

Stefes, Christoph H. Understanding Post-Soviet Transitions: Corruption, Collusion and Clientelism. Euro-Asian Studies. Palgrave/Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2006. xii + 211 pp. Notes. Bibliographical references. Index. £55.00.

THERE is no reason to suppose that the centuries-, not to say millennia-old relationship between the small neighbouring communities of Armenians and Georgians south of the Caucasus mountain-range will ever have been other than it is today, namely one of intense, universal rivalry. Who were first to adopt Christianity? Whose is the older script? Into which language was the Bible first translated? Did one nation's style of ecclesiastical architecture derive from that of the other, and, if so, who lent and who borrowed? If these bones of contention represent the noble end of the scale, Christoph H. Stefes plumbs its nadir by contrasting the two in terms of the nature of corruption in their post-Soviet states.

Of the former Soviet republics the three Baltic states are judged the most successful in freeing themselves from any legacy of corruption following fifty years in the Kremlin's shackles. Transcaucasia suffered an additional two decades of Soviet rule, which, after a brief period of independence, followed over a century of Tsarist domination. Stefes takes for his case-study Armenia and Georgia, two states of comparable size with many historical and cultural links, both of which are close to the West, albeit in different ways: Armenia, thanks (in part at least) to notorious developments in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, has a large and influential diaspora in both Europe (France) and America; Georgians, though they do not speak (unlike the Armenians) an Indo-European language, see themselves as more European than Asian, and from March 1992 to November 2003 the republic had as head of state Eduard Shevardnadze, the West's blue-eyed boy for the role he was perceived to have played as Gorbachev's Foreign Minister in helping to bring down both the Berlin Wall and subsequently the USSR itself.

Those in need of a theoretical framework will find it in chapter I, where a typology of corruption differentiates non-systemic from systemic, the former category being either incidental (based on individuals) or sectorial (more widely distributed through networks in certain areas of society), whilst the latter encompasses centralized and non-centralized varieties. It is Stefes' thesis that Armenia exemplifies centralized systemic against Georgia's decentralized systemic patterning. Table 1.1 (p. 33) sets out the features characterizing each (sub-)type, and human rights' activists should note that, whereas abuses tend to be widespread under centralized corruption, they are judged pervasive under the Georgian variant. The rest of the book is devoted to substantiating the central thesis and examining why two so similar neighbours should end up exemplifying different categories. It closes with suggestions for dismantling the existing systems and offers some conclusions.

Two features which distinguish Armenia from Georgia are (a) the ethnic homogeneity of the former vs the heterogeneity of the latter, and (b) the different paths they traversed towards independence, feature (b) being not wholly unrelated to (a). Armenia faced external danger in the shape of hostilities with another neighbour, Azerbaijan, over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh; this resulted *inter alia* in an exchange of populations, which buttressed Armenia's homogeneity, and the general population consolidated behind the governments of Levan Ter-Petrossian and later Robert Kocharian, enabling the establishment of the more centrally controlled system of corruption. Georgia, on the other hand, experienced ethnic wars in South Ossetia (1990-92) and Abkhazia (August 1992-September 1993), a civil war (1992-93) between supporters of the country's first post-communist president, the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, based in his home-province of Mingrelia, and those backing the junta that ousted him, plus a decade when the S. W. province of Adjara (Ach'ara) was effectively a self-governing fiefdom under local potentate Aslan Abashidze, who controlled all land-trade with neighbouring Turkey (1993-2003). A fractious state and consequential weak central authority facilitated the development of decentralized corruption, based on the long-standing networks of family, friends or other social groupings that had become a sine qua non of daily life in Georgia. After toppling Shevardnadze in November 2003, Mikheil Saak'ashvili quickly reestablished control over Ach'ara (spring 2004), but S. Ossetia and Abkhazia remain de facto independent (though unrecognised) states.

Divergent recent histories must have contributed to the different structures obtaining in Armenia and Georgia, and my only slight quarrel with the book is its acceptance of the view that responsibility for the Abkhazian war lay with the paramilitary leaders of the then-ruling State Council, Tengiz K'it'ovani and Djaba Ioseliani (p. 42), the potted history of whose career in Footnote 8 needs refining. I have long argued that the only logical explanation for this pointless war was the (vain) hope that Gamsakhurdia's supporters in next-door Mingrelia would rally behind Shevardnadze's 'pan-Georgian' flag against the common (Abkhazian) enemy; in other words, I see Shevardnadze's cynical (mis)calculation behind this catastrophe at a time when he was immune from criticism in the West.

Stefes makes some complimentary remarks about Saak'ashvili, the current Georgian president, in terms of anti-corruption moves but recognises that ultimately there could be dangers ahead, given the powers amassed in the president's hands — Shevardnadze too originally came to power as Party Boss in Georgia in 1972 as an anti-corruption campaigner.

The book should be a valuable eye-opener for all interested in the region, where ignorance has too often determined policy. Occasionally a wrong word or syntactic construction has crept in, but these are minor distractions.

Department of Near & Middle Eastern Languages & Cultures
SOAS, University of London
seer@ssees.ucl.ac.uk

B. G. HEWITT