Between 'Wizards of Oz', Madagascari Lemur and Megalomaniac Presidents: The Amusements of Research in Post-Socialist Spaces

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When mentioning that my work involves dealing with several former USSR countries I often get questions on the kind of dangers my research entails. Whilst I do not see particular dangers in what I do, I have to admit that I had asked myself the same questions before my first fieldwork. I stopped worrying only after working out some automatisms, attitudes and gaining an understanding of certain realities that permit me, to a decent extent, to 'stay safe'. This blog entry shares some experience-based reflections can be useful to minimise risks but it is also intended to discuss why dangers in some 'exotic' states are much less than one could think, writes **Abel Polese**

The former USSR is possibly the largest world area that has opened up to researchers in the past years. Visited by a few fortunate scholars during the cold war, it is now an immense live laboratory offering material for case studies and comparative research where urban studies researchers, inter alia, have been able to mingle for some time now. It is, although to different degrees and with a few exceptions, a widely accessible region and most of the permissions needed to conduct research in the past are now a fading memory.

Odessa, 1 May picnic, making post-socialist spaces accessible (Photographed by the author in 2006)

This, however, does not mean that postsocialism lacks 'exotic' features or characters; the three mentioned in the title refer to: 1) the abundance of political elites – Heads of State are the most visible ones but their entourage tries hard to catch up with them – with, let's say, unconventional habits and taste; 2) the possibility to find a ruling elite completely disjointed from reality, as in the case of the lemur chiefs of the 'Madagascar' animation movie and 3) the fascination of the 'Wizard of Oz' (Verdery 2005), this pointing at the fact that in an officially strictly controlled system there is a large margin of manoeuvre and officers will often make decisions on the basis of their personal perspective advantage, or lack thereof.

After more than ten years of fieldwork between the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern Europe, I wanted to share a reflection or two that could be useful to those visiting it for the first time or are simply curious to read about other colleagues' experiences. I will refrain from mentioning the place where things happened for two reasons. The first is to guarantee the safety of informants, of people that have helped me, and possibly my own. The second is because most of the examples may apply to a wide range of situations and geographical locations. The difference is not the approach but the degree to which this may be used.

How dangerous is it to visit a place with a megalomaniac president?

Information on a country, or a region, can be very deceptive. What makes headlines are normally dramatic events and most readers will not know anything about the concerned country if not the capital. Geographical oversimplification becomes the norm and often brings odd associations. The current Ukrainian crisis makes some wonder if going to L'viv (more than 1000 Km from the separatist areas) is safe and, should there be a riot in Eastern Siberia, my mother would still ask me if it is safe to go to Moscow. In addition, there is little guarantee that you will meet face to face with a megalomaniac president or that his decisions will directly affect you. We (researchers) are 'small fishes' and constitute a problem only when actively campaigning politically or in rare cases of addressing a wide public, something less frequent than it should be.

Official reception of guests in Ashgabat to celebrate the greatness of Turkmen poetry (Photographed by the author in 2010)

I will not deny that there are risks of fieldwork in postsocialist spaces but I do not think those risks are more than in Western settings; they are just different. Once there, you (researcher) need to create a network of trusted people able to help out with your data collection or with practical matters (paperwork, health and security). You might have a more complicated bureaucracy, structures might not have the same standards you have at home but in general people are very approachable, open to befriending you and helping in case you need. I was once requested to find a birth certificate in the archives of Odessa and the modus operandi, according to my US-based employer, was simple: go there, get the microfilm and send me a copy of the certificate. That is, 'we'll pay you for the 2-3 hours this takes'. She could not possibly imagine that the archives were closed for several months and access to the document cost me a few visits to the place and thrusting through a few connections to get what was officially not possible.

In some areas, or at some times, you might have to face a higher level of repression or control, which is perhaps the main, or most tangible, constraint in the region. This might limit your access to certain data or areas and create a cloud of diffidence around you, making people more afraid to share with you some information. It might even prompt some people go against you if they perceive you as a risk. However, the main remedy to all this is the same you would need in any other setting. You need to build a network of resourceful trustees that do not fear you or what you do whilst setting some limits, that is understand what you may or may not do, and even what you ask for. Ultimately, it is more likely that you are a hazard for the locals than they are for you. You can be deported and sent home but they will be arrested and persecuted in their own country, affecting their life sometimes forever.

What can (or can't) I say/do to the lemurs?

There is, obviously, no universal answer to this question. A research on party politics or political opposition in a country where the opposition does not officially exist is likely to bring you a few headaches. But there is a wide range of other things you can do research on with little risk. A colleague once told me "befriend the secret services, they will eventually know what you do in any case, if you make sure you tell them everything they won't bother you". Connections and trust networks may take you far and you have a double role during your fieldwork. You are a researcher but are also a guest of the country and hospitality rules do apply in most places. You are diverse, sometimes 'exotic', and might be able to be allowed to do things locals cannot have access to (Polese 2006, 2009). You will find people keen to meet a foreigner, people who are just curious, who want to practice foreign languages, who want to earn respectability by showing to their neighbours they know someone 'exotic', and many others who will go out of their way to help you. You just have to make sure you do not abuse this and, when asking for something, not to pass their threshold of personal safety that would embarrass them or make them feel uncomfortable.

Trust relations (I mean people who guarantee for you) have brought soft-spoken political scientists into countries where political science is not a recognised discipline, to put it mildly. Sometimes it is not a matter of what you say but how you say it. A colleague once published a book on local history – which is always a controversial issue and not all governments are equally keen to explore different versions – but used the word 'culture' instead of history. Culture is a friendly word and almost everyone is keen to share their own culture with other people, so to bring in little frowns. Try to avoid judgment-laden words and use concepts instead of normative statements. Not everyone understands 'democracy' or 'democratic structures' in the same way. If you could find a way to pitch your research in 10-15 words avoiding sensitive words in a given language and context, that would be a great advantage. Every country/culture has a list of negative keywords and neutral ones: they are different and the researcher must learn a new technical vocabulary in order to 'survive' the fieldwork. Avoid explaining that you are studying undemocratic settings even if the country is blatantly authoritarian; corruption is something you can mention in general (corruption is everywhere) but avoid referring to specific corrupted institutions, practices or categories of people. Patriotism is still better than nationalism when referring to love for the homeland.

How powerful is the Wizard of Oz?

Anecdotes from Stalin's terror periods prompted me to think, as I am sure many other researchers have done before and will do after me, that ideological commitment plays a major role in the behaviour of officials. Police might be

ready to arrest you or hinder you if they felt you are a 'threat to national stability'. Pressure from above might ultimately determine some officer's decision on whether to think you are a threat to the country or to them and some events (i.e. colour revolutions, tensions between countries) can lower the alarm threshold making your life miserable. However, in general, I am more inclined to believe in contextual, or situational, moralities (Bourdieu 1977). People will do the easiest and most convenient thing for them. If they fear that reporting you to the authorities will bring them more hassle, they will either do nothing or simply try to take advantage of you. If doing you a favour would risk their job or freedom, they will be less likely to do so. In contrast, if they fear that not reporting you will endanger their situation then they will do it.

This also depends on many other personal factors. How well do they know you (if they are friends they might warn you rather than reporting you? How curious are they about you? How hospitable are they?) Some years ago, when I arrived into a city so late that could not find a place to sleep I was approached by a security person. I was initially afraid but he was so kind to allow me to sleep in his cabin. The next day he even brought me breakfast. Ultimately, you might want to understand what is the level of repression in that country, city or area to become, as a friend once told me, "aerodynamic", that is to be able to amalgamate in the local context and occupy a position that people around you will take as acceptable.

An American young visiting scholar to Ulan Ude, in southern Siberia, was successful in getting herself arrested, and sent home eventually, for rallying too loudly for democracy. A friend's take was that the local authorities did not want any hassles and ignored her until they got orders from above that she was becoming too loud and someone asked to stop her somehow. A colleague once recalled travelling to Moscow in the late days of the USSR. He would be asked: "do you carry any electronic goods" and answer "no, just books" and let passed. Controlling circulation of books and ideas could be a priority of the regime at the time, and control on electronic goods was more a matter of how much the custom officer could take advantage of you.

Colleagues arrested and deported make headlines but for each colleague arrested there are hundreds who are not and carry out their fieldwork with little hassle. Arbitrariness is possibly the worst enemy in the post-Soviet region (well, in most of the world). If you stumble upon the wrong person you may be in trouble. This is subject to change, as there are more and less difficult times in a country or a region. During my fieldwork I had absolutely no problem in accessing schools and schoolteachers, whereas a colleague, two years senior to me, had. Some common friends told me that this was because her fieldwork was before the elections whereas mine was in a more relaxed period. This might certainly be true but I would add that she was going to talk with the school asking for permission to visit the same class for a long period whereas my approach was more casual. I was once allowed into a class. Then I liked it and asked to be allowed again and again. Then it became a routine. I was not planning to be so systematic but it just happened. However, once I had developed a relationship with some of the teachers, it became more difficult to deny me something.

I have often felt a close correlation between the way leadership is applied to a country, its political settings, and the general attitude of a population – including towards the researcher. But, with few exceptions, I have found the process of learning the right terminology and attitude to use relatively straightforward. I started taking little hazards in the very beginning to gradually understand what I could ask directly and what I could not – and, equally important, whom I could ask what questions. After all, no matter how 'exotic' is a place, social scientists deal with people, and people, in my experience, are often happy to make friends or at least interact with other people, especially if they find you as 'exotic' as you find them.

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About the author

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- Morris, J. and Polese, A. (2014) Informal Health and Education Sector Payments in Russian and Ukrainian Cities: Structuring Welfare From Below. *European Urban and Regional Studies* (published online first);
- Polese, A., Morris, J., Nodelsen, I. and Kovacs, B. (2014) 'Welfare states' in Central and Eastern Europe: Where Informality fits in. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 22(2): 184-198

The reflections in this blog post come from experiences from different projects. In particular the author's PhD fieldwork in Odessa (2003-2006)