

Review Essay

Mosaic Ethno-Geographic Configurations and Other Factors accounting for Ethno-Territorial Conflict

Babak Rezvani, *Ethno-Territorial Conflict and Coexistence in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Fereydan* Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA—Amsterdam University Press, 2013, 444 pages. ISBN: 978-90-5629-733-6.

Babak Rezvani, *Conflict and Peace in Central Eurasia—Towards Explanations and Understandings* Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2015, 373 pages. ISBN: 978-90-04-27635-2 (hardback) / 978-90-04-27636-9 (e-book).

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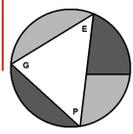
An abbreviated and modified version of this review essay, which exclusively focuses on Rezvani's 2015 book and elaborates on methodological aspects of his research, will be published in the peer-reviewed journal Nationalism and Ethnic Politics (Routledge) sometime this year.

NB: citations and other references from each of the books under review are indicated by its year of publication and the relevant page numbers, e.g. '(2013: p.1)'; '(2015: p.100)'; etcetera. These references are different in format than the other source references in this review essay.

Introduction

Babak Rezvani's *Ethno-Territorial Conflict and Coexistence in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Fereydan* (2013) and his *Conflict and Peace in Central Eurasia—Towards Explanations and Understandings* (2015), an updated, shortened and improved version of the former book (e.g. more clearly presented maps and figures in the latter book), constitute notable, highly relevant additions to the field of conflict studies in particular. Similar to Monica Toft's *Geography of Ethnic Violence* (2005), Rezvani also pays attention to the geography of ethnic conflicts, and includes new geographic variables into his analyses.

Rezvani specifically seeks to explain the occurrence of the following eight ethno-territorial conflicts: “the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts in Georgia; the North Ossetian-Ingush conflict over Prigorodny and the Chechens conflicts in Russia; the Armenian-Azeri conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan; the Osh conflict between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan; and .. the Tajikistani Civil War” (2013: p. 19 (& p. 169); 2015: p. 9)—the only eight



cases among the distinguished 129 “ethno-territorial encounters” in all three regions selected for comparative analysis (Caucasus, Central Asia and Fereydan in Iran) that turned violent from the late 1980s onwards (2013: p. 169; 2015: p. 134). He also contrast these with the cases i.e. encounters that nearly turned violent or did not turn violent at all; Rezvani seeks to explain the latter non-violent cases as well. Most notably, there have been “no ethno-territorial conflicts” (Ibid 2013; 2015) at all in Iran (barring interethnic tensions), not even in Fereydan, a “region in central Iran in the western part of Ostan-e Esfahan” (2013: p. 17; 2015: p.5) that is just as ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse as the Caucasus and the Central Asia.

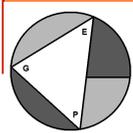
This appears to be mainly due to the fact that, contrary to the Soviet Union and most of its successor states, the “Iranian ostans, the first-order territorial administrative divisions [in Iran], are not based on and demarcated rigidly along ethnic lines” (2013: p. 113; 2015: p. 104). Thus the conflicts discussed in both books include “all ethno-territorial conflicts in the post-Soviet space except that in Moldova” (2015: p. vii).

Factors accounting for Ethno-Territorial Conflict

From the reviewer’s perspective, both of Rezvani’s books convincingly show that least five interrelated factors—as already mentioned in another review essay on Ilyas Akhmadov’s books on the Chechen independence struggle (Ten Dam 2016: 68-69)—can or do account for secessionist ethno-territorial conflicts:

- i) historic grievances, particularly of grave deprivations and injustices like the wholesale deportation of the Chechens in 1944 on orders of Stalin;
- ii) the obligation in martial cultures which obliges one to avenge historical wrongs and seek safety from such wrongs in the future through independence;
- iii) a rebelling movement representing (or claiming to represent) the biggest indigenous group in the region or contested territory, like the Chechens in the North Caucasus (see also Ten Dam 2010: esp. 333-334,345-349; Ten Dam 2011: esp. 247-252);
- iv) the contested territory exhibiting a “so-called mosaic type of ethno-geographic configuration” of “highly homogeneous pockets of ethnic concentration” (2013: p. 15; 2015: p. 3); and
- v) a “*politicization of ethnicity*” (2013: p. 55; 2015: p.43) in a hierarchical-territorial ethno-political system whereby some ethnicities get a higher autonomy, nationality status and/or other privileges in defined territories while other resident ethnicities do not or less so (2013: esp. pp. 116-120; 2015: esp. pp. 107-112).

Above all the absence of this latter factor in Iran accounts, according to Rezvani, for the absence of conflict there, even in highly mosaic Fereydan—in contrast to the Soviet Union which, unlike Iran, introduced, promoted and sustained a divisive and ultimately (self-)



destructive ethno-territorial structure that most of its successor states unfortunately inherited (2013 & 2015; esp. Chapter 3).

The combination of all these factors—acting as either necessary or sufficient-making conditions—account for an ethno-territorial internal conflict like the Russo-Chechen wars of the 1990s and beyond, as “there are many cases of ethno-territorial groups in the (post-) Soviet space that enjoy territorial autonomy and a dominant demographic position therein, but nevertheless have not waged a war of independence” (2013: p. 249; see also 2015: p. 220).

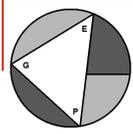
Yet Rezvani in effect argues that, at least on the Eurasian continent and in the Caucasus and Central Asia in particular, that the mosaic type of ethno-geographic configuration in a certain circumscribed territory or area, is the most important *necessary, conflict-inducing condition* (reviewer’s term) accounting for the occurrence of ethno-territorial conflicts. He thus concludes that this ‘mosaic’ factor can best explain such conflicts in combination with other, typically *sufficient-making, conflict-triggering conditions* (reviewer’s term), like above all the “possession of territorial autonomy” (2013: p. 327; 2015: p. 301)—especially if it makes and privileges one ethnic group into a ‘titular nation’ at the expense of other ethnicities in the territory, as was fatefully encouraged and enshrined in the “hierarchical ethno-territorial federalism” of the Soviet Union (Ibid 2013; 2015).

In addition to “titular demographic dominance” and demographic “transborder dominance” of one or more of the competing ethnic groups in one or more adjacent territories, also other factors appear to play significant roles, such as “religious difference” and “traumatic peak experience”—though the latter two can be interchanged as additional explanatory factors for the Russo-Chechen wars and other ethno-territorial conflicts within the Russian Federation (2013: p. 327 (quotes); 2015: p. 301 (quotes)).

Rezvani particularly comes to such conclusions after assessing the results of his statistical analysis of altogether nine factors as “explaining conditions” (2013: pp. 281(quote)-282; 2015; pp. 254(quote)-255), in combination with each other and vis-à-vis the occurrence or absence of violent conflict, through a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) method “based on Boolean algebra and its binary logic” (2013: p. 132; 2015: p. 133) with each ‘yes’ or ‘presence’ coded as 1 and each ‘no’ or ‘absence’ coded as 0.

In sum, Rezvani does acknowledge multiple factors accounting for internal armed conflicts in general and internal ethno-territorial conflicts in particular—especially grievances of severe deprivations in the past and demographical size and dominance of the initiating (rebellious) party (2013; esp. pp. 227-249 (Chechnya); 2015: esp. pp. 197-220 (Chechnya); see further Rezvani 2014 (on Chechnya)).

Therefore it “appears that the conditions of demographic dominance (D) within an autonomous territory (A), as well as transborder dominance (B) could explain the events taking place in Crimea and eastern Ukraine” (2015: pp. vii-viii)—and in other conflict areas as well.



Yet Rezvani stresses that such factors only make any conflict truly likely, in a time of interethnic tensions and state fragmentation, when the ethnicities concerned live next to each other in concentrated pockets (mosaic configuration) within ethno-politically constructed territories: “in addition to their demographic dominance in their autonomous homeland, the burden of trauma caused by their genocidal deportation [in 1944] as well as a certain peculiarity of the Caucasus—probably its mosaic type of ethno-geographic configuration—are crucial factors, which in combination can explain the Chechen conflict” (2013: p. 249; 2015: p. 220 (almost identical); see further Rezvani 2014: 886). In short, he considers Ethno-Geographic Configuration (or rather the mosaic type of it) and Ethno-Political Subordination as (being among) the most dominant factors accounting for ethno-territorial conflict (see for an overview of the main factors Figure 3.7: 2013: p. 120; 2015: p. 111).

Be that as it may, one must also identify the factors-behind-the-factors to explain the course and outcome of conflict, in order to understand for instance “why an ethno-nationalist conflict emerged in Chechnya, and diffused and transformed [to a considerable degree] into a Wahhabi/Salafi religious conflict” (Rezvani 2014: 871 (quote); see further esp. 886, note 57).

Conclusion

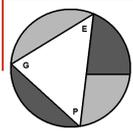
Both books by Rezvani are relevant if only because ethno-territorial conflict—above all internal separatist ethno-territorial conflict—arguably constitutes the most frequent type of armed conflict, not just today and over the last few decades, but actually since the dawn of recorded human history (see Ten Dam 2015b).

More to the point, Rezvani’s treatises offer innovative, informative and thought-provoking observations and analytical approaches—that already have been useful to my own research and analyses (see Ten Dam 2014, 2015a, 2015b)—as these employ unusual yet effective multidisciplinary, cross-cutting methodologies and (consequent) insights taken from political geography, ethnography, geopolitics and other, related fields of study, applying both descriptive and quantitative analyses.

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