultural factors: the problem of education, transmission of knowledge and identity in the religious perspective.

The paternity of transitions

All these fields came across various moments of transition, which reveal separate chronology. But the main problem, which still darkens our Central Asian field, is to assume the paternity of transitions in order to better understand post-Soviet societies.

It seems to me drastically erroneous to ascribe to the Soviet power, all the

innovations and transformations we used to attribute to it: dividing the Turkestan territory, erasing all tracks of alternative spirituality and values, creating native Turkic languages, opening education school for girls (which was already done in reformed maktabas), freeing women (which was among the demands of the Djadids), centralizing administration, fighting against opposition, promoting sanitary reforms, increasing the irrigated surfaces, digging the irrigation canals, implementing new cotton crops, developing the transport infrastructure, and so on.

So far, one of my purposes is to “give back” to the Aq padishâh (the tsar of Russia), what is usually attributed to the Red one (General Secretary of Communist Party). Indeed, who tried first to settle nomadic tribes, who first “artificially” divided the Central Asian territory into administrative units, who first promoted the split of a potential unified Turkic language into different vernacular dialects to avoid the political panturkist project threatening russification?

My purpose is to attempt through the presentation of seven postulates, which precisely reveal the Western perception of the “Post-soviet transition”, to better understand the nature of the current changes and continuity after Independence.

Such a way to handle the Post-Soviet

reality does not mean that I am looking for various explanations to smooth the historical responsibilities of each power toward its subjects or citizens. This means that I would try to get closer to “historical truth” for the sake of the local populations and the memory of their “grandfathers”, some of them being politically active a long time before the Russian Revolution and continuing during it.

Seven postulates for several transitions

In order to renew the approach of the post-Soviet so-called Transition in Central Asia, it seems to me appropriate to point out the following preconceptions which trouble our perception of the real stakes of today’s so called “Transition”.

1) *The political transition:* the Soviet power stands at the origin of all the disruption that occurred in Central Asia, namely in the Turkestan and the Steppe Regions, especially in the fields of:

- Territorialisation and sedentarization of the nomadic tribes, administrative division.
- The will of breaking traditions, which were considered as harmful to russification.
- The political fight against Islam.
- The claim of equality for women.

Alternative proposal: most of the crucial disruptions that concerned Turkistan were initiated by Russian colonization. The burst into Dar el - Islam of a “kafir” power which did not intend to turn to Islam constituted the first trauma to territorial integrity, so to say, purity or sacrality of the Turkistani earth (remember previous conquerors such as the Mongols, the descendants of whom gradually became Muslim, in Russia, in Persia and in Central Asia). Then, the tsarist, administrative, economic and cultural policy, with their own attributes of modernity respectively, achieved a first step of conditionment to “Alterity for all”, meaning the Turkistani populations and a first experience of defeat (Kosseleck) for some of them.

This obviously made easier the task of those who were involved in the “building of the new man” in Central Asia during the XXth century. Moreover, the small fringe of Muslim Reformers, the Djadid who were active before the Russian Revolution in a certain way, had prepared the ground for Bolshevik reformers. They took on their shoulders the first clash of modernity in front of the conservative ulemas with the introduction of innovations such as railway, telegraph, photography, movie, then electricity, and cars...

So far, the political transition is colonial by nature. It began in the middle of XIXth century in Turkestan and was followed by the Soviet one.

2) *The administrative and statehood transition:* nation building in Central Asia is assimilated into the nation state frontiers building, made by the Soviet Power between 1924 and 1936 in order to “divide and rule”. 1880-1991.

Alternative proposal: The artificial and deliberate nature of the frontiers is attributed to the nations themselves, even though their history is totally documented by archives and even if it cannot reach the deep structures they claim. We can find in the pre-colonial and colonial archives numerous mentions of those ethnonyms chosen by Soviet ideologists to achieve an administrative delimitation, which was already done many times by the tsarist Civil servants. The Soviet Modernity consisted of applying a pluri-ethnic, pluri-confessional territory, the most coherent cutting-out.

- a sedentary Zone: Ouzbek -Tadjik
- a desert zone : Turkmen
- a steppe zone: Kirghiz-Kazakh.

Imposed from outside was an imported pattern of state (European type) inside these administrative and political limits (which had nothing to do with international borders but upon a deeply patriarchal, traditional and agrarian Society.)

This exogenous scheme, which answered to the management and development requirements of the Soviet rulers, got its hypertrophic

achievement in the Ferghana division. It was highly conflictual from the 1920s on. Thinking of these limits only as proof of Soviet cynism seems for me to be a serious mistake. This would mean that we ignore the first territorialisation of the Kirghiz nomads by the Tsarist power. The willingness of the Soviet Rulers to give a South to Kirghizstan, and East to Uzbekistan, a North to Tadjikistan, in other words, to provide an access to the water of Syr Daria and to allow the development of irrigation.

The administrative Transition was undertaken by the Tsarist military and civil servants and achieved by the Soviet ones.

3) *The psychosocial transition:* Soviet ideology through one of its tools. The legislation adopted at the end of the 1920s takes the entire responsibility of the damages endured by the family structure and psychic structures of individuals who came across harsh political and economic transition in Central Asia. In other words, the Soviet Power would have become as strong as its dogma. The Social transition was achieved at the very beginning of the Sovietization.

Alternative proposal: Soviet legislation tried to give women a better status in society. The minimum age for marriage was set at 18, verbal consent was required and it was forbidden

to practice polygamy, the seclusion of women, the wearing of parandja and tchachvans, and the payment of kalym. This changed the family organization; indeed it diminished male predominance over women. But the main reason for implementing this programme was to involve half of the population, the women, into socialist production. One other goal was to introduce new aspects of modernity and western secularized culture into a traditional society, which was supposed to change thanks to women. Despite this, we must notice the persisting weight of the Sharia and of the mental representations tied to Islam in the states where it was abolished by a Revolution or a change of power, as in Turkey. In Uzbekistan, for example, several traditions were mostly preserved, such as the arranged wedding, the temporary wedding, payment of Kalym, groups of solidarity (gap), vertical and horizontal.

This raises the question of the specificity of Central Asian societies living under the conservative structure of the Soviet System (labeled as progressive). Those Muslims who were able, performed an 'out of Sharia Islam' without a legal transmission of the religious knowledge in conditions of power abuse from a laic and secular State.

The ideological and social Transition in Central Asia has its own path

and has to be studied separately and within a large scale of time.

4) Stalin, the authoritarian and repressive transition: stalinism was perceived and is today re-considered only as an "unfair tyranny" (zolm) by the Central Asian Muslims (intellectuals and others).

Alternative proposal: There was a kind of social reception (adherence) to Stalinism, Stalin being perceived as the undeniable chief of the Soviet State, subjected to a quasi religious cult. The Stalin repressions could not have occurred without the participation of thousands of executants. Moreover, many Central Asian citizens today would appreciate a new Stalin as President.

According to the dogmatic Islamic point of view, the rebellion against the "unfair Emir" is not allowed (according to J.P. Charnay) even though he is personally corrupt and a hypocrite if he maintains the Islam of the community (Ummah). It was legally impossible for a believer in Central Asia or in the Caucasus to murder Stalin who during World War II re-established the official representations of Islam (the SADUM).

This does not mean that there were not various forms of protest, more or less clandestine at this time. This does not mean that the current rulers in Central

Asia do not concentrate resentment toward the Russians, or Russian colonial and Soviet involvement in Central Asia toward the personality of Stalin, the absolute evil, and toward Stalinism, as a period of Communion in a collective suffering. If we start with the fact that (quoting O. Roy in his book *The Failure of Political Islam*), “The contrary of tyranny in the Islamic political thought is not freedom but justice (adolat), ethic became the emblem of protest and not democracy”.

By the way, the current governments in Central Asia do have an ethic discourse (decoratively democratic for the outside world). This discourse that the western experts understand only through their strongly didactic form, demonstrates, on the contrary, the persistence of an “Islamic mental structure” despite the Soviet education and formation of the elites.

The authoritarian transition under Russian style began with the colonial rule. Stalin was a tragic experiment in Soviet History, but is not entirely seen as such.

5) *The alternative thinking transition:* the Central Asian Civil Society did not exist until the massive involvement of international NGOs after the collapse of the Soviet Union. All Soviet citizens followed the social requirements imposed by the regime and above all

the Communist Party, (the number of adherents did not reach more than 4.5% in Central Asia). They sent their children to the Komsomol without trying to transmit the minimum (or the maximum) of their own values. Homo sovieticus was without depth, without memory, entirely devoted to the building of socialism. This would lead to denying the history of opposition in Central Asia from the de-Stalinization, or the existence of political Islam (since the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and even before).

Alternative proposal: Central Asian society from 1945 up to perestroika was apparently Soviet (that is to say correctly Soviet) but persisting Muslim (by its values and representations). After a certain time of “consideration” and latency, it preserved unexpectedly its identity - despite the considerable efforts made by the Central Power to transform the morals and mentality. This shows a kind of resiliency among this population that faced tragic decades, but adapted themselves to the current reality and survived...

Moreover, the Soviet constitutions allowed room, even formally, to the respect of private life (family groups structured by authority of elders, integrity of houses, respect of honour). If there is in Islam a civil society indifferent to the State, there

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was in Central Asia a Muslim society despite the State and within the State. And not only a Muslim one, also a Christian and Jewish one.

The alternative thinking transition began with the October Revolution in Turkestan. Many strata of clandestine opposition up to Perestroika followed the choice between Bolsheviks or Basmatchis at that moment.

6) *The official islamic transition:* the Official Structure founded by Stalin in 1943, the well known SADUM, was entirely loyal to the power, for the sake of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union.

Alternative proposal: Despite its constant proofs of loyalty, this official structure took the small opportunity it could get to maintain a minimal Islam within an official atheistic State. It was able to convince the Central Asian workers and peasants that they were still Muslims, even being restrained from perfuming the Islamic requirements, thanks to the niya (value of intention) and a compensation system for prayers (hajj, ramadan). This was set in order to reduce the anxiety of the believer, as of the citizen. The stake was consistent as because “the denying of the almighty of God in Islam is almost the only unexpiable sin” (JP Charnay). According to the Islamic dogma, the State atheism condemns

without remission the believer to live as a sinner. This implies that the pragmatic Central Asian Muslims very soon after the coming of the Russian power to Turkistan have set few systems of purification in order to reestablish their dialogue with God, systems the SADUM highly contributed to promote.

The Official Islamic Transition seems to be more complex than it appears. Its consequences are various and crucial for the development of the Soviet and Post Soviet Civil Society. Official Muslim clerics have obviously played a buffer role between the State and the citizens.

7) *The ideological and political islam transition:* political Islam, even Islam as a whole re-emerged in Central Asia from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Alternative proposal: On the contrary, this trend, strongly implemented in the ex-Soviet space, has an historical depth of at least three or four decades with the clandestine creation of the Party of Islam Rebirth in Kurgan Tiube in 1973. This allows it a larger maturity than if it was only thirteen years old. It can also be proud of its good generational basis and its martyrlogy. (trials, goulag, Soviet War in Afghanistan, then in Tadjikistan and Tchechenia). It might also benefit from the Soviet education and the

social and political networks inherited from Soviet times (Communist party, Komsomol). In a certain way, what allowed the Muslim community to persist were the following Islamic rules: the exception of necessity (lâ darûra fi'l Islam, no constraint in Islam), constancy that helps to endure adversity (sabr), and fundamental vertu. To this we can add the weight of the traditions that help to maintain family and community relationships.

Conclusion

Indeed, Central Asia keeps some crucial qualities of preserving old values while accepting new ones. Its multipolar ethical, religious, cultural background always gives some space to modernity and innovation, which does not exclude harsh political and religious debate. The question of transition gets as well a multipolar structure.

This very special capability to mix quite harmoniously apparently antagonistic concepts and conceptions (for instance, for a urban modern Kazakh to be former communist, now nationalist, Muslim and Shamanist) seems to be one of the keys to understand the XXth century in this region. It helps to avoid the temptation of reshaping the historical, political and socio-cultural periods according to the strict chronology of disrupt, breakdowns and historical transitions

and to rewrite the official discourse, neither Western, nor Soviet, about them.

As a short conclusion I would say that finally, my aim would be to solve partly the question of the real sovietization of Central Asia, the nature and specificity of Central Asian Civil Society, the local reaction to European secular modernity, the tracks and evolution of the numerous conflicts that affected these societies during seven decades despite the periods of repression or cooptation. It would give some crucial keys to allow the understanding of the current period of independency and its prospects.

In other terms, such an approach implies to define the proper time of introduction of modernity and changes and the ones of their “re-introduction” and “re-instrumentalisation” that are the guidelines of each separate Transition. I think that this is the only way to stop creating an “imagined Soviet period”, in between the colonial and the Post-soviet independence ones. At the same time this would allow the proper “discovery” of the real Soviet community with its capability of both maintaining its official identity and its plural self identifications and adaptations to a huge political and social pressure, a kind of “Transition resiliency”.

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