

“Deja vu” or “Policy of Reciprocal Curtsies”:

Interstate Exchange of Monuments

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Abstract

The specific features of the post-Soviet policy of commemorations do not always constitute only rethinking of the national past or the fact that Soviet symbols and monuments are replaced with national and counter-Soviet symbols. The current policy of commemorations (monuments, street names, ceremonies, etc.) reflects, among other things, the specific features of post-Soviet political relations among the states that used to be part of the Soviet bloc.

Thus, exchange of national brands becomes a habitual practice of “policy of reciprocal curtsies”. The political and economic friendship is accompanied by a cultural policy of reciprocal exchange of monuments which fill the public space in the capitals of Eastern European states.

I think that this policy becomes especially topical in the first decade of the 21st century when in Kiev and St Petersburg, for example, monuments are erected to an Azerbaijani national brand - poet Nizami, or in Kiev to a Georgian one - poet Shota Rustaveli, and streets bearing the same names appear, etc. Correspondingly, Pushkins and Taras Shevchenkos made of stone and bronze appear in Baku and Tbilisi.

This intervention of monuments is quite often some kind of *deja vu* from the Soviet past. In the post-Soviet situation, Heydar Aliyev, formerly a KGB general, the secretary-general of the Azerbaijani Communist Party etc, came to be not only president but also the founder of a ruling dynasty, and after he passed away he was transformed into the main symbol of post-soviet Azerbaijan. In the beginning of the 21st century monuments of Heydar Aliyev are appearing in many cities of Eastern Europe (Moscow, Kiev, Chisinau, Bucharest, etc).

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Although the South Caucasus region is located on the very edge of Europe, but it has “long arms” which easily reach up to Kiev, Chisinau, Moscow or St Petersburg and they would not mind reaching out even farther. These long arms are reaching out not without a purpose. They reach out towards other cities with symbolic gifts, for example, monuments. And here, it is important to understand that this is not about monuments or symbols of any ideas – like, for example, the Statue of Liberty in New-York city. These are depictions, made

of bronze and marble, of “national brands” that are symbolically significant only for one or another imaginary community. Mainly, these are, of course, monuments to poets, who are, as Eric Hobsbawm said, “literary and not existential” (1990, p. 57) idealized symbols of nations. In turn, Baku or Tbilisi is also open for the installation of these kinds of “national brands” from other imaginary communities. That is to say, kind of a fourth “institution of power” (Anderson, 1998, p. 163). The power to fill the public space of the urban centers of one’s nation state with the monuments as symbols of political and economic alliances.

All this quite intensive swap of not only monuments but parks, street names and so on, I will call a “policy of reciprocal curtsies”. Rephrasing Pierre Bourdieu, I will mainly be talking about a policy of manifestation of signs of respect and curtsies which are implemented based on allied relations between some countries. It is from this perspective that I find it interesting to talk about the meanings and practices of the post-soviet policy of commemorations. Paraphrasing John R. Gillis it is possible to say, that the commemorations “as national memory practices” in the post-soviet space still didn’t become “more democratic” and “more impersonal” (1994, p. 11). I also think that the specific features of these tendencies do not always constitute only a rethinking of the national past or the fact that Soviet symbols and monuments are replaced with national and counter-Soviet symbols. This is not only the problem of “the potentially (though not inexorably) charged symbolic nature of public monuments — particularly statues of historical figures — as well as the potential that they offer for ‘historical populism’” (Burch & Smith, 2007, p. 934). The post-soviet cultural

policy of commemorations also reflects the specific features of current political, cultural and economical interstate relations.

This symbolic monument swap is certainly not a post-soviet invention. Here, I could recall for example the old practice of monument swap between twin towns. However, in post-soviet years, especially in the first decade of the 21st century, one can observe the process of these practices becoming topical again and new meanings being added to them. In some cases such a policy of swaps is undoubtedly determined by the specific features of the political regime. This can be observed for example in the case with the political regime in Azerbaijan. The meaning of these attempts to put monuments whenever an opportunity to do so arises is

certainly not a symbolic demonstration of warm interstate relations and political or economic alliances. One of the meanings can also be a demonstration of independence that was achieved not so long ago. For example, a very noteworthy feature of public discourse in Azerbaijan is the idea that few people in the world at large know about this country and nation existing. In the course of this discourse the appearance of every new monument to an Azeri person is perceived as another important event leading out of the boundaries of being unknown.

As a rule, these monuments, parks, or streets appear in the capitals of states, in urban centers which occupy, as Paperny put it, a special location in the hierarchy of towns (Paperni, 2007, p. 109-111). Here it is also important to remember that “The capital cities in Central and Eastern Europe played an essential role in national movements and in the creation of new political identities” (Kolbe, 2007, p. 79). The political leadership, apart from everything else, seems to be also demonstrating its right to use the public space of their capitals at their own direction. As a result, monuments, parks or street names dedicated to culture figures or politicians that have nothing specific to do with the country or the history of the city may appear in St Petersburg, Kiev, Chisinau or Tbilisi.

However, in the post-soviet situation a category of townsmen has taken shape, for whom a monument, a plaque or a park named after some figure may also become a place for periodical collective events. These are activists of ethno-national Diasporas which emerged as a result of migrations and quick diasporization of the population of towns after the collapse of the USSR. Precisely the Diaspora ethnic activists become increasingly more active actors who independently initiate or actively support the intervention of monuments into the space of receiving cities.

I find it necessary to talk about this “policy of reciprocal curtsies” also based on the context of symbols of the socialist past being ousted from the space of post-soviet towns. This process of the soviet being ousted is very unequivocal and within the context of policy of reciprocal curtsies, a feeling of *déjà vu*, a feeling of the return of the soviet past, albeit somewhat modernized past, may also arise. Thus, this is also a situation within the context of which one can observe the entire ambiguity of democratization processes in the post-soviet space.

I will mainly be analyzing a case of such swaps which is being initiated and in which the Azerbaijan political regime is actively involved. Naturally, I am best familiar with this case but, in addition, I find it to be the most interesting and ambiguous one.

The late president of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev conducted a flexible foreign policy and strove to preserve good relations with all neighbors and political actors important for the region. However, the relations with Russia were quite complicated for a long time. Only during Putin's presidency did interstate relations experience something like a renaissance. And I would risk asserting that this situation was largely determined by the background of the two presidents. Both had previously served in the KGB. The two, especially Putin, had very warm feelings towards each other, which probably were even sincere.

The very first result of the symbolism of these warm feelings was a monument to the well-known Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin in Baku. It was installed on 12 October 2001 in a public garden on the crossing of streets named after Pushkin and Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hacıbayov. As conceived by the authors of the project, this street crossing, already symbolized the proximity of Russian and Azerbaijani cultures. Besides the monument by sculptor Yuriy Orekhov was a present from Russia on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Azerbaijan's independence.

A return present from Azerbaijan was a monument to poet Nizami. This is poet who lived in the 12th century in Ganca, now the second important and second largest city in the country. This gift was timed to coincide with the 300th anniversary of St Petersburg. The selection of the city was not accidental I think. Besides the stereotypical idea about Petersburg in the spirit of "northern capital" or "cultural capital" of Russia, the idea that this is Putin's home town was of rather greater significance. The significance of the all improving relations was underlined by the presence of both presidents – Vladimir Putin and Heydar Aliyev - at the opening ceremony for the monument. At the opening of the monument on 9 June 2002, Putin, wishing to please the guest, rephrased a phrase from Nizami's works - "a word said from the heart hits right in the heart". Putin was speaking in the spirit of "all that we are doing today comes from our heart and we want this to reach the hearts of the Azerbaijani people".

These kinds of official ceremonies and speeches on the occasion of monument swaps are designed to publicly represent the nature of interstate relations. Thus, a temporary warming in the relations between Russia and Ukraine was also accompanied by the opening in Petersburg of a monument to the chief and well-known Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko.

This happened on 22 December 2000. Both presidents, Vladimir Putin and Leonid Kuchma, were present at the symbolic opening ceremony in order to give it special significance. However, the speeches during the ceremony were far from being as warm as those in the case with the Nizami monument.

The relations between Ukraine and Russia never improved afterwards and the monument in each other's capitals were later on unveiled by representatives of a different political alliance - incumbent Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. A monument to the "chief" Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli, who lived in the 12th century, appeared in Kiev on 7 June 2007. Under a tradition taking shape, the monument was installed on the crossing of the streets named after the very same Shota Rustaveli and Ukraine's known playwright and theatre director Panas Saksaganskiy. Naturally, both presidents attended the ceremony. A Georgian choir which performed the anthems of Georgia and Ukraine without accompaniment added exoticness to this event. Already on 2 March 2007 a monument to Taras Shevchenko was installed in Tbilisi too.

In both cases the emotional speeches made by President Saakashvili expressed his accentuated respect to the Ukrainian nation. Here, the language in which he said those words was of greater importance than the words themselves. In Kiev Saakashvili was speaking in Ukrainian. In Tbilisi, also in Ukrainian, he read out without looking at any notes Shevchenko's poem "Zapovit". Here it is worth recalling that previously, Mikheil Saakashvili had lived in Ukraine for some time. Yushchenko failed to do the same in response. But his speeches on both occasions were more specific and reflected the meaning and goals of the political alliance of the two states. Besides the "deep friendly ties" and "the history that unites us", this alliance is reinforced by political prospects. In Yushchenko's words, both countries are "united by the future" which should manifest itself in a full membership of the EU and NATO.

Usually all this policy of monument swap pays no attention to the wishes of townsmen themselves. However, one could assert that, as a rule, townspeople themselves quite often do not show a noticeable interest in the installation of those monuments. At the same time, some events around the intervention of these monuments into the space of post-soviet capitals also demonstrate growth of xenophobia. For example, paint has been poured on Nizami's

monuments in both Petersburg and Kiev. The quick spread of monuments to the late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev¹ causes even more mixed reaction.

Back in his lifetime, some kind of a personality cult was established in Azerbaijan which only strengthened after his death. Now not one single more or less large population centre or institution in Azerbaijan is without a monument of bust to Heydar Aliyev. This spread of clone monuments inevitably causes a feeling of *deja vu* from the soviet past. Finally it was after his death that Heydar Aliyev became the main exported national brand, noticeably pushing poet Nizami aside. The disposition for a wide spread of his monuments, parks named after him and branches of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation is now an example of going beyond the logic of “policy of reciprocal curtsies”. Certainly, doing something nice to an ally continues to make sense. Political and economic alliances are preserved too. However, the spread of countless pictures of the late president is already some kind of an end in itself too.

Here, one cannot but view a certain process of return of the soviet in a somewhat modernized form. And here it is a very illustrative thing that the main monument in Baku contains a symbolic reproduction of the soviet background of the former president. This situation demonstrates, I think, the whole ambiguity of the post-soviet democratization. This is rather a process of imitation of democratic changes. Since this is an imitation, residents of the capital are effectively deprived of the right, and often of the will too, to influence the process of filling of public space of their towns with monuments. The ideology of this spread of monuments to Heydar Aliyev is presented by the country’s chief ideologist Ramiz Mehdiyev, in the following way: “A monument to Heydar Aliyev is a symbol of independent and self-sufficient Azerbaijan”. Nowadays these symbols of independence and self-sufficiency are appearing in increasing numbers and this process is gaining momentum. Monuments to the former KGB general, a prominent communist party bureaucrat and post-soviet authoritarian president have already been installed in Kiev and Tbilisi.

That is to say, in republics “whose future lies in a full integration into the Europe Union”, as president Yushenko said. However, there is now a monument in one of the capitals of the European Union too – in Bucharest - and no major protests have been voiced against its installation.

Summarizing the foregoing, one can draw the following conclusions. The rituals of installation of such monuments look like established ones. On the whole, the ritual of

¹ He made his career in the then KGB to the title of major-general and for about two years – from 1967 to 1969 - he held the post of chairman of the KGB in Azerbaijan. Then, from 1969 to 1982 he was invariably led the republic as secretary of the central committee of the Communist Party in Azerbaijan.

ceremonies, the meaning of speeches and must-visits by president have already been established. The ceremonies are often timed to coincide with some significant dates, for example, culture days. Monuments are to be created by “ethnic specialists” even if they are installed on the money of the city itself, like was the case with the Shevchenko monument in St Petersburg.

The aims and meanings of these swaps can quite strongly differ. However, this, in all cases, is a process of influence of political relations on the filling of the urban space with monuments. This is also always some kind of a symbolic curtsy too. Actually the depth to which back bends demonstrates the boundaries from “let’s be friends” to “we are such close friends that we can’t be any closer”.

I am certainly far from the thought of seriously believing that monuments to Putin, Yushchenko or Saakashvili, as monuments to Heydar Aliyev, will soon start actually appearing, though one can never know for sure. I would place my bet on Putin but he is for the time being in good health. However, if, in the spirit of President Yushchenko, one thinks more about the future than the past then another question is more important – the question about when serious discussions will start about how much does a city need a monument to some ambiguous political leader.

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