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**THE PRESS IN CONSTRUCTING THE CULTURAL STRATEGIES OF WAR.
AN EXAMPLE FROM THE CONFLICT IN THE REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN**

Preface¹

The reason for taking up the issue of cultural strategies in conflict is the insufficiently explored understanding of the role played by cultural content in military movements which is also unsubstantiated by case studies. At present, the media have become an important symbolic force in political activism, serving forms of power (Herzfeld 2001, p. 42), which makes them a legitimate area of research in terms of the cultural strategy employed by the warring factions. Due to the cultural context of our empirical research in Tajikistan, we shall focus on the press. This case is a most interesting one as the general opinion is that journalists inspired and even influenced the course of events during the first years of independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war (1992-1997) between the opposition inspired by democratic or Islamic values and the post-communists.

Our understanding of newspapers as tools used by the warring factions in the frame of their cultural strategies is inspired by the ritual view of communication proposed by James W. Carey. From this perspective, communication means constructing a symbolic reality, and through media “a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed” (2009, p. 16). Different cultural contents and linguistic methods can be used as new means of either defeating the enemy or bringing peace to a conflict (cf. Čolović 2001; Malešević 1998).

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Our qualitative content analysis covering examples of important Tajik oppositional and state publications revealed a variety of strategies employed by the different parties, as attempts to legitimise the position of their own fraction by referring to local tradition, promoting different lifestyles and values, discrediting the enemy – for example of the post-communists by identifying them with the Soviet regime and of the opposition by identifying them with Islamic fundamentalists. This article reveals one of the strategies that was an attempt by all of the key players of that period to convince Tajik society about a designated vision of a new country.

The media on war

The media have been used to promote conflicts since ancient times, but a crucial period in the regular use of media for political causes were the last two centuries (Jowett, O'Donnell 1999; Wolska-Zogata 2012). The press shaped public opinion and whipped up war fever during the Crimean War (1853-1856), which was one of the first conflicts reported in the press on a daily basis and immortalised in photographs. The media also played a crucial role in the American Civil War (1861-1865), considered to be the one of the earliest industrial wars. The press not only informed the public, but also interpreted news according to a certain political orientation and, throughout the 1850s, “increasingly engaged in an editorial war of words, often portraying the opposing side in the most virulent and disparaging terms” (Risley 2012, p. xvi).

In the twentieth century, the development of information technology facilitated the invention of successful techniques for mass persuasion. Politicians as well as military leaders realised that the press may be used as an effective tool of impact on society on a mass scale (Adamowski 2007, p. 287). Aware of their importance, during the World War I and World War II the authorities controlled the media, using the press and radio to build a nationwide unity and to incite hatred against the enemy.

The evolution of the role of the media in contemporary conflicts is researched by social scientists, who admitted that media can be directly responsible for inciting violent conflicts, as during the Vietnam War or the civil wars in Bosnia, Sierra Leone or Rwanda, with the broadcast messages of the Rwandan Radio Télévision Libre des Milles Collines “explicitly calling for the murder of the Tutsi population were believed to have contributed to the massacre” (Bratic 2008, p. 8; cf. Kirschke 1996).

Furthermore, the Balkan conflicts demonstrated the growing importance of local media in shaping and developing the violent conflict. Mark Thompson (1999) described

the role of the nationalist press in the war in former Yugoslavia. The media were crucial facilitators of the war between groups of people who had lived together peacefully all their lives. As pointed out by Andrew Puddephatt, “It was a frightening example of how a society can disintegrate, how fear can be exploited by the power of a media in the hands of those unscrupulous enough to wield it as a weapon” (2006, p. 8).

In the case of the Balkan conflicts one may examine the role of the local media in preparing the ground for war as well as inspiring ethnic cleansing and mass killings. Moreover, the wars in former Yugoslavia showed “that the battle for the hearts and minds is as important as the battle for territory. The media arena is often where that battle is conducted” (*ibidem*, p. 9). These conclusions sparked our interest in the situation of the media in the internal conflict in Tajikistan, scarcely explored among academic circles.

Tajikistan’s press and journalism in the 1990s

New ideas, inspired by Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of *perestroika* (restructuring), appeared in the Tajik press at the end of the 1980s. The period between 1990 and 1992 was especially a time of vitality and radical changes in the press system (Sobczak 2014, p. 332). Some journalists call that period the “golden era” of Tajik journalism, because of press freedom and an open political atmosphere, when journalists wrote about anything they wished, not necessarily following journalist ethics. More than 30 independent publications were published that time, and the circulation of all newspapers and journals amounted to 112 million in 1992 – a lot for such a small country (Adinabay 2013, p. 8).

According to Ibrohim Usmonov and Davlat Davronov (1997, pp. 149-150), two main events led to the development of the press in Tajikistan at the beginning of the 1990s: the Language Law (*Qonuni zaboni tojiki (forsi)*) issued in 1989, that gave the Tajik language the status of a state language, and mass demonstrations held in Dushanbe in February 1990, that ended in violence and fatalities. Afterwards, the oppositional press developed, mainly thanks to intellectuals and students, revealing the tensions and problems in society. Its legal foundation was possible on the basis of 1990 act On Press and Other Mass Media (*Dar borai matbuot va digar vositaboi akhbori omma*), that almost imitated the Russian law created half a year earlier (Adamowski 2002, p. 283).

The first independent, politically and culturally involved title, was “Rastokhez” (Renaisance), published in May 1990. It was a publication of the People’s Movement Rastokhez, founded by some Tajik intellectuals during the period of *perestroika* as a tool

for the revival of Tajik culture and their language, as well as other reforms of Tajik society (cf. Nourzhanov, Bleuer 2013, p. 196). Not only were the topics raised in the newspaper new, but also the usage of a standardised font and high-quality paper was unusual for the Tajik press at that time. “Rastokhez” was printed illegally, mainly abroad. From May 1991 it has been published in Tajikistan as an officially registered publication named “Dunyo” (World). As its editor-in-chief and the head of Rastokhez movement, Tohir Abdujabbor, mentioned, the publication needed to be issued because official party press did not inform society of the true reality (*Zarrabin: Debochai matbuoti mustaqili Tojikiston* 2006).

Among other journals published by anti-governmental movements and parties we have to mention “Adolat” (Justice). Its first issues have also been published abroad, and it has been officially printed in Tajikistan from September 1990. The journal was linked with the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (*Hizbi Demokratii Tojikiston*), founded in the Summer of 1990 under the leadership of Shodmon Yusuf, among others as the result of the split among the activists of the Rastokhez movement. Another politically involved publication of that period was “Najot” (Rescue), the official journal of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (*Hizbi Nahzati Islomii Tojikiston*) under the leadership of Muhammadsharif Himmatzoda – the main Tajik oppositional force, founded in 1990 on the basis of the Islamic revival of that period. The first issues of “Najot” appeared illegally in 1991, but it was officially published from the beginning of 1992.

The government, dominated by former communists, used the newspapers created in the 1920s by the first Tajik communists. The most popular dailies in the Soviet Tajikistan were “Kommunist Tadzhikistana” (Communist of Tajikistan) in Russian and “Tojikistoni Shuravi” (The Soviet Tajikistan) in Tajik, both associated with the Communist Party of Tajikistan (*Hizbi Komunistii Tojikiston*). These newspapers were published in Dushanbe six times a week and delivered across the country by an efficient distribution system (Adamowski 2002, p. 279). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the media system was taken over by the post-communists and remained almost unchanged. Being no longer official organs of the Communist Party, some newspapers changed their names (e.g. “Kommunist Tadzhikistana” into “Narodnaya Gazeta”) but remained state-owned and associated with the powers-that-be.

The period of press independence in Tajikistan soon came to an end after the outbreak of the civil war in 1992. In March 1993 the Dushanbe prosecutor announced that journalists would be held criminally responsible for the passing of information that might destabilise the socio-political situation in the state and incite enmity. He blamed

the opposition press for the attempted overthrow of the constitutional government by spreading materials that violated the honour of the leadership of the republic (Panfilov 2003, p. 62).

Until the end of 1993 all oppositional parties and movements had been banned by the Supreme Council's decision. There was also a ban on issuing their publications (*ibidem*, p. 278-279). Since 1994 new pro-governmental newspapers appeared. Other parties and political movements were registered and the ban on the press was lifted in 1999, i.e. far after the reconciliation that ended the civil war (Akiner 2001, p. 57).

Oppositional press: building a free and united state

One of the most specific visions of the Tajiks' future presented by the opposition was described in May 1990 in the fourth edition of "Rastokhez", as a part of the official program of the movement. In fact, the program was written more than a year before and this delay might be explained as a result of a fear that the society as a whole might not understand the ideas proposed (Nourzhanov, Bleuer 2013, p. 201).

The movement's leader Tohir Abdujabbor explained that Rastokhez stands against a totalitarian system, injustice, partocracy and bureaucracy and wanted to implement a democratic system and give the power to the people (R² 4.1990). The program contained postulates of conducting free elections, separating the Communist Party from the government, informing the public about government activities and demanding changes in the constitution based on higher human values, democracy and the right to the self-determination of nations. Tajikistan should be a sovereign country that would resolve its political, economic or social problems by itself³.

In the cultural sphere, Rastokhez's postulates the rebirth of national culture and traditions, and above all the language (including a return to the Persian-Arabic script), as well as disseminating knowledge of classical literature among citizens. This was to remind the Tajiks of who they were and highlight their links with the Iranians with whom they shared not only a common language, but also literature, symbols, customs

² Abbreviations used for the Tajik publications' titles: A – "Adolat", ChR – "Charoghi Ruz", D – "Dunyo", N – "Najot", NaG – "Narodnaya Gazeta", R – "Rastokhez".

³ Tajikistan declared its national sovereignty on 25 August 1990. In the referendum on the future of the Soviet Union, held on 17 March 1991, the majority of Tajiks (96,85%) voted for preserving a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics. Declaration of State Sovereignty was a political act which implied the priority of the constitution and laws of the republics, not assuming the national independence and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

and history (R 1990, No. 4). Interestingly, Islam was not mentioned among the national values, although we know that these Western-style ideas of leadership were not always in line with what was written in the pamphlets distributed by young and more populist activists of the movement (Nourzhanov, Bleuer 2013, pp. 200-201).

On the pages of “Dunyo”, which replaced “Rastokhez”, among the crucial steps for rebuilding the country was a need for the awakening of a Tajik nation as well as acquiring self-knowledge (*khudshinosi*) (e.g. D 1991, No. 1). The opposition activists appealed to the Tajiks: “Open your eyes! Awake from a dream! I am not saying you to take a weapon in your hands (...). It is about a future election. It may be done a democratic way” (D 1991, No. 2). To some extent, a good example was the process of change taking place in Russia and as a symbol of the success of democracy the election of Boris Yeltsin as president in 1991 was mentioned (D 1991, No. 2). Interestingly, from the first edition of “Dunyo”, Islam appeared in its pages. Its first article began with the words “in the name of God forgiving and merciful” (*ibidem*).

Over the course of time, the main force of democratic-oriented opposition became the Democratic Party. The main values promoted on the pages of their publication “Adolat” were solidarity, unity and freedom. The label of democracy was frequently used, although not profoundly explored. At the beginning “Adolat” balanced a discreditation of the post-communists with a declaration of openness for cooperation with them as a legitimate government (e.g. A 1992, No. 10). The aforementioned idea of a need to awaken the Tajiks was also promoted. Democrats perceived the post-communist as those who “keep in the darkness the oppressed people of Tajikistan, and deceive the people” (ChR/A 1991, Sept.) and oppositional intellectuals as the nation’s guides (e.g. A 1992 No. 3).

It should be pointed out that support for the democratic activists’ ideas seemed not to be very widespread in Tajik society during that period. Before the presidential election in November 1991, they formed an allegiance with an Islamic fraction to increase the support for a common oppositional candidate for a new president⁴. As Shirin Akiner stated, the democrats were “able to channel and manipulate popular anger in support of particular causes” (2001, p. 40), although in general there was a very little understanding between them and the masses, as well as a slight convergence of interests. Over the course

⁴ Nine candidates took part in the election. A joint candidate of democrats and Islamic fractions, the film-maker Davlat Khudonazarov, received about 35 per cent of the vote and lost in favour of a previous First Party Secretary, Rahmon Nabiyev, who received a mere 57 per cent (Akiner 2001, p. 35).

of time, the main force of the opposition became a movement linked to Islamic values, the rebirth of Islam, mainly centred around the Islamic Renaissance Party.

The fascinating question about the promotion the country's rebirth arises when it comes to this second opposition's fraction. The first texts of the Party's official publication "Najot" referred more to Muslims beyond national borders, opposing nationalism and the concept of a "nation" (*millat*) in the modern sense (N 1991, No. 4), focusing rather on what one might call an *umma* – the unity of all Muslims. However, very soon it shifted towards the idea of the residents of Tajikistan and "the Tajik people" (*khalqi tojik* or *mardumi tojik*).

In "Najot" the idea of the establishment of a confessional state was not proposed, and at the same time the idea of the separation of state and religion was somewhat criticized: "Islam is not limited to a mosque and madrasa, but it concerns the life actions and social reality" (N 1991, No. 1). The separation was presented as a mistake made by those influenced by Marxist-Leninism ideology with no proper knowledge of Islam (N 1992, No. 9). Moreover, the Islamic Republic of Iran established after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was the main reference point when it comes to a model country. It was presented as a good example to be followed on political, social and moral levels (e.g. N 1991, No. 4; N 1992, No. 5).

The official press: building a stable and national state

The Tajik government attempted to dominate the informational environment in order to neutralise the role of the democratic and Islamic media mainly by creating a positive vision of a democratic, secular and national state. The press controlled by the government asserted that peace and stability could be ensured only via a legitimate government. The "civic and national agreement" (NaG 3 Sept. 1991) is necessary to build the rule of law and the legal government and institutions should be supported both by the media as well as political and social organisations and parties. They are able to create the "state of harmony and unity", based on rights and freedoms guaranteed to every citizen regardless of race, national origin and religion (NaG 4 Apr. 1992).

With the development of the conflict between the government and the opposition, emphasizing that a Tajikistan governed by the post-communists is a state friendly and safe for residents from different ethnic and linguistic groups (especially Russians and

Uzbeks) intensified. The opposition was blamed for wanting to create a totalitarian Islamic state and expel the Russian-speaking population and Uzbeks from Tajikistan (NaG 28 Nov. 1992).

Therefore, it was important to defeat them as quickly as possible and integrate them into the state structure. “*Narodnaya Gazeta*” (People’s Newspaper) repeatedly stressed that only the government created in Khujand in November 1992 during the Sixteenth Session of the Supreme Council could guarantee the peaceful unification of all inhabitants of the republic and end the bloody, fratricidal struggle. The Session prevented “the annihilation of the nation” (NaG 28 Nov. 1992) and started the process of building a democratic state (NaG 18 Mar. 1993).

According to governmental newspapers, the opposition was a destructive force which disrupted legitimate authority in its constructive mission. As an exacerbation of the conflict, the government side started to represent the opposition as more and more dangerous and fanatical enemies. They were described as “armed terrorists” (NaG 29 Sept. 1992), “criminal groups” (NaG 25 Nov. 1992) and “political extremists” (NaG 17 Nov. 1992). It should be mentioned that invoking the fear of Islamic fundamentalism helped justify the introduction of the Commonwealth of Independent States troops, mainly Russian and Uzbek, on the territory of Tajikistan (NaG 18 Sept. 1992).

Another strategy adopted by the government newspapers, when Tajikistan turned into an independent state, was to focus on de-sovietisation and emphasize the meaning of national heritage. The newspapers changed their logos and names, while communist iconography gradually began to be replaced by new, national symbols. Nationalist concepts were used by the post-communists to enlist public support and to assert a new Tajik identity. The Tajik people were assured that the present rulers were the heirs of legitimate authority and guarantors of the rebirth of national culture and heritage.

The shift towards tradition and the nation did not mean a total “renunciation” of the communist past. From mid-1992 particularly, the Soviet past was described as a period of stability and the *perestroika* époque – as a period of chaos and economic decline (NaG 25 Nov. 1992). The governmental leaders used this sense of nostalgia for the stability of the Soviet past, shared by the majority of the population of the country (Mullojanov 2015, p. 215) in order to discredit the opposition reformist activities, which only brought instability and economic decay (NaG 25 Nov. 1992).

Conclusion

Considering how quickly it was banned and that many independent journalists suffered persecution or faced death may suggest that the independent press was perceived as a influential medium used to promote anti-governmental ideas. It is impossible to analyse the role of the press during the civil war in Tajikistan, as the independent press was banned soon after its outbreak and almost disappeared⁵. Therefore, our study has been restricted to the unsettled period of building a new state and the dawn of the war. Among the cultural strategies employed by opposition parties that were uncovered in the course of our analysis, we decided to show how both sides sought to engage public interest by the vision of a new Tajikistan in the context of reforms and later the total dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Specific ideas of how both opposition and government imagined the new state were rather blurred. It seemed they were mainly focused on the need to split from their opponents and consolidate around specific slogans, rather than deeply thought-out ideas. Generally, the Tajik opposition in the initial period of state-rebuilding sought to build roads out of the crisis, proposed social, economic and cultural reforms of the Tajik nation, as well the unity of the people. Both factions – the democratic and Muslim – stressed a lack of freedom. They claimed their readiness to influence society and shape the direction of change – in their own opinion, only the opposition could implement changes designed to exit from a deep crisis and build a strong state – or the democratic and free version supported by the Democrats, or governed in accordance with Islamic values as the Islamic opposition wished.

On the other hand, the post-communist nomenclature tried to use the press to create the impression that only they are able to guarantee peace, unity and the salvation of the nation. The government's strategy was to refer to the need for stability and security as well as to the sense of nostalgia for the Soviet past, shared by the majority of the Tajiks. The contemporary elite was compared to the heroes of the Socialist Republic of Tajikistan and the mission to building a new independent state – to build communism. People needed reassuring that the government, led by the President – the father of the nation – cares about their needs and is able to provide them with all the means to live comfortably.

⁵ There were cases of illegal publication as well as opposition publications issued for example in Afghanistan, but they are not accessible.

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The press in constructing the cultural strategies of war. An example from the conflict in the Republic of Tajikistan

Abstract

The article describes the role of the press in constructing the cultural strategies of war on the example from the conflict in the Republic of Tajikistan (1992-1997). On the basis of qualitative analysis newspapers published in Russian and Tajik we present one of these strategies – the efforts of the key factions of the conflict (the post-communists, the democratic opposition, the Islamic opposition) to convince Tajik society to a certain, designated vision of a new, independent Tajikistan.

Keywords: conflict, media, cultural strategies, war, Tajikistan, press analysis, post-Soviet area

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