

Cultural Autonomy in a Federal Republic: The Tartars in Russia

written by ecem | 12 Haziran 2015

Interview with Dr Federica Prina, Research Associate at the University of Glasgow, has been working in the field of minority rights and freedom of expression in Eastern Europe and Central Asia for many years, first as a human rights practitioner in a London-based NGO, later on various research projects.

We had the chance to talk to her at the workshop on “New Modalities of Autonomy”, co-organized by the Faculty of Political Sciences at Ankara University and Queen’s University Belfast and funded by the British Council.

You are currently working on a research project studying various examples of cultural autonomy in Eastern Europe and Russia.

Yes, we are looking at countries that have adopted legislation on national cultural autonomy and Russia is one of them. They adopted a law in 1996. We are also looking at the cases of Hungary, Estonia and Serbia; they all have this kind of legislation, and Romania, which doesn’t have a law, but has discussed such regulations for a long time. So, it is an interesting example. We are also thinking of including the Ukraine, because while it has no specific law on national cultural autonomy, there is a reference to cultural autonomy in the law on minorities, and there has been some autonomy for Crimean Tatars in the Crimean Peninsula. So, we will possibly also incorporate it and see how the situation has changed after Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

That definitely sounds like a very interesting project. Maybe we can focus on the Tatars in Russia for the sake of this interview. Could you perhaps tell us first what kind of problem there existed that triggered the need for that kind of autonomy solution. What was the situation there and when exactly was this law passed? Was that also 1996?

Yes, well, actually the issue of nationality policies started even during the Russian Empire. Since it was a very multi-national Empire, there was a need to try to accommodate different groups to deal with them to some extent. Then, when the Soviet Union started they developed a form of ethnic federalism. So, again the question was how do we incorporate all these minorities into the Soviet Union and how do we teach them communism, basically, when we don’t speak the same language. As the country was extremely vast and also very diverse, they couldn’t simply “russify” the whole country, so they tried to come up with this arrangement so that they wouldn’t feel alienated and they could at least keep some of their identity and they could receive some education in their languages. That, however, later slowly shifted towards Russian or becoming bilingual. So, the main groups including the Tatars received a territory and that is how they created a number of the republics including the republic of Tatarstan. Some of the republics, the so-called ‘Union Republics’, eventually became independent states, like for example the Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

Tatarstan didn’t become independent, is that right?

There were a number of autonomous republics which were inside what was called the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, which also had its own smaller republics within it and Tatarstan was one of them. They actually have very strong ethnic consciousness and a long history in that territory,

but because it lies right in the middle of Russia, it would have been very difficult for them to become an independent state and it didn't happen. At the same time, in addition to the Tatars, there are many other ethnic groups, which do not have a territory at all, because it was not 'assigned' to them, because they were not as numerous or influential minorities.

In the 1990s, when the Russian government was preoccupied that more of these ethnic groups would make claims and pose possible threats to the territorial integrity of Russia, they thought of introducing national cultural autonomy (NCA), which is not based on territory, but rather on cultural autonomy and some kind of autonomy in the field of education and culture, which is non-threatening from the point of view of the state. In this way, they could also accommodate groups which had an autonomous region, but whose individual members were obviously not all living in that region, because for example there are lots of Tatars which live outside of Tatarstan, and there are lots of ethnic groups which do not have any territory at all, and which are dispersed, like the Roma, the Jews (actually the Jews do have a small territory, an autonomous okrug, but in a very remote part of Russia, in the Far East). So, this law was regarded as one that could accommodate some of these demands.

Was this a law that the Russian government itself implemented before actually any clear claims were being made or did an ethnic Tatar movement already exist which was getting stronger? Was national cultural autonomy the claim of such a movement or was it rather the government that tried to impede their claims?

I think they kind of met in the middle, because there was definitely ethnic mobilization which started at the end of the perestroika when more freedoms were given to society, which included ethnic groups, and some started complaining about the fact that e.g. in some of the republics, there was a decrease in minority language education. So, although in the 1930s much education was in the Tatar language, it progressively decreased. Some groups started complaining about problems in the sphere of education in the early 1990s, so the state was looking for a solution. The state also realized that they had to come up with some kind of models that could be acceptable for the groups.

The idea of national cultural autonomy had already been examined at the beginning of the Soviet Union, but it was initially rejected, because they thought it would not be a viable alternative. Lenin, himself, had actually considered it, but he had rejected it, thinking it would simply solidify ethnic consciousness. Instead, they wanted to accommodate ethnic groups, but only with the view of creating a Soviet Socialist society.

So, one unity?

Yes, eventually. They were willing to provide ethnic schools for minority languages, but eventually there would only be the Soviet citizen without any major differences in ethnicity. Ethnicity was going to be transcended, eventually.

So, they decided to discard the idea of cultural autonomy for ethnic groups. But then, at the end of the Soviet Union, when they were considering new models and were trying to come up with new ways of dealing with the problems that had emerged, it was considered again. I guess the government also realized the limits of territoriality, because there were many groups which had obviously not been 'assigned' a region and there were also many that had a kin republic, but they didn't live there. So, these individuals had been neglected by nationalities policy. National Cultural Autonomy was seen as a way to pacify all minorities.

So, we understand that there was actually already a federal system when they started contemplating national cultural autonomy models. Why couldn't the federal system solve

the problems which were then regarded solvable by cultural autonomy? Is it only because there were people from ethnic minorities that did not actually live in those specific territories or was there anything else that the federal system can't solve which cultural autonomy can?

Yes, I it is mainly because of individual members of minority groups that didn't live in 'their own' republics, because of their history or because of the need to move for to other regions for work. And as noted the smaller groups were not 'assigned' a territory at all. But the other issue is also that in the republics there are not only people of that specific ethnic group (the so-called 'titular group'), there are Russians as well, and often other ethnicities. So, these groups combined have developed a kind of regional identity. For example, if we consider the republic of Tatarstan, there exists not only a Tatar identity, but also a Tatarstani identity which can also encompass the Russians who live there. So, it's another complexity. The Russian government realized the limits of territoriality, and National Cultural Autonomy was also seen as possibly creating links between members of a particular minority across the country, or maybe even beyond the country.

Can you maybe tell us, what do people actually get from cultural autonomy agreements. What are the competences or what kind of decision-making powers do they get?

Yes. Actually, the model hasn't been considered to be very successful. I should mention there are two different systems of cultural autonomy. One is the actual *national cultural autonomies*, which are institutions; and the other is what they call *Peoples' Congresses*. So, in the case of the Tatars there is a World Congress of Tatars.

Talking about the national cultural autonomies, what I explained to you is actually the concept that lies behind it, which was possibly an idealized version of inter-ethnic relations, and is different from the practice. If you look at the Russian law, it says that these institutions can be established at the local, regional and federal level. So, you can establish local organizations and they could unite and form a regional organization. And then, the regional organizations could unite and form an institution at the federal level, which is part of a consultative body which is in dialogue with the government. That means that they have a consultative function, and the law says they also have some functions in the area of education and culture. That would already be a very important function, because the issue of minority education in Russia has been a very very important one.

In practice, the system has not work so well, because consultation does not always take place, - and when it does happen, there is no actual obligation on part of the local, regional or federal authorities to listen to the recommendations. At the beginning there was a lot of enthusiasm including from groups which don't have a territory. For example, I was interviewing a group of Karelians, which is a minority which is mostly located near Finland and their language is very close to Finnish. There is a small republic of Karelia, but there are also Karelians living outside of this republic, in the city of Tver. In the interview they said that [through this law] it was the first time that they were recognized as a group of Karelians in this city (as 'Tver Karelians'). So, they welcomed the law and they felt it had brought some kind of symbolic recognition. They also had ongoing relations with the local authorities, a form of cooperation for the preservation of their culture, language classes etc.

Is it, therefore, right to say that this regulation on cultural autonomy in Russia enables mainly competences in the field of the preservation of culture, language and education?

Yes, but even in these particular spheres, of language and education, the law doesn't actually work very well, because only in some cases minority groups can cooperate with the authorities in shaping the [school] curricula or organizing language lessons; sometimes even this does not happen.

So, the competences are only really consultative and not more?

Yes, unfortunately. Members of National Cultural Autonomies can conduct seminars. Maybe they are given some space in the media. Actually, that is an important thing. The law says that National Cultural Autonomies should have access to the media to popularize their messages. But it doesn't really happen or it happens, but this provision is not strictly observed. The law does, however, give minorities access to public officials, sometimes even at a high level. As I said, there is also a federal board for national cultural autonomy and they meet in a consultative body and can raise their concerns. But then, they can never be certain that they are actually going to be heard, or that they will have an impact.

Can I just double-check with you on that? Is this law specific for every individual groups that exists, or is it one law for all groups?

It is one law for all groups. So, anybody who is affiliated with any particular minority can establish an organization.

Is it then right to say that this law in a way only regulates the possibility to freely organize as an ethnic group, rather than that there are fixed mechanisms, competences and obligations?

Yes, it is a very loose system. And again, there is a real problem with the implementation of this law, because initially there were some obligations for the government to ensure that these consultations took place and also to provide support to these organizations, including funding. Some funding is provided, but it is quite non-transparent the way in which it is allocated in some cases. And I guess, initially, there was an expectation that this funding would be provided. However, this shows the way in which the law developed and what amendments were introduced later. For example, initially, the law said that funding "should" be provided, but that was later changed into "can" be provided; it now says that organizations are "allowed" to receive support from the government, but it doesn't mean that the government has an obligation to provide any support.

Well, that does sound a bit as if the state was trying to pacify these groups, give them a little bit of freedom to organize around their cultural identity, but then not really bind them into a decision-making process. So, there is no representation in the parliament or executive, is that right?

Not only that, but also political parties on the bases of ethnicity are banned. There haven't been very clear demands to have these parties, also because it is not very easy to enter parliament. There is a threshold for parties to be represented in parliament, which is now 5%. It would be very difficult for any minority party to achieve that. I think that the Tatars have tried to use the opportunities they have as much as they can. They also use their republic, for example to provide education in Tatar. They use lobbying. That [territoriality and contacts] is probably considered a more effective way of upholding their culture than having a political party which would never manage to pass laws in parliament because, even if it could enter parliament, without a majority it would be outvoted.

Also the powers of the republics have decreased under Putin. It is possible that - at the time - the people who campaigned to adopt this law - it was actually introduced by the Minister of Nationality Affairs - actually had good intentions, but the situation has changed since then.

So, if I understand you correctly, we have an increase in cultural autonomy which is very limited in its competences and at the same time the strength of the individual federal republics which once were created along apparent ethnic lines has in fact decreased.

Yes.

So, more centralization than less.

Yes, more centralization. In fact, during the Yeltsin period the president of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, was a very important political figure. He was a former Soviet communist leader, but also he was trying to balance the interests of the Russians in Tatarstan and the Tatars. So, he was a kind of moderate nationalist. There were some agreements between Moscow and Tatarstan at that stage, but now the republic has less power. Now that Shaimiev is gone, the current president has less power. All the leaders of the different regions of Russia used to be represented in the Federation Council, in which they had some decision-making powers. However, a law was passed in 2000, under Putin, that changed the structure of this Federation Council. So, now it is no longer the leaders of the regions, but their representatives, who are appointed in a way that can be manipulated. This means that the regions do not have the powers that they used to have.

That is definitely interesting, especially when we look at it from the situation of Turkey.

When you look at the original theory of national cultural autonomy, which was proposed by Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, they mention that the groups should have cultural autonomy, but also some form of representation in the central government. I think that it is this form of consociationalism that is important, because this is exactly what they don't have in Russia.

Even if they have a form of cultural autonomy, minorities in Russia don't have any power to actually define the laws that affect them, because they are for the most part excluded from law-making.

That does definitely sound as if this law in practice causes minorities to become passive. Then, I would like to ask you if there are any examples of the other countries that you are looking at in your project, in which cultural autonomy is connected to some kind of decision-making processes in parliament or executive.

Hungary is considered to have the strongest model of cultural autonomy, because there are local councils and the representatives of minorities are actually able to elect people who sit in these councils. Then, the councils have a say on the management of the regions at the local level. So, they can make decisions about schools and the language that is used by the local authorities etc.

When we go back to what you said about Lenin himself who discarded this idea, because he thought it would deepen ethnic differences. And obviously, these ethnic differences didn't disappear with the policies which they then followed. Do you think that this kind of cultural autonomy, even in a stronger form than it exists in Russia today, can actually lead to a strengthening of ethnic divisions? On the one hand, these forms of ethnic representation or self-government in some form is needed to counter all kinds of discrimination, on the other there is the situation that they fortify ethnic divisions. We should face this problem. Is there any solution that comes from the theory on cultural autonomy which bridges this problem?

Well, definitely, cultural autonomy is very much criticized for this reason, for entrenching differences. Especially in the original model one would have to register as a member of specific ethnic group, and put your name on a particular electoral roll. Also according to the original model, people would pay taxes to the institutions of that particular ethnicity which would then fund school etc.

The criticism with that is that it is very divisive, because one person will have to identify with one

group and not with others. There is a problem with that. It takes you away from the idea of plural identities and makes you instead focus on your ethnicity. I think that if you can create some kind of overarching (supra-ethnic) identity, this can be a solution. Or have a state to which one can feel a sense of loyalty without being of a member of the ethnic majority.

[...]

If we go back to the example of the Tatars, you said yourself that there are ethnic Russians living in Tatarstan and that they have developed a kind of Tatarstani identity. I can imagine that ethnic divides do not stay forever, do they? People mix and so on. In this sense, it is backward to go back to these forms of cultural autonomy models today, when we already have a Tatarstani identity?

The Republic of Tatarstan and Tatar cultural autonomy do different things, because there are not so many opportunities to preserve Tatar culture outside Tatarstan. National Cultural Autonomy is useful to represent the interests of the Tatar minority groups outside Tatarstan, in areas in which there is a concentration of Tatars, and they want to establish a Tatar school, for example. At the same time, probably these Tatars also have a regional identity in addition to their Tatar identity. For example there are Tatars in Siberia and they are likely to have a Siberian identity in addition to the Tatar one. At the same time, the Russians in Tatarstan are likely to feel differently from the Russians in Moscow. So, there are different layers of identity.

I think territorial and non-territorial autonomy regulations address different needs. The cultural autonomy addresses something different and they can generally co-exist.

That is a brilliant point. If a cultural autonomy can apply to this plurality of identities that exist, then it doesn't have to be so divisive as we actually think.

But it is definitely an important problem that comes up whenever we have these discussions.

What is also interesting in the case of the Tatars is that they have established a World Congress of Tatars, which is actually quite similar to national cultural autonomy and there are some of the same people involved in both. They lobby the government for more opportunities to express Tatar culture, but they also have contacts outside Tatarstan. It is quite interesting: a Tatar respondent told me that when Tatars have meetings with other Tatars from Russia, they end up speaking Russian because often they are more fluent in Russian than in Tatar. But, he said, when they have supra-national events, they have to speak Tatar, because it is the only common language that they have. Then, they go back to the core of Tatar culture.

What kind of status does this World Congress have? Is it a NGO?

Yes, it is registered as an association. So, it is basically an NGO.

So, it brings all Tatars together globally. But, is it also bound into any regulatory body, such as the United Nations or so?

No, it is just a kind of cultural association, which does lobbying. Sometimes, depending on the context, they have contacts with members of parliaments. Although in Russia you are not allowed to have ethnic parties, there are still Tatars represented in parliament through other parties. So, they sometimes have informal contacts with members of parliament, or some kind of patrimonial links are created. The World Congress of Tatars has a network of contacts at a high level, sometimes, but this is nothing guaranteed. That is the problem with this structure.

Yes, that is exactly the point. After our conversation here, I am not sure whether the interest was rather to pacify their demands, than binding them into a structure and taking them seriously.

I also think it is difficult. I think, at the beginning some of the initiators of the law had good intentions, but then it didn't develop into anything structural.

For other contexts, it is definitely an important example to see what happens if a minority demands something like cultural autonomy. What exactly it can include and what it might not be able to do? If we think of the Kurdish situation, there is a difference between demanding a Kurdistan autonomy region which is more territorial or cultural autonomy for the Kurds as an ethnic group which also live in Istanbul and throughout the West of Turkey. There is a debate going on there, and I think this example is very fruitful to see what the limits and possibilities are of either these models.

Yes, but I think the two can co-exist, because you could have a territorial autonomy in the area in which the minority is situated and you could have a form of cultural autonomy for those living outside the region. Russia does not provide a very good example, and many of the people I interviewed said it is better to have a territory where you have some autonomy, rather than cultural autonomy. Such a territory is also a kind of reference for people outside the region. Because if you wanted, for example, to go to university and have classes in Tatar, the only place where you could do that is in the capital of Tatarstan, Kazan. So, you know that you can go there. You might not go, but you know that when you go there, there will be a concentration of university courses, theaters etc. in Tatar. And then, there is also the emotional attachment to a homeland, which is represented by this region.

So, the people you were talking who said that a territory is more important, where they referring mainly to this emotional side or did they maybe also refer to competences?

They referred more to practical aspects. While cultural autonomy has only a very limited impact on minority education, they noted that in Tatarstan (as a region) there is some autonomy in the sphere of education. That is maybe mainly because the system of cultural autonomy has very limited impact in Russia. Maybe if the system was working better, they wouldn't see it this way.

But it could be a technical question couldn't it? About what kind of competences can be attached to cultural autonomy and what cannot?

Potentially, they could have a lot of say in these issues. But another problem is that of resources. The Republic of Tatarstan is quite rich, because of its oil. It doesn't mean that they have control over the oil, because in fact, when taxes are collected a substantial part of the funds go to Moscow and they get redistributed. So, they actually lose some part of the wealth; at the same time, the Republic of Tatarstan has much more resources than other republics and national cultural autonomies.

I have one last question: In cases you know, is there an institutionalized link between the cultural autonomy and the territorial republic. Have there been regulations or mechanisms?

No, there are not really any defined mechanisms. In fact, the cultural autonomy should exclusively be for groups outside Tatarstan. So, they should operate in parallel. In practice, it is sometimes the same people who work in both or they have contacts with each other. But, no, there is no specific mechanism or relations between the two. This is interesting. The national cultural autonomies don't really work on issues inside Tatarstan, because the republic is supposed to deal with them. There is

definitely coordination, but it depends on the people involved themselves, how they want to be organised. It is rather an issue of internal management.

Yes, it is interesting that it isn't institutionalized from the state in any kind of way and that there is no institutionalized mechanism regarding the flow of resources between the territorial republic and the cultural autonomy organization. But, I suppose it doesn't always have to stay that way. Thank you very much for taking your time for this extremely interesting interview!

Selected Work by Federica Prina:

Prina, Federica (forthcoming). *National Minorities in Putin's Russia: Diversity and Assimilation*. Series: Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series. Routledge.

Prina, Federica (2014). 'Introduction: National Minorities between Protection and Empowerment', *JEMIE* 13(2), 2014, accessible under:
<http://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2014/Prina.pdf>

Prina, Federica (2013). 'Introduction: National Cultural Autonomy in Theory and Practice', *JEMIE* 12(1) 2013, accessible under:
<http://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2013/Prina.pdf>