

Review of PhD thesis Klaudia Kosicińska

"Everyday Life Between Borders. Mobility and Translocal Practices in Southeast Georgia."
Dissertation written under the supervision of Dr. hab. Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska. Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences. Warszawa 2023

Klaudia Kosicinska addresses a doubly marginalized field: in the municipality of Marneuli, located on the state borders of Azerbaijan and Armenia, she examines the mobility practices of Georgia's marginalized Azerbaijani minority at the local level of the village of Shulaveri. Such a study has not been conducted so far and therefore must be considered a novelty for this region. To capture the survival strategies and practices of coping with the difficult daily life, she introduces the concept of translocality in her study.

In her introduction into the field (4-39) she discusses her status in the field as a foreign woman in a Muslim male dominated field (28). She discards the possibility to achieve an "insider position", since besides all her activities she is not permanently integrating in the community of Shulaveri. She might have considered a position of a "mediator" towards the outside world (38) in compensation for the insights she gained into the village community. As a foreigner in an Azeri village it is impossible to become "invisible" as she tried (36-37). The possible influence of her choice of the language for the interaction with the local population is only shortly reflected in footnote 195, but is highly relevant for the interviewees' responses.

The second chapter summarizes correctly the disposition of the Azeri population as an ethnic or national minority in an ethnic Georgian dominated nation state, which to a great degree is a continuation of the hierarchical Soviet nationality policy. It is quite difficult to "trace" the Azerbaijanis in such an essentialist way (e.g. the first and last Tsarist census from 1897 did not ask for ethnicity, but for languages and religions as markers for self-identification; any linkages with ethnicity are interpretations by researchers). It is a pity that the relatively recent books by Krista Goff ("Nested Nationalism. Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus", [Cornell UP](#) 2021) and Claire Pogue Kaiser ("Georgian and Soviet. Entitled Nationhood and the Specter of Stalin in the Caucasus", [Cornell UP](#) 2022) have not been used for this chapter. The reference to the separation of the concepts of nationality and citizenship is of high importance in order to understand the dominance of the "titular nationalities" of the USSR outside Russia. When it comes to the narration of the latest period since Georgia's independence in 1991, the flow of events during the transition period (1988-1993) might be difficult to understand for someone, not aware of all the detailed national and international actors in the country. The behaviour of the Azerbaijani minority, like the Armenian one, during elections in March 2004

(57) was oriented towards the ruling party. This was part of an informal deal of the ruling party with community leaders granting them autonomy in running their internal affairs. Very important is her attempt to resist an essentialised view of the Azeri minority in Georgia and to provide for a differentiated assessment of this minority group (58) as context-bound “We groups” in [Georg Elwert](#)’s understanding and as she exemplifies with the following discussion about the unclear status ascription either as a ethno-national “diaspora” of Azerbaijan or (to a lesser degree) civic one as full-fledged citizens of Georgia. The power of the ethno-national state in “silencing” the Azeri minority in the region and ascribing the whole of the state territory to the dominant ethnic group of Georgians provokes different reactions of self-ascription among the representatives of the Azeri community that the author convincingly presents and discusses. She also assesses the different choices of citizenship and identity they have.

In the third chapter the author turns to the processes of migration among the Azeri community, which she – at least partly – sees in the long-term structural patterns of marginalization and discrimination from the majority population. She analyses the different long and short-term migration flows of Azeri people since 1991 on regional and international level (mainly between Georgia and Azerbaijan) relying on statistical data and personal interviews. Here she covers all the important details causing emigration as well as immigration as the discrimination, instability, the threads of the raiding Svans (themselves ecomigrants from 1987) and forceful evictions from areas like Bolnisi in the region in Kvemo Kartli, but also the turn towards immigration since 2015. The personal reminiscences demonstrate the stress and traumatic experiences esp. during the early 1990s from the ethnic Georgians and their state administration.

In the fourth chapter of her thesis the author turns towards mobility regimes and related trans-local practices. First the differentiation of the state from the ethno-cultural nation is essential for understanding the post-Soviet South Caucasus (92-93). With the introduction of the concept of translocality into her research she captures this specific feature of continued reference to a “homeland” despite a permanent movement. “This type of phenomenon implies that emigration and the attempt to settle in the destination country are replaced by "mobility settlement" and that people remain mobile in constant movement for as long as possible, in order to improve the quality of life quality of life in the place defined as "home" - or to maintain it at all. maintain it.” (94) This means that translocality in the end serves the escape from emigration. To uphold the connection with the “home” is the regular mobility for family and public feasts like Novruz as the main holiday for the Azeri community, which she analyses in greater detail and presents twice in her narration and in an extract of her field diary (101-103). She also assessed the impact

of the COVID-19 pandemics on these translocal practices since the borders to Azerbaijan were closed in March 2021. Another form of keeping the bond with the “home” community for people living in Azerbaijan (only shortly presented) is to invest into local businesses or donate for communal projects like the construction of a mosque or social assistance or renovating the family’s house for retirement. With the topic of “translocal families” she analyses relations among genders and the role of norms shaping them with several limitations for women in a patriarchal community. Only in one paragraph does she cover the role of social media as a tool of keeping translocal social contacts with the relatives at “home”. Particularly noteworthy in this part of the work is the boundaries that both states, Georgia and Azerbaijan, set through marriages to be officially registered, the issuance of passports or border regimes of translocal practices. This is especially true for single women with children as the author notes. Without support from the extended family, the social barriers for women in a patriarchal community are almost insurmountable. Translocality is also extended beyond life in funerals held at two places or through the construction of memorials (small fountains) for relatives who came from the village and died abroad, as the author sums up in four pages. Finally, she presents the entanglement of translocality and transnationality in everyday life and ways of being among the Azeris from Shulaveri, which is exemplified with the locals positioning in the latest Karabakh war or the coexistence of various citizenships in one family. Not discussed is here the issue of a growing civic responsibility that appeared in the last paragraph on page 127 in connection with Azerbaijani citizenship. As the most decisive factor in receiving a passport from Georgia is the knowledge of the Georgian language as state language, which inhibits most of the Azerbaijanis from Marneuli region living in Azerbaijan.

The fifth and final chapter of the dissertation is devoted to visible and invisible borders and attempts to overcome them translocally. First, she discusses state border regimes, which, with the formation of nation-states, made freedom of movement across former administrative borders impossible. On the other hand, Marneuli Azeris do not perceive entering Azerbaijan as crossing the border into a foreign country. This perception changed only with the closure of the border as a result of the pandemic as she observed. The detailed narrative of how the pandemic was handled in Shulaveri and its impact on translocality and interethnic relations with ethnic Georgians are very exciting to read and provide unique insights into the resilience of the village community in the face of external, government intervention. It also raises the questions about the preconditions for the functioning of translocality as it was practised by the Georgian Azeri community. However, at the end of this chapter I am missing the consistent implementation of Marc Auge's approach about the border between Georgia and Azerbaijan as non-places.

In the second part of chapter 5 she turns to the state language as an informal border or barrier for integration of the huge Azeri national minority, who are full citizens of Georgia, and thus depicts to the ethno-cultural dominance of the Georgians at the expense of more civic approaches. Some of the references (2000-2005) are outdated and their validity for the current language situation at schools can be doubted. Crucially, she concludes that linguistic segregation is not between ethnic groups, but rather spatial and primarily tied to place of residence. Villagers in mono-ethnic settlements and regions have fewer opportunities to learn and practice the state language, the practical utility of which is then often questioned. She convincingly explains how ideologically charged the language issue is among the Georgian majority as well as the Azeri minority. As her interviewee Kamran Mammadli rightly states, the local demand for the knowledge of the state language without providing sufficient resources by the Georgian state and the disregard of Azerbaijani as a minority language can be considered a systemic discrimination. However, I would be cautious about making comparisons with Muslims in Ajaria, who are exclusively ethnic Georgians and among whom there is immense pressure to assimilate and convert to Georgian Orthodox Christianity. Here, it is precisely not linguistic integration that is the priority. In contrast, the role of Russian as a local lingua franca in the multi-ethnic region around Marneuli is beyond question, but beyond – especially in Tbilisi - already more difficult to apply (the Russian war against Ukraine may have changed this to some degree). The use of language is also a symbolic practice that generates identity and in- or excludes members of a society as exemplified in the renaming of public places like streets or whole villages. Kosicinska demonstrates how this form of renaming places without consultation of the Azeri community leads to adverse effects and the whole Azeri community is being “muted” by the dominant Georgian ethnic majority, which leads to identity narratives countering the dominant one.

In the concluding subchapter, Kosicinska introduces the Marneuli region as an ethno-culturally diverse "borderland" in which the various groups interact with each other in diverse areas and can apply different cultural codes. These interactions may transcend "ethnic boundaries," but therefore do not dissolve them as the author rightly puts it. She addresses the complexity of ethno-religious interactions at the local level, which are much more oriented toward common participation than toward mutual demarcation. The results of her field research seem to confirm this. External events like the COVID-19 pandemics or the war over Nagorno-Karabakh can easily resonate in the respective communities in the Marneuli region as she highlights. For these phenomena in her field she refers to Robert Hayden's theory of “antagonistic tolerance”, which is informed by the practical knowledge of translocality about the “others” norms and values on

the local level. She also states that in this environment “the Georgians” as dominant group remain as outsiders that impose their norms on the diverse communities of this region. For the sake of the local community the existing “ethnic boundaries” are being hidden and the locals know, when and where to talk more frankly.

In her conclusion of her research, she summarizes her findings from a multiethnic, multireligious and multicultural border region of Kvemo Kartli, where she gathered an impressive amount of evidence for the often neglected Azeri minority in Georgia. She manages to convincingly present the voices and perspective of local dwellers from Shulaveri as well as from human rights activists. Having presented the richness of possible forms of interactions and translocal transgressions of existing state borders as well as hidden ethno-linguistic boundaries is the main achievement of her study. She introduced a lot of interesting theoretical concepts, which she not always consequently applied to the evidence she gathered, but this is most probably a consequence of being the first in conducting in-depth field work in an Azeri village in such a diverse region.

In style and form of the narration I was missing some summarizing interim conclusions at the end of each chapter, in order to understand the contribution to the overall argument of translocal mobility among the Azeris from Shulaveri. Some of the background information for example about the Novruz holidays are given several times in the footnotes. An additional review to avoid unnecessary repetitions would have made the text more consistent. Also, it would have been helpful to indicate the pages to some of the references given in the text.

In my conclusion, the thesis of Klaudia Kosicińska meets the requirements of Polish law on Higher Education and I recommend admitting Klaudia Kosicińska to the next steps of the formal doctoral procedure at the Institute of Slavic Studies of Polish Academy of Sciences.



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