

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Report 2008 – 2009

Volume I

Halle/Saale

## **Caucasian Boundaries and Citizenship from Below**

*Lale Yalçın-Heckmann* (Head of the Research Group),

*Nino Aivazishvili, Milena Baghdasaryan, Teona Mataradze, Florian Mühlfried, Neşe Özgen*

Studies dealing with the South Caucasus often consider ethno-nationalism to be a central phenomenon and the cause of all political conflict in the postsocialist era. The purpose of the Research Group has been to challenge this assumption by examining notions and practices of citizenship, and applying the perspective of the anthropology of the state to the new independent states of this region. The significance of this theme was evident to us primarily because of the new citizenship and border regimes, as well as new patterns of mobility and migration within the South Caucasus and in the larger region covering Turkey and the Russian Federation. Not only have ethno-national groups been affected by new passport and citizenship rules, but also individuals and groups whose activities cannot all be explained by some ethnic-national principle alone. Moreover, the issue of social inequality, exacerbated in post-war and postsocialist settings, also demands a different framework for understanding state-citizen relations. We aimed to look particularly at how citizens cope with these new inequalities, even if they culturally, ethnically, and nationally belong to one of the new independent states of the region.

Citizenship has been a much discussed concept in the social sciences. We have addressed the classical Marshallian components, namely the political, the civil, and the social. Despite the fact that they were developed in a specific historical context very different from our setting, we aimed to go beyond this perspective to the meaning of citizenship as understood and practiced from below, by the people, in the recent past and the present.

Our findings can be summarised under three themes. All our projects touched on all three, although their emphases differed.

### **1. Social Citizenship and Migration**

Teona Mataradze's research project explores citizenship practices in a rural settlement in western Georgia with a high rate of out-migration. This particular region was formerly highly dependent on the state subsidised coal industry and tea plantations. Both declined in late socialism and were dissolved, privatised, and downsized in the postsocialist period. Apart from subsistence agriculture and a few remaining state and health resort jobs, the population is oriented towards out-migration (17% of the households surveyed had at least one member who had migrated abroad, and 10% of them had a migrant within Georgia, mostly in the capital city Tbilisi). Migrants support their families through remittances and fulfil the role of the state in terms of social citizenship, but the financial support and the prestige gained through migration

do not fully compensate for the symbolic loss felt by families that are left without their male head of household or their wife and mother. Remittances are also used to invest in the higher education of the family's children, although they are not sufficiently effective to change the overall economic structure of the locality. When the payments are substantial enough, they are used to invest in education and/or buying flats in urban centres, but not in the job-creating sectors. Mataradze was able to observe several cases of the deportation of labour migrants from Russia back to Georgia during the diplomatic crisis between the two countries in 2006, which revealed the vulnerability of labour migrants and how passport and visa regimes force them to be creative in subverting bureaucratic and diplomatic regulations. These strategies are carried out on an individual basis and Georgian citizenship is not necessarily activated in order to claim legal protection or economic compensation.

Forced migrants and their citizenship issues are the focus of Milena Baghdasaryan's research with Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan. Most arrived in the years 1988–1992, many leaving Armenia thereafter to migrate further onward, primarily to Russia. Economic crisis coupled with access to family networks, cultural capital, jobs, and property in Armenia seem to be primary factors in determining this double migration. Her particular focus is on those who stayed in Armenia to live in so-called “temporary” state-provided housing. She found that acquiring formal citizenship was mainly an instrumental and strategic matter, quite different from cultural citizenship and a sense of national belonging. Refugee Armenians believed that Armenia as a country and as a state was the ultimate homeland for all Armenians, especially after having been expelled from other locations that they had also considered to be their home. Some refugees resisted formal citizenship as a way of protesting against the two-decade-long lack of state social support, especially regarding housing. Baghdasaryan examined how people defined their various attachments to the former Soviet state (and within it the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic) and to contemporary Armenia; how they selectively remembered and reconstructed the state and their own citizenship practices; and how legislation, political ideologies and housing policies combine to shape contemporary understandings of citizenship, while full social citizenship benefits are still denied to those who have acquired the formal status.

## **2. Mobility and Citizenship**

In his postdoctoral project, Florian Mühlfried explores historical and contemporary mobility patterns and perceptions. Using cognitive analysis to analyse his data, he examines the meaning of citizenship for the Tushetians, a transhumant ethnic group traditionally settled in the Georgian Highlands, bordering Chechnya and Dagestan. Mühlfried does so by exploring “how memories of the programmatically anti-bourgeois Soviet state” shape and compete with present-day notions and practices of citizenship. He identifies belonging and entitlement as two crucial and

contrasting concepts of citizenship among the Tushetians. The notion of entitlement is, as in other projects of the Research Group, historically embedded in the Soviet notion of the strong state, and Tush distinguish between the new nation-state and current citizenship: While the former is almost universally appreciated and preferred to the Soviet Union, Georgian citizenship is generally dismissed as inferior to Soviet citizenship. Freedom is conceptualised in two ways: While the nation is now sovereign, mobility is limited by the new state boundaries, which thus constrain freedom. Mühlfried relates the significance of mobility to the transhumance of Tushetians and to the different symbolic, historical, and social meanings they attach to lowlands and highlands. This mobile life and settlement pattern allows them to enact a distinctive “flexible citizenship” as a way of coping with unpredictable changes in state forms over the last century.

South Caucasian states have all adopted the market economy, a step which could be seen as an invigoration of “economic citizenship”, allowing citizens to follow the flow of goods as consumers and traders. The conspicuous rise of the informal economy led Lale Yalçın-Heckmann to focus on the rise and decline of small-scale, local markets in Azerbaijan and to examine how citizenship regimes affect the economic behaviour and political notions of Azerbaijani citizens. Internationally produced goods are now available in most cities of the region. Yalçın-Heckmann’s research shows that goods and traders do not conform to the logic of reducing costs and optimising benefits. Traders at her research site, a small town in western Azerbaijan, were a mere 50 km from the Georgian capital, yet they travelled to the wholesale market in Baku, some 450 km away, to acquire the goods that they would later resell at the local market. The logic was not one of economy but one of the new citizenship. Tbilisi is close but inaccessible to petty traders; as trade in Western consumer goods is said to be controlled by monopolistic clans and family networks, small traders have to go to Baku. The power-holders who occupy central state positions ensure that upward mobility is only available to those traders who take the “exit option”, usually by becoming citizens of other states, notably the Russian Federation and Turkey.

### **3. Borders and States**

The impact of borders on people’s everyday lives is a central theme in the research of Nino Aivazishvili, who joined the Group as an associate PhD student in 2008. Her research site lies in North-West Azerbaijan, close to the border with Georgia. A border that was hardly noticeable during the Soviet period, its presence and materiality in the lives of the ethnic Ingiloy now shape their political citizenship. While those who have the means to trade and travel have maintained ethnic and religious ties to the Georgians across the border, visits and contacts have become much less frequent. They are remembered in private but cannot be evoked publicly, unless expressed by a member of the ethnic minority elite under the scrutiny of the state.

Border regimes are also at the centre of another associated project: H. Neşe Özgen looks at changes in property and citizenship regimes in the marches between Georgia, Turkey, and Armenia over the last century and a half, during which the region has experienced depopulation, re-population, and radical changes in land tenure. The border was closed during the Soviet period, during which the Turkish side built up its self-image of “protecting democracy and the West.” Since 1991 the residents have had to justify their cultural belonging in different ways, which involve reclaiming and rewriting the history of land and power in the region. The new Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline has opened up new possibilities in the evaluation of land, and in terms of claiming it as property through citizenship entitlements. Özgen uses historical narratives to illustrate how families of renown and power were able to employ their citizenship in bargaining with the state during the “Iron Curtain” years, and how their power is nowadays re-established through the strategic use of legislation and governmental methods such as enforcing land registries. New discourses of global governmentality are invoked to claim rights and entitlements that no longer depend solely on national citizenship.

### **Conclusions**

Our results have contributed to the theory of citizenship in various ways. Many recent writings have pointed to the erosion of social citizenship. Others have drawn attention to proliferating varieties of citizenship – transnational, postnational, multicultural, flexible, biological, etc. These developments are seen as emerging from global processes of migration, multiculturalism, human rights discourses, and neoliberal economic and political processes. Yet other authors have argued that citizenship in Western societies has diminishing value, and that we live in an era of “citizenship lite”. Our findings modify all these arguments: Citizenship as a category of formal belonging with political and economic implications plays a crucial role in people’s lives in the South Caucasus. The differentiation of the Marshallian components is still useful here: Social citizenship is taken seriously in terms of entitlements from a state that has been withdrawing from its social security obligations. Historical concepts of citizenship are strongest when this social aspect of citizenship is evoked, but less so when the civil aspect of citizenship is at stake. The different aspects of citizenship are activated and differentiated from one another according to historical experiences and contemporary economic and political issues. It is therefore important that the traditional notion of citizenship is not simply dismissed as irrelevant in modern global times. It instead needs to be empirically studied and re-evaluated as a sub-theme in the anthropology of the state. In all of these projects, we have been engaged in examining not only changing notions and practices of citizenship but also changing relationships with the state.