

## THE KURDS TODAY: BETWEEN LOCAL, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

**LESZEK DZIĘGEL**  
Uniwersytet Jagielloński  
Katedra etnologii  
Ul. Grodzka 52  
34-044 Kraków, Polska

**UDK 39:312**  
Izvorni znanstveni rad  
Original Scientific Paper  
Primljeno: 15. listopada 1994.

*Particularly interesting from the point of view of culture studies is the situation of Kurds in post-Soviet Transcaucasia. Their original ethnic and religious composition was far from homogeneous. In Armenia, most of the Kurdish-speaking settlers in the early 19th century were Yezidis, who fled from persecution at the hands of their Muslim compatriots and the Turkish administration. Nevertheless, the Russian administration in Transcaucasia regarded them for generations as Kurds. Side by side with them, there also lived - among the Transcaucasian Azerbaijani population - Kurdish refugees of the Muslim faith. Under the Soviet rule, the Armenian Kurds enjoyed considerable cultural freedom, although at times they too fell victim to repression. In Azerbaijan, on the other hand, they were subjected to a policy of forced assimilation into the Turkish-speaking Azerbaijani population. Currently, an idea is being formed among the Kurdish-speaking Transcaucasian Yezidis to establish a non-Kurdish, religious ethnic community of their own, in opposition to Islam. Muslim Kurds in Transcaucasia, in their turn, demand the re-establishment of the Kurdish Autonomous Region, dissolved by Stalin.*

The conflicts arising these days between the 20-million-strong Kurdish nation and the governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria can no longer be seen as skirmishes with an unruly tribal element or reprisals against robbers in the borderland.

The Kurdish independence movement is of interest not only to political scientists. It is turning into a complex social and cultural process, whose consequences are irreversible. Possibly, what we witness in the Middle East is the birth of a modern nation, frustrated in its aspirations, ready to fight desperately for a place to live in the region in question, and adroit at forming at least temporary allegiances and taking advantage of conflicts between their enemies.

The Kurds have lived for millennia in the territories of present-day southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, northwestern Iran and northeastern Iraq. Linguistically, they are closest to the Persians. Since the 7th century, they have belonged to the Muslim world, usually embracing the Sunnite branch of Islam. Nevertheless, other denominations are also represented among the Kurds, such as Shiism, Alevitism and some extreme sects, which, however, can still be placed within Islam. Finally, there is a small group called Yezidis, whose religion is syncretic in character, combining elements typical of various Oriental cults.

There exist numerous Kurdish dialects, which linguists classify into three principal groups: Kurmanji, Sorani and Gurani. Only the first two have evolved a written, literary variety. Kurdish

literature used for centuries the Arabic alphabet. Only in the 20th century did the Kurds from the North and West start using the Latin alphabet, while those living in Soviet Transcaucasia were forced to learn and use the Cyrillic alphabet. Educated champions of Kurdish independence are nowadays aware of the need of thorough standardization of their language, if it is to become an effective tool of promoting Kurdish unity.

The long and complex history of the Kurds is the history of a nation which, until 1946, had never embarked on the task of establishing a state of its own - unless one takes into account the small, tribal emirates of the old times, which remained at odds with one another and amounted to little more than vassals of Sultans and Shahs. Divided into tribes, the Kurds inhabited the least accessible mountain region in that part of the Middle East. From time immemorial, the Oriental rulers willingly employed the valiant Kurdish highlanders to their purposes, while leaving them a considerable margin of freedom. After the Sultan of Turkey's victory at Chaldiran in 1516 and his successful campaign against the Shah, the border between the Ottoman Turkey and the Safavid Persia was stabilized. As a result, two thirds of the Kurdish territory became part of the Sublime Porte's empire, while the rest remained under the Shah's rule. Kurdistan constituted a buffer zone, made up by semi-independent principalities mentioned above, whose rulers were obliged to take up arms in defense of either Turkey, or Persia. Facing loss of power and influence in the 18th and 19th centuries, both these countries embarked on modernization and built up a centralized administration. In the process, they put an end to the semi-independent Kurdish emirates, crushing the resistance of the feudal, tribal rulers. The birth of modern nationalism among the Turks and the Arabs at the beginning of the 20th century made the Kurds react with instinctive hostility towards the traditional, ethnically alien centres of political power. Increasing arrogance and chauvinism, directed against the Kurdish minority, contributed to the rise of the earliest forms of Kurdish national movement. It originated among the educated stratum of the tribal aristocracy, which was a very small group at that time, living in the Middle-East metropolises: Cairo, Damascus, Istanbul - in other words, outside Kurdistan proper.

The formation of modern Kurdish nationalism was hampered by the centuries-old tradition or regional and tribal divisions giving rise to innumerable local communities. Occasionally, some energetic and successful leaders managed to unite several clans or even tribes, forming a confederacy. However, it would disintegrate as soon as the leader's prestige went down following a defeat in battle. A traditionally-minded Kurd would identify himself first of all with his own clan, and often also with a religious fraternity, to which he belonged together with his family, recognizing the authority of a charismatic shekh.

Attempts to implant in the Kurds a sense of supra tribal and supra regional identity were further complicated by the age-old division of Kurdish society into *eshiret*, that is, people having a concrete tribal affiliation, and *reyet* or *mishken* - those without such an affiliation, living in subordination to a particular tribe. The relationship between the two groups was often marked by tension, conflicts of interest, or even downright antagonism. Only towards the end of the 20th century did the political and economic turmoil in Kurdistan weaken the structure based on the *eshiret/reyet* distinction while the traditional, tribal loyalties gave way to new ones, which are, incidentally, typical of other regions referred to as "developing".

After World War I, President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's strongly nationalist doctrine denied the Turkish Kurds the right to exist as a separate nation. The suppression of three successive uprisings in the years 1925, 1931, and 1938 put down the armed resistance of the Kurds, but at

the same time it reinforced their hate of the republican Ankara, regardless of any differences between the tribes inhabiting the eastern part of Anatolia.

In Iran, attempts to rebel against the Shah took place at that time still at the tribal level. Tribal divisions within the Kurdish political movement in Iraq under British mandate did not allow the Kurds in that country to advance claims that would have a chance of fulfillment. The relatively small Kurdish minority in Syria under French mandate was not in a position to influence the policy of Paris in accordance with its aspirations. In fact, most of the Syrian Kurds were refugees from southern Turkey, who feared deportation to Anatolia.

It was only during World War II, after the intervention of British, American, and Soviet troops in Iran, that the first independent state in the history of the Kurds was established - under the reluctant protection of the Red Army - in the town of Mahabad. This tiny area remained under control of a group of wealthy townsmen and several tribal aristocrats from the neighbouring area - for less than 11 months, until 17th December 1946. Now the centre of the independence movement shifted to northern Iraq, where, after the abolition of monarchy in 1958, Mela Mustafa Barzani appeared on the scene. Barzani's revolt, overtly supported by both the USA and Iran, went on with a varying degree of success until its final suppression by the Iraqi army in 1975. Yet despite this defeat, Baghdad did not manage to eliminate the Kurdish movement in Iraq completely. For many years, however, this movement remained divided.

In the Turkish Republic, social and cultural life of the Kurds began, after 1950, to gain momentum after a long period of depression and stagnation. The Kurds expected changes and hoped that the authorities would abandon their official "Turkey-for-the-Turks" policy. But in 1967, some Kurdish activists and journalists were placed under arrest. It was the beginning of a chain of increasingly severe repression. In the end, martial law was declared again in southeastern Turkey in 1978.

Stabilization of the border with Iran, which was a top priority for Baghdad, broke down when the fundamentalists toppled the shah in 1979. The uprising staged by the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, under the leadership of Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, failed.

The war between Iraq and Iran in the years 1980-1988 threw the Kurdish independence movement into disarray. In the Zagros Mountains, Ghassemlou's uprising against Khomeini was slowly dying down, despite the support of Jalal Talabani's movement from Iraq. Talamani led at the same time protracted and fruitless negotiations with Baghdad. Barzani's sons, in their turn, representing the Democratic Party of Iraqi Kurdistan, took advantage of the support of Iranian troops and entered the border regions of northern Iraq. No significant territorial gains were made, while the price to pay for Teheran's support was heavy: the Iraqi Kurds had to fight against their compatriots from the Ghassemlou forces, for which they still have not been forgiven. Thus in the case of Kurds from Iran and Iraq, one can hardly speak about a supra regional sense of national identity emerging in those years. On the other hand, numerous, tactical alliances were formed among political groups on both sides of the Iraqi-Iranian border.

On 15th August 1984, when the Iraqi-Iranian war was escalating and the role of various Kurdish groups in the conflict had been marginalized, there began in southeastern Turkey the longest-lasting uprising in Kurdish history, which has been going on uninterruptedly until today. Troops from the so-called Kurdistan Liberation Army attacked the gendarmerie posts in Erüh (Siirt province) and in Semdili (Hakkari province). Fighting Ankara was an entirely new force: the

Kurdish Workers' Party - a Marxist organization, known today as PKK. The party began to organize guerrilla training camps and bases in the borderland area between Turkey and Iraq, from which they launched attacks against the Turks. When threatened by the Turkish gendarmerie and army, the guerrillas would withdraw into the Iraqi territory, in the hope that Turkey would not risk a diplomatic conflict.

However, Ankara decided in 1985 that air strikes were necessary against the Kurdish guerrilla camps near Zakho, and in the years to follow, Turkish forces continued to operate across the border on many occasions. Despite such spectacular measures, it turned out that with all its power, the Turkish army was unable to maintain order even in its own country. Meanwhile, hostilities on the Iraqi-Iranian front had ceased in 1988. Baghdad could now deploy its army against the Kurdish rebels in its own territory and began to carry out large-scale deportations (planned well ahead) of Kurds to strategic settlements situated along some selected routes, for easier access. After the chemical attack against Halabsha, a new wave of civilian refugees left Iraqi Kurdistan for Turkey, which willy-nilly granted them shelter in special camps. At the same time contacts became established between former antagonists, the leaders of the Kurdish revolts in Iraq: Jalal Talabani and Masud Barzani.

In summer 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait, only to sustain a crushing defeat by the Allies in spring 1991. There followed an uprising of the Iraqi Kurds and Shiites, drowned in blood by the surviving units of the Revolutionary Guard. Once again the world watched the tragedy of millions of refugees seeking shelter in Turkey and Iran. By all appearances, the Kurdish cause was lost, at least in Iraq, due to the massive emigration and total destruction of the infrastructure in the northeastern provinces. Reality, however, proved wrong the catastrophic predictions of the media, announcing the extinction of nearly all the Middle-East Kurds. Iraqi Kurds are just a part of their nation, and not the largest one at that. Besides, even in Iraq their situation was not all that hopeless. Scenes of brutal extermination of Kurds by Saddam Hussein's troops, captured by the cameras of many Western journalists, came as a shock to the world's public opinion. Consequently, pressure was exerted on the Allies to react, which was one of the reasons why they did not allow Baghdad to capture the northernmost parts of three provinces inhabited by the Iraqi Kurds: Dohuk, Arbil, and Suleimaniya. This narrow strip of land would allow a chance of survival to the starving and freezing refugees who did not manage to cross the Iranian or Turkish border. Already in 1991, British and American fighter planes began to enforce the ban on flights of Saddam Hussein's aircraft above those areas. But soon the allied armies began to withdraw from the Turkish border and the President of Iraq attempted to regain control over the rebellious Kurdish provinces with the help of infantry and tanks alone, without support from the air. It turned out, however, that Kurdish guerrilla forces, both those led by Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, had consolidated after their recent defeat and managed to stop the Iraqi offensive. They even launched a counterattack in the mountains, capturing Suleimaniya - a city of about a million inhabitants. Still, they did not manage to get hold of Kurkuk with its oil fields, defended with determination by the government forces.

As a result, the Iraqi Kurds were in 1992 in control of an area of 38,900 square kilometers, with Arbil as the seat of central civilian administration. The guerrilla posts extending furthest to the south were in the town of Kifri, a mere 155 kilometers away from Baghdad. Plans of the Iraqi government to launch a new attack on the northern provinces in summer 1992 were thwarted by the decision of the Allies to ban Saddam's planes also from the southern part of Iraq, inhabited

by Shiites. Baghdad's attempts to regain control of the airspace in both territories in question in January 1993 moved the Allies to launch a counterattack, yet at the same time the West's indecision about the ways to deal with the Iraqi dictator became exposed.

Quite officially now, Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani opened their representative offices in Istanbul and Ankara. This antagonized the PKK guerrillas in Turkey. Both groups still cannot attain a position to identify themselves openly with a common, national cause. PKK in Turkey would prefer to treat the Kurdish enclave in Iraq as a springboard for its military actions. The leaders of the enclave under the Allied protection, on the other hand, cannot afford to antagonize Ankara and cut off its only link with the outside world, which is through Turkey.

In spite of the many defeats it has suffered and even more appeals for unity, the Kurdish independence movement is still more divided than it is willing to admit. Formerly, the divisions stemmed from differing tribal interests and the fact that enemies of the Kurds played on the ambitions of particular clans and their leaders. Today, on the other hand, it seems that the rivalry takes place first of all between various ambitious political coteries that often disregard the tribal element, even though they are still controlled by the families of their leaders. Participants in such coteries include also Kurds living in towns, where tribal divisions have been lost, and Kurdish émigrés in Western Europe. The dramatic social and political changes are at least partly matched by the transformations within the Kurdish "political class". This, however, is no guarantee against sectarianism.

For several years, the role of the leading Kurdish organization has been played by the belligerent Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), founded in 1972 by a certain Abdullah "Apo" Ocalan. The party deliberately rejects all kinds of tribal tradition and divisions in Kurdish society. As has been said before, it resorted to guerrilla warfare in 1984. The founders of the party were Kurdish students and the leaders of the organization were allowed - like Talabani - to operate from Damascus.

Ocalan's party declares the necessity of armed struggle for independence of entire Kurdistan within its ethnic boundaries. Yet its guerrilla warfare is aimed first of all against the Turkish soldiers and state institutions in the Kurdish regions of Anatolia. Besides, the party fights against the peasant militia organized by the Turks in the country in order to back up the gendarmerie. To be sure, these local, auxiliary units consist of conscripts pressed into service by the police and their combat value close to zero. From the very outset, Ocalan has expressed extremely leftist, Marxist views and denounced the "feudal" Kurdish establishment and senior tribal leaders, who indeed still remain quite influential. First of all, however, PKK intends to discredit the big, old, established parties. It accuses them of passivity, opportunism and a silent betrayal of the national interests.

It is true that no other force in recent history except PKK has initiated armed struggle in eastern Turkey on such a scale. On the other hand, one cannot fail to notice that the guerrilla troops it has organized resort to ruthless terror even if it triggers bloody retribution on the part of the Turkish army against the defenseless peasants. This is one of the reasons why the Kurdish Workers' Party has often been openly criticized by other Kurdish political organizations. Some political analysts are, nevertheless, of the opinion that the determination of Ocalan's squads, which the Turkish government did not manage to destroy or subdue, is beginning to bring first effects. In the first place, PKK has filled the political vacuum that formerly prevailed in the

Turkish part of Kurdistan, which forms the largest part of the Kurdish ethnic area. Show trials and death sentences for 86 members of the party in late 1983 and early 1984 did not break the spirit of that militant movement. Conducting guerrilla warfare on such a scale against the very well equipped Turkish army and gendarmerie would not be possible if the Ocalan groups did not receive continuous support from Syria. It was in the Lebanese valley of Bekaa that PKK guerrilla training camps functioned for a long time, of which the Syrian government was perfectly aware. The fighters were often recruited from among the Kurdish poor in Lebanon, as Kurdish refugees in that country are situated, in their mass, at the bottom of the social hierarchy and, facing deportation, often have little to lose. Only in 1992 did Syria's President Hafez Assad acquiesce in Ankara's demands and ordered the Bekaa training camps to be closed. But "Apo" Ocalan and his brother Osman, in command of the guerrilla troops, organized similar camps in the borderland between Turkey and Iraq. Those camps became the bone of contention between PKK on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, who are in power in the Kurdish enclave of northern Iraq.

Hostilities in Turkish Kurdistan stimulate emigration from that region to Western Europe. The refugees, whose legal status usually remains unclear, perceive PKK activists as people who stand up for them in their misfortune. Accordingly, the number of Abdullah Ocalan's supporters is growing also among the Kurdish diaspora. This tendency is reinforced by the fact that emigrants from eastern Turkey clearly outnumber Kurdish emigrants coming from Iraq, Iran or Syria. Under such circumstances, the influence of the old parties, which have traditionally operated outside Turkish Kurdistan, is dwindling, although it would be a mistake to write them off completely.

"Apo" Ocalan and his party have called both leaders of Iraqi Kurds "traitors to the national cause". Kurdistan is one, they argue, and its partition into several territories within the borders of other countries was the work of imperialists - formerly English and French, and now also American. The Kurdish Workers' Party is fighting for the liberation of the entire nation, within its ethnic territory. Therefore, it does not respect anyone's spheres of influence, borders imposed from the outside, or solutions prompted by narrow, secretarial interests, such as the idea of a Kurdish enclave to become confederated with Iraq in the future, or a similar idea of a federation, comprising northern Kurdistan and a future, democratic Turkey. Furthermore, PKK activists accuse Iraqi Kurds of tacit agreement to subordinate that part of northern Iraq to Turkey, which allegedly has sought to regain the lost vilayet of Mosul since the end of World War I. Their next claim is that Turkey intends to use Iraqi Kurds to gain control over the oil fields around Kirkuk, using as a pretext the need to protect the local population of 350,000 Turk men in northern Iraq, especially since Turkey, through the territory of which the oil pipeline from Iraq has been built, would be very interested in exporting oil from Kirkuk.

As we can see, the leftist PKK opts for a nationwide identification, rejects differentiation of interests across regions, and advocates a massive insurrection in the whole of Kurdistan, within the territories of at least four Middle-East countries.

The contemporary Kurdish independence movement comprises several orientations. Some of the parties fighting for freedom would be satisfied with a broad autonomy within the states of Iraq, Turkey and Iran. The small Kurdish minority in Syria - just about a million people - for obvious reasons plays down its national ambitions and concentrates on achieving full civil rights. Even so, they have been subjected in recent years to a new wave of discrimination. Other political

groups believe that the Kurds should rather join forces with the democratic opposition in Turkey, Iran or Iraq, and cooperate with the Turks, Iranians or Arabs in the task of restructuring the political systems in their countries. This would allow a political consensus to be reached without antagonizing the ethnic majority in a given country. For many years this has been the stand of the extreme left. One expectation is the leftist Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), which champions the idea of full independence for Kurdistan. Ocalan's supporters say that federalist ideas are a thing of the past and that they never worked in practice anyway. In their radicalism, they not only blame the West for its alleged support - for selfish motives - for the occupation of Kurdistan, but also criticize the idea of an "air-force umbrella", which the Allies extend over northern Iraq. It is seen as an attempt to keep Turkey in control of Iraqi Kurdistan and prevent the outbreak of a final uprising of the Kurds in all the Middle-East countries. PKK views the government of Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani as a satellite of Ankara and the West. Such a government would not allow the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq to become a base of supplies and a safety zone for the Kurdish insurgents in Turkey and Iran. Moreover, the situation would provide a pretext to keep Iraq a weak country, divided into spheres of influence, where Turkey would hold a dominant position.

In the light of what has been said above, one might accept the reasoning of the Kurdish Workers' Party. In present-day Turkey, the Kurds can hope for only as much as they gain in their struggle, sometimes using the most ruthless methods. On the other hand, PKK is too weak to enable the Kurdish parties in Iraq and Iran to start jointly a war for the liberation of all Middle-East Kurds. Even if all the guerrilla forces became united and fought under a single command, the Kurdish insurgents would still be militarily too weak to conduct a war in such a large area. Worse still, concrete attempts to coordinate the Kurds' armed struggle would persuade the countries of the region to stop fighting and plotting against one another and join forces to crush the Kurdish guerrilla forces, wherever they showed up. This is, by the way, precisely what the Pact of Saadabad, concluded towards the end of the 1930s, provided for. It is, however, consistently ignored by the Middle-East governments.

And so the Kurdish independence movement has no choice but to maneuver carefully and take advantage of the changing, egoistic, political ambitions of particular countries in the region.

Many authors who analyze the history and the present state of the Kurdish national movement tend to stress its anachronistic, sectarian and tribal character. Some leaders share this opinion, too. In fact, however, the situation has changed considerably also in this respect over the last decades. In the previous centuries, riots against the Turks or the Persians were organized first of all by local tribal leaders, everyone of whom relied on the forces of his own confederacy. Later on, at least some of the fighting for independence was inspired by charismatic shekhs, who roused the masses to action by appealing to their sense of religious loyalty to the master. In such militant movements, tribal affiliation was of secondary importance only. Mela Mustafa Barzani, in his turn, became something more than just the leader of a belligerent highlander clan living on the Great Zab: he was also the heir to a tradition of religious leadership in his family. His rival, Talabani, also came from a family of Kirkuk shekhs. Besides, Barzani was the last leader in the grand old style, relying on a group of loyal mountain tribes, among which he exercised autocratic power. The new generation of insurgence leaders and champions of Kurdish independence comes, at least in part, from among the young, urban intelligentsia. Many of these leaders have either graduated from one of the Middle-East universities or at least studied there for some time. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou claimed to have studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and

to have obtained a doctorate from the University of Prague. Abdullah Ocalan also says he used to be student and so do other founding members of PKK. Large part of the political support the Kurdish diaspora in Europe provides for their compatriots comes from student circles, too. Organizations of Kurdish students in the West were at one time almost an exclusive forum of political life of Kurds in the West. They provided aid for the refugees and maintained contact with their mother country.

And yet one should not disregard the tribal element, which still plays a significant role in many regions of Kurdistan. In the northern Iraqi enclave, particular parties have the support of tribal communities, which are capable of providing even 10,000 armed fighters at a time. Local political leaders contend for the loyalty or support of one tribal or another from the region of Zakho or Dohuk. Armed tribal militias reportedly run contraband across the border and fight with one another. On the other hand, however, the large-scale deportations of the borderland population, carried out by all the Middle-East countries at different points during the second half on the 20th century, must have disrupted a great deal of traditional, old relationships. According to the German sociologist Jochim Blaschke, the majority of Kurds live today not in the country, but in towns - usually out of necessity.

Some Kurdish political organizations, particularly on the left wing, ostentatiously reject the "feudal" tribal elements. This is typical especially of the PKK rhetoric. The armed forces of that party allow also women in their ranks, proclaiming their social and cultural liberation. Women form separate units, which receive concrete and precise tasks. The Kurdish Workers' Party tries also to attract the Kurdish intelligentsia, and in particular students. Military camps of that organization provide not only army training, but also elaborate ideological instruction.

Propaganda activities are particularly strong among the radical Kurdish organizations in the West. They rely increasingly on the assistance of European extremist organizations. However, this alliance of the Kurdish Workers' Party with Western European organizations that promote uncompromising violence is being watched by other Kurdish émigré organizations with a growing concern. PKK comes in for particularly heavy criticism for their contacts with IRA - which, by the way, are widely publicized by centres of anti-Kurdish propaganda, sponsored especially by Turkey.

"Apo" Ocalan's influence among the West European circles of the Kurdish diaspora is a consequence of the fact that its largest part consists of people coming from Anatolia and speaking Kurmanji dialects. The radical slogans of PKK promise the numerous Kurdish *Gastarbeiter* rather more than could be reasonably expected, judging by the current political situation. But the impoverished and rather poorly educated refugees are glad to hear what they would like to hear. Let us add that the Iraqi and Iranian elements among the Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe are probably much less numerous. It is so despite the fact that outside Turkey, the Kurdish political parties functioning for decades in Iraq and Iran provide serious competition for Ocalan's followers. We should, however, always remember that a vast majority of the Kurds live not in Iran, Iraq, or even less so Syria, but precisely in Turkey, where Ocalan's PKK is clearly the leader of the independence movement.

In the case of at least part of the Kurdish national movement, its leftist orientation is residual in character. It was a consequence of the contest between two ideological blocks and sprang from the hope that in the end, Moscow would give its support to the insurgency movements,



with which it should feel an affinity. While the Soviet system did not support the Kurdish aspirations for independence in the Middle East, it did allure for decades Kurds living outside its borders by a vision of ostentatious national freedom it supposedly provided for their compatriots in Transcaucasia. Regions to the south of the Caucasus, situated within Russia's sphere of influence and, later on, within its borders, have long attracted the Kurds. Among other things, they offered good pastures for the Kurdish nomads. In the 1820s, Transcaucasia provided shelter for the Kurdish-speaking Yezidis, persecuted both by their Muslim compatriots and by the Turks. Members of that syncretic sect lived in Armenia and Georgia throughout the 19th century. There were even periods when a Yezidi nationality, which they professed, was being officially entered into their documents. Usually, however, they were classified as Kurds, on the basis of the language they used and their outward look. The traditional economy of the Yezidis did not differ from that of the herding and farming tribes to the south of the border, in Anatolia. There is no doubt, either, that side by side with the Yezidis, also Muslim Kurds settled in Transcaucasia, although they usually preferred to do so among their coreligionists, some of whom, by the way, had been deported there centuries before by Persian Shahs.

Unlike the Armenians or Georgians, the Kurds and the Kurdish-speaking Yezidis formed in Transcaucasia an insignificant minority, consisting of refugees from the south. After the victory of the Soviet system in that region, a Kurdish Autonomous Region was formed in 1923, which was also called at that time "Red Kurdistan". Already in 1928, however, it was dissolved by Stalin's order and incorporated into Soviet Azerbaijan. Like many other nationalities, the Transcaucasian Kurds suffered repression and deportations to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and other Soviet republics in Central Asia. Looking back, one can conclude that Moscow's policy on the Kurdish minority was full of interesting inconsistencies. On the one hand, the Kurds were being subjected to cruel repression, following accusations of allegedly provoking border incidents. On the other hand, they were granted access to cultural institutions and a degree of cultural freedom of which their compatriots in the Middle East and especially in Kemal's Turkey could not even dream of. Indeed, no one forced the Transcaucasian Kurds by police methods to turn Russian, Georgian or Azerbaijani, although in the case of the last-mentioned nationality, opinions of the Kurdish leaders differ. Some of them speak about a local, Azerbaijani nationalism and attempts of Azerbaijan's communist bureaucracy to eradicate their national consciousness. At any rate, more recent census data on Azerbaijan mention no Kurds. It is also certain that the Soviet administration did not recognize the claims of the Yezidis, who considered themselves a separate nation on the basis of their religion. They were all treated as Kurds. The Soviet state was no place to boast about one's religion and claim for it the status of a separate ethnic-religious entity. Thus it became common knowledge during the decades of Soviet rule that a Kurdish ethnic minority lived in Transcaucasia. The existence of a group among them which was unwilling to claim Kurdish nationality was totally ignored. This fact has come to light only now that the Soviet Union has ceased to exist and the structures it created are falling apart also in the Caucasian region.

Yet for the previous several decades, Kurdish independence leaders, with Mela Mustafa Barzani and Jalal Talabani, were silent about Stalin's repression against their brothers. Hoping for Moscow's support, they preferred to praise, sometimes excessively, the liberal policy of the Soviets concerning those Kurds who had avoided persecution by the police.

To be sure, in comparison with the chauvinistic denial of any rights of the Kurds to a national

life of their own in neighbouring Turkey, the Soviet model of cultural policy did seem fairly liberal. We know today that Moscow would allow activities which were of national character only in form. They were at the same time strictly subordinated to the fundamental guideline concerning absolute loyalty to the totalitarian, atheistic doctrine. But even under such stringent restrictions, a lot was done for the Kurds in Transcaucasia, particularly thanks to the good will of the Armenians. Soviet Armenia's relative autonomy in economic matters supposedly allowed the Kurds living there to enjoy a better life than in other regions of the empire.

Today, near the end of the 20th century, all regions of Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora witness a gradual process, yet one of lasting consequences: that of national unification, and disappearance of old antagonisms, tribal and regional divisions. In Western Europe, and especially in Germany we see a rapprochement between the Kurdish-speaking Yezidis and their Muslim brothers, who begin to develop a sense of common identity in the face of an alien and often hostile world. It would seem that the process of overcoming old antagonisms and integration of the Yezidi communities into the 20-million Kurdish nation should run particularly smoothly in Transcaucasia, where Yezidis have lived for generations in an ideal symbiosis - one would think - with Muslim Kurds. However, things are different. The Kurdish-speaking minority living in Transcaucasia and in the republics of Central Asia has suddenly faced a new threat and also a new type of ethnic pitfall.

In Central Asia, the group in question has been subjected to an increasing pressure of the modern Turkish propaganda, which emphasizes the unity of all the Turkish-speaking peoples, thus filling up the vacuum left by Moscow. The ruling elites of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan or Kazakhstan may be more inclined to take heed of Ankara's arguments than to those of the leaders of Kurdish communities, struggling to maintain their native language. The danger seems particularly great in northern Azerbaijan in Transcaucasia. To make things worse, the prolonged, Armenian-Azerbaijani armed conflict engages the Kurdish-speaking population on both sides in bloody hostilities. Fearing the growing enmity of the Christian Armenians, some 15,000 of the Muslim Kurds, who inhabited those regions for at least a hundred years, fled to Azerbaijan with their families. They refrain, however, from taking part in the fighting on either side. The Armenian-Azerbaijani war has thus driven thousands of Transcaucasian Kurds away from the land of their birth and forced them into exile in the Krasnodar and Stavropol regions, as well as in other parts of the Russian Federation - without jobs and without any means of subsistence.

Apart from those objective circumstances, very dangerous for the Kurds, there have appeared tensions within their own communities: Yezidi national and cultural ambitions have suddenly surfaced. A small Transcaucasian minority, using the same Kurmanji dialects and classified for generations by the administration as Kurds, is beginning to divide itself according to religious criteria and digging up old conflicts that started in northern parts of Anatolia and Mesopotamia in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

So far, the Kurdish-speaking inhabitants of Transcaucasia are still considered by others to be Kurds, regardless of their own views and ethnic loyalties. In the capital city of Erevan alone, their number amounts to some 12,000. Most of the Kurdish communities, however, live in the agricultural region of Hoktemberian. There are also Kurdish villages in the regions of northern Aragatz, Talinn and the Armenian sanctuary of Echmiadzin. Religious and ethnic divisions among the Transcaucasian Kurds have been observed since 1988. Today, Yezidis form a majority among the 65,000 Kurdish-speaking inhabitants of Armenia. Parallel to the escalation of Armenian

nationalist movements in the final years of the Soviet Union, there appeared advocated of a separation of the Yezidis from their compatriots who use the same language, but are of Muslim denomination. This new movement has four leaders, representing the clergy and the laity. They argue that it is time to join the world's one-million-strong Yezidi community. One could question the accuracy of that apparently exaggerated number, just like a lot of other statistical data about the size of Middle-East ethnic minorities seems doubtful. It should be reiterated at this point that the idea of a Yezidi-Muslim separation has not been expressed among the Kurdish diaspora in the West so far. Nevertheless, some of the most militant Yezidi activists in Transcaucasia have gained considerable influence in the newly established government of the post-Soviet Armenian Republic. And what is the situation in northern, post-Soviet Azerbaijan, which is in conflict with Armenia? Unfortunately, I am unable to quote any data about the present number of Muslim Kurdish inhabitants of the republic. It has only come to my knowledge that the so-called Kurdish Liberation Movement, organized in Armenia and operating in Transcaucasia, has declared independence of a tiny area, comprising, Lachin, Kubatla, Zangelan and Jebraïl, that is, the territories that constituted the Kurdish Autonomous Region during the period between the two World Wars. However, since the 1930s, it has formed part of Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani government strongly condemned the Kurds for their decision. The authorities would not accept any attempt on the part of the minorities living in Azerbaijan to establish politically independent territorial entities. The President of the Republic at that time, Echibei, warned the minorities that all they could expect was cultural autonomy and nothing more. It was an unambiguous warning also for the Azerbaijani Kurds.

As we can see, contemporary Kurds embrace various forms of identification and various loyalties. In the case of an émigré living in Europe, it is a nationwide-level identification and loyalty. At the same time, living abroad reinforces also family and local ties, due to the exposure to an ethnically and culturally alien environment. One can wonder, on the other hand, whether local and tribal links have not become weakened or destroyed in the wake of the massive displacement, migrations and deportations that have become the fate of millions of Kurds living in the Middle East. Rapid urbanization of that region as well as the return of some of the refugees to agricultural areas where they are allowed to settle may create entirely new situations in this respect.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ABRAMIAN, J. (1992): The Yezidi movement in Armenia. *Kurdistan Report*, 11: 22
- ARFA, HASSAN (1966): *The Kurds*, London
- BLASCHKE, JOCHEM (1991): Kurdische Communities in Deutschland und Westeuropa. In: *Kurden im Exil*, ed. by Schneider, Robin, Berlin. 2.1.1-15
- DZIĘGIEL, LESZEK (1992): Węzeł kudryjski. *Kultura, dzieje, walka o przetrwanie*, Kraków
- FRANZ, E. (1986): *Kurden und Kurdentum*, Hamburg
- FUAD, K. (1990): On the Origins, Development and State of the Kurdish Language. In: *Yearbook of the Kurdish Academy*: 11-21
- GREAVES, A. (1992): A short stay at camp Lolan. *Kurdistan Report*, 11
- GUNTER, R. (1990): *The Kurds in Turkey - A Political Dilemma*, Boulder, Colorado

- HASSANPOUR, A. (1992): *The Standardisation of the Kurdish Language 1918-1985*, Lewiston, New York
- HITCHENS, CH. (1992): Struggle of the Kurds. In: *National Geographic*, vol. 182: 33-60
- HOWELL, S. (1965): *The Soviet Union and the Kurds*, Ann Arbor University, Michigan
- KUCHLER, H. (1978): *Offentliche Meinung*, FUB, Berlin
- MACKENZIE, D. N. (1962): *Kurdish Dialects Studies*, London

## KURDI DANAS:

### IZMEĐU LOKALNE, REGIONALNE I NACIONALNE IDENTIFIKACIJE

#### Sažetak

Neispunjene nacionalne ambicije dvadeset milijuna Kurda već su odavno prestale biti samo lokalni problem koji se tiče jedne etničke manjine u državama Srednjeg istoka; Turskoj, Iranu, Iraku i Siriji. Kurdski etnički prostor, stoljećima podijeljen na dva nejednaka dijela : turski i iranski, razdijeljen je nakon I svjetskog rata između čak četiri države. Unatoč tome što su Kurdi s vremenom uspjeli iskoristiti nesuglasice između vlada te četiri države, na kraju su ipak ostali izigrani od njihovih ad hoc stvorenih političkih saveza.

U svojoj dugoj povijesti, obilježenoj političkim i vojnim bitkama kurdski pokret za neovisnost stvorio je nekoliko političkih partija različitih ideoloških profila i prostornog raširenja. Oružana saveznička zaštita sjevernog Iraka 1991 godine omogućila je formiranje jedne enklave u iračkom Kurdistanu koja je ostala pod kontrolom lokalne gerile, većinom povezane s dvije najveće kurdske partije. Turska je odlučila da se neće suprotstavljati ideji o stvaranju jedne autonomne države iračkih Kurda na njezinoj južnoj granici, pod uvjetom da se s tog prostora ne potpomažu kurdski pobunjenici u Anatoliji, gdje su se gerilske trupe kurdske radničke partije osam godina borile protiv snaga iz Ankare, koristeći se teritorijem s iračke strane granice za obuku svojih vojnika i vojne baze.

Ideji o autonomiji turskih Kurda oštro se protivi Kurdska radnička partija, dok su druge kurdske partije u Turskoj (iako mnogo slabije) voljne takovu ideju prihvatiti. U kurdskom nacionalističkom pokretu danas prevladava ideja, (koja se čini mnogo realističnijom), o federativnom statusu nacije u četiri srednjeistočne države. Niti jedan oblik otvorene političke, vojne solidarnosti unutar nacionalnog pokreta Kurda koji žive u te četiri države ne bi dolazio u obzir. Kurdske snage su preslabe za takvu koordiniranu akciju.

Tijekom posljednjeg stoljeća desile su se mnoge društvene promjene unutar kurdskog nacionalnog pokreta. Žarište pokreta prenosilo se iz tradicionalnog konzervativnog kruga plemenske aristokracije i karizmatičnih šaikova na radikalnu urbanu inteligenciju koja često djeluje iz inozemstva. Visoki postotak deportacije seljačkog stanovništva u gradove i jake represije izmijenile su tradicionalnu društvenu strukturu i stari sistem plemenske lojalnosti (odanosti). Vjerojatno iz nužnosti, većina Kurda živi danas u gradovima koji su postali neprirodno veliki. Također važan činilac je prisustvo brojne kurdske dijaspore u zapadnoj Europi koja se sve više zanima za razvoj političke situacije u Kurdistanu.

Za kulturne studije je posebno zanimljiv položaj Kurda u post-sovjetskoj Transkavkaziji. Njihov

izvorni etnički i vjerski sastav je daleko od homogenog. U Armeniji su Jezidi početkom 19 st. činili većinu naseljenika koji su govorili kurdskim jezikom. Oni su na ove prostore došli pred naletom zlostavljanja njihovih muslimanskih zemljaka i turske vlasti. Unatoč svemu ruska vlast u Transkavkaziji ih je generacijama smatrala Kurdima. Uz njih su ovdje, među transkavkazkim azerbejdžanskim stanovništvom, živjele i kurdske izbjeglice muslimanske vjere. Pod sovjetskom vlašću armenski su Kurdi uživali znatnu kulturnu slobodu iako su i oni s vremenom postali žrtve represije. U Azarbeidžanu, nasuprot tome, bili su podvrgnuti politici prisilne asimilacije među azerbejdžansko stanovništvo koje je govorilo turskim jezikom. Među transkavkaskim Yezidima koji govore turskim jezikom se s vremenom pojavila ideja o osnivanju vlastite ne-kurdske vjersko-etničke zajednice. Kurdi muslimanske vjere zahtijevaju ponovno uspostavljanje kurdske autonomne pokrajine koju je ukinuo Staljin.

Pritisak i proganjanje Kurda kojem su u 20. st. pribjegli Turska, Iran, Irak i Sirija nije rezultirao integracijom kurdske manjine u te države. Nasuprot tome, to je doprinijelo uzdizanju kurdske svijesti do razine nacije i razvoju nacionalnih ambicija modernog tipa.

Prevela J. Puntarović-Vlahinić