Uncertain divides: religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands

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Summary

This dissertation describes and analyzes how people construct identity in a rapidly changing border region. Based on ethnographic research in three localities of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria (Georgia), it traces changing ideas and practices concerning ethnicity, religion and modernity in order to illuminate the shifting linkages between state borders and cultural boundaries. It demonstrates that in the Georgian borderlands the withering of the socialist state was paralleled by the drawing of rigid cultural and social boundaries. These boundary-drawing practices had the paradoxical effect of grounding and reinforcing Soviet constructions of identity, even though they were part of the process of overcoming and dismissing the Soviet past.

These findings about identity construction challenge conventional wisdom concerning the end of socialism. The heightened importance of cultural identity in postsocialist countries is often presented as a return to pre-Soviet identities that were held in ‘cold storage’ and/or as a response to the ‘ideological vacuum’ left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The problem with these views is that they ignore the Soviet past and fail to understand how, often in unexpected and unintended ways, Soviet rule has, and continues to influence, the formation of specific identities. Instead of assuming or denying continuities between pre-Soviet and post-Soviet forms of identity as the ‘cold storage’ and ‘vacuum’ theories do respectively, it is crucial to analyze how these forms of identity have been shaped and modified to fit changing social and political contexts. This dissertation shows that even though local celebrations of cultural identity are presented as a return to the pre-Soviet past, they often follow social lines, and are based on ideas, that developed during Soviet rule.

These ‘Soviet creations’ of identity have not simply spilled over to the present. Rather, the collapse of the Soviet state has sparked incentives to fortify and essentialize the cultural constructions it produced. The disappearance of socio-economic certainties, the renewal of cross-border contacts and the return of dissenting voices revealed contradictions and incongruities in locally held notions of religion, ethnicity and modernity. These threats to identity have pushed inhabitants of Ajaria to emphasize and enlarge differences between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ and thus the boundaries between Christianity and Islam, Georgians and Turks, and Asia and Europe have been reinforced. This dissertation shows that although physical constraints do not necessarily bind the construction of identity, the dynamics that unfold along territorial borders may well provide the means and incentives for grounding and fortifying the state endorsed identities. Thus, in the case of Ajaria, the ideological divides created during the socialist period have been reinforced despite the fact that the Soviet state has disappeared.
The Georgian Republic and its autonomous regions

The Ajarian Autonomous Republic