
The Soviet nationalities policies and their contribution to conflicts: law, legacies and ideology

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of the Soviet nationalities policies and its legal instruments on the territorial conflicts along the ethno-federal lines of the former USSR. By looking at selected examples in the South Caucasus, this work considers, in particular, how the Soviet ideology of ethnic federalism fuelled conflicts within the federal units of the USSR. It is argued that the installation of proto-elements of statehood and the promotion of national consciousness within the USSR – which were at the core of Soviet nationality policies – created the structural conditions, which resulted in the outbreak of conflicts across the USSR after 1989. The paper contemplates, further, that the concept of ethnic federalism remains the most haunting legacy of the Soviet ethnopolitics: Rather than vanishing with the demise of the USSR, it continues to shape political decision-making in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: Abkhazia; autonomy; ethnopolitics; ethnoterritoriality; federalism; law; Nagorno-Karabakh; nationalism; South Caucasus; Soviet Union; Transnistria

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1 Introduction

The Soviet nationalities policies, which coupled ethnic indigenisation with ethno-federal devices, were not only a key reason to the demise of the USSR, but moreover, a key to understand the underlying structural conditions that enabled the outbreak of conflicts in numerous spots of the Soviet Union, in particular after 1989. This article will, hence,

discuss the emergence of ethno-nationalism by re-shifting the focus on the pivotal issue of ethno-federal institutions as well as the legal setting in the analysis of the conflicts. This analysis will encompass a close inspection of two underlying dimensions, which have helped plant the seeds of future confrontations. While, first of all, the factor of ideology and the thereby primordialised social relations have had an impact on the outbreak of conflicts, the second dimension revolves around the practical background of these policies by extending the monopoly over mobilisational resources through elite inclusion and possibilities for upward social mobility. Selected case studies from the South Caucasus will attempt to illustrate the underlying thoughts of this contribution.

2 Ideological landmarks concerning the national question

The Soviet Union as a totalitarian autocratic regime was based on a hermetically closed worldview revolving around the ideology of dialectical materialism and proletariat morality. However, it simply had no choice but also to accommodate its ethno-cultural diversity. The question of what kind of a state and nation concept the Soviet Union should represent and the subsequent underlying definitions of cultural diversity had to be somehow addressed in light of the vast ethnic diversity of the USSR population.

Indeed, from the 1960s onwards, and contrary to any reasonable consideration, it was publicly and officially proclaimed that a non-ethnic Soviet people ('sovetskyi narod') had risen in a victorious fashion from the dust heaps of World War II, thereby branding every critical discourse on ethno-cultural issues as bourgeois nationalist reaction (Beissinger, 2003). In fact, the victory in the so-called Great Patriotic War provided more internal legitimation to the astounding sustainability of the Soviet empire than the officially announced harmony and coming closer of all social segments across the different cultural affiliations. Nevertheless, the ideological foundation of the Soviet nationality policies and the formally ethno-federal anatomy of the Soviet Union did not oppose or necessarily oppress the promotion of non-Russian national identities. It even fuelled this process, and in doing so – unintentionally, one has to say – created the essential conditions that accelerated the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union from 1989 onwards and served as the prerequisite of armed conflict in regions such as the South Caucasus.¹

Paradoxically, it was only in 1977 that the 'Soviet people' as an official legal term entered the preamble of the Constitution of the USSR.² However, unlike in the case of the former Yugoslavia³, there was no possibility for the Soviet citizens to declare themselves as members of an artificial 'Soviet' nation, neither in census nor in personal identity documents. Hence, in contrast to Yugoslav attempts, the Soviet authorities did not push their 'bratstvo i edinstvo' agenda over the edge of the reasonable or acceptable. Mirsky (1997) points elegantly to this often overlooked paradox of the Soviet Union:

"A powerful and wholly centralized authoritarian regime organically unable to tolerate any autonomous, unco-opted authority, to say nothing about opposition, was genuinely promoting and encouraging national consciousness of diverse ethnic groups." (Mirsky, 1997)

Yet, one may want to inquire how the political and ideological architects of the Soviet Union interpreted the aspect of ethnic diversity and what ideas they had regarding its legal accommodation. And instead of a chauvinist repression through systematic

Russification, which, regrettably still many believe to have been the norm in the Soviet Union, the Soviet nationalities policies in fact represented a genuine attempt of political manoeuvring to generate popular commitment to the communist cause by promoting national identities.

Overall, it must be noted that the leading Bolsheviks – especially Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin – had a fairly modern and rather avant-garde perspective regarding the explanation of the phenomenon of nationalism. Their ideological position was partly driven by the methodological approach of instrumentalism, as they portrayed nationalism as an ideology mobilised by the bourgeoisie to obscure other, much more important social conflicts (Martin, 2001). In their written thoughts as well as in their speeches, both often referred to the USA claiming that its vibrant diversity represented first-hand proof that ethnic identity and nationalism are ultimately subordinate to the class interests, and that economic progress can solve nationally motivated issues and disputes (Kremenjuk, 1996). In his book, *Marxism and the National Question*, Stalin (1913) who was considered *the* expert and the main political figure of the Bolsheviks on the nationalities question, defined the nation as historically constructed rather than racially designed. He argued:

“A nation is primarily a community, a definite community of people. This community is not racial, nor is it tribal. The modern Italian nation was formed from Romans, Teutons, Etruscans, Greeks, Arabs, and so forth. The French nation was formed from Gauls, Romans, Britons, Teutons, and so on. The same must be said of the British, the Germans and others, who were formed into nations from people of diverse races and tribes. Thus, a nation is not a racial or tribal, but a historically constituted community of people.” (Stalin, 1913)

However, even if these early definitions of the nation and the instrumental role accorded to ethnicity may appear quite progressive, the general political line of the Soviet Communists in the nationalities question was shaped by a rather strictly primordialist pattern. This pattern envisaged that ethnic identity and territory should be brought together in an allegedly ‘natural’ and arguably authentic relation with one another, pointing to the advocacy of a romantic philosophy, designed to restore ‘authentic communities’. Ideally, this can happen if ethnic and territorial markers and boundaries coincide. And the Soviets gradually institutionalised this general methodological point of departure, despite the fact that the concentration of political power never left the orbit of the Communist Party.

This concept of Soviet ethnoterritoriality can be contrasted with and illustrated by the Soviet rejection of the ideas of Austro-Marxists Otto Bauer and Karl Renner.⁴ In 1907, the book, *The Question of Nationalities and the Social Democracy* by Otto Bauer, a leading thinker of the New Left movement in the early 20th century, proposed the establishment of a national-cultural autonomy for the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which would have allowed its constituent peoples to form nationally defined bodies. According to Bauer, those bodies should have been decoupled from any territorial claims whatsoever but they should have received a certain degree of administrative and legislative self-rule. However, in Stalin’s eyes, this decoupling of territorial claims would have rendered the principle of autonomy, as well as that of self-determination, absurd. In relation to this highly controversial issue, and taking the Caucasus as an example, Stalin (1913) explained his rejection of the ideas of national-cultural autonomy:

“Cultural-national autonomy presumes more or less developed nationalities, with a developed culture and literature. Failing these conditions, autonomy loses all sense and becomes an absurdity. But in the Caucasus there are a number of nationalities each possessing a primitive culture, a separate language, but without its own literature; nationalities, moreover, which are in a state of transition, partly becoming assimilated and partly continuing to develop. How is cultural-national autonomy to be applied to them? What is to be done with such nationalities? How are they to be ‘organized’ into separate cultural-national unions, as is undoubtedly implied by cultural-national autonomy? What is to be done with the Mingrelians, the Abkhassians, the Adjarians, the Svanetians, the Lesghians, and so on, who speak different languages but do not possess a literature of their own? To what nations are they to be attached? Can they be ‘organized’ into national unions? Around what ‘cultural affairs’ are they to be ‘organized’?” (Stalin, 1913)

The rejection of this ‘Eurocommunist’ model of inter-ethnic cohabitation was further strengthened in the Soviet Union on account of Lenin’s firm position on national self-determination as well as the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I. Particularly this collapse illustrated to the Soviets that one cannot easily sideline nationalism by avoiding the issue of territoriality (Raffass, 2012).

3 Operationalisation of ideology through Soviet federal devices

3.1 Territorialisation as condition sine qua non

Therefore, in the USSR, national identity was not primarily regarded as a primordial category but rather as an unavoidable by-product of the modern capitalist era, which had to be advanced before a more stable international and socialist world could materialise (Martin, 2001). Lenin and Stalin were, thus, convinced that developed nations also ultimately represented elements of modernity [Martin, (2001), p.5]. However – according to these Soviet Communist chief architects – this level of modernity had not yet enlightened the majority of the ethnic groups of the Soviet Union. Hence, the question was what to do and what institutions to design in order to address these ideology-driven considerations.

On the one hand, this perceived backwardness of the peoples of the Soviet Union was to be countered by an aggressive indigenisation policy.⁵ On the other hand, the territorialisation of the nation was seen as the appropriate expression of this policy. This combination of nation and territoriality as well as the rejection of the theses of the Austro-Marxists Otto Bauer and Karl Renner was also based on the notion that national-cultural autonomy without administrative-territorial reduction could lead to divergent political positions in decision-making processes and provide for some space for freedom of expression. This, in turn, would have clearly stood in the way of the ideological principle of Marxist centralism (Armstrong, 1977), since it could have provided serious loopholes for potential opposition. Cornell (2002) brings the ideological foundation of the Bolsheviks – which has turned out to be completely wrong, according to the centrifugal movements after 1989 – aptly to the point:

“In a socialist society, the nations would first grow closer (*sblizhenie*) in order to eventually merge (*slianiie*). Given that this was a historically inescapable fact, the ruling socialists could without danger speed up this process by granting all national groups full rights to develop their own culture, language, even ranging to the right of secession. Nationalism was inherently transient, and would not cause a threat to socialism since it was bound to disappear.” (Cornell, 2002)

In order to operationalise the above-mentioned growing closer of nations, the Bolsheviks decided to introduce a socialist federalism quite soon after the October Revolution in 1917.⁶ This system, which continued to be confirmed in all Soviet constitutions, was to be based not only on administrative entities but also on nationally defined territorial units. The ethnic groups of the Soviet Union were thereby subdivided into four federal categories, in a way that can quite accurately be equated with the individual components of a Matryeshka doll. Thus, the individual Soviet Republics (SSRs) and the Autonomous Soviet Republics (ASSRs) located on their territories constituted the so-called ‘basic nations’ (Mirsky, 1997) of the Soviet Union which were reserved only for individual peoples, or, to use the Russian term, ‘*narody*’.

On the other hand – and one institutional level below – some peoples were (only) been assigned the administrative-territorial dimension of autonomous *oblasts* (‘regions’) and *okrugs* (‘territories’) on the territories of the respective SSRs. In this regard, it must also not go unnoticed that many ethnically defined groups received no territorial setting whatsoever (Tishkov, 1997). And besides, as the example of the Chechnya-Ingushian ASSR shows, sometimes the right to invoke the title of a titular nation had to be shared by two peoples in one republic. It goes without saying that this particular concept of ethnic federalism confirmed the view claiming the very existence of so-called ‘national territories’, which served as object of projection for historical narratives. This constitutes one of the most haunting USSR legacies, which has and continues to influence political decision-making in particularly volatile regions such as the South Caucasus. In light of this legacy, history is seen as prerequisite for territorial ownership. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict serves as a brilliant example since for the conflict parties, it seemingly revolved – particularly at the beginning of the hostilities – only along the question “who settled first in this territory historically?” (Harzl, 2016). Maisuradze (2009) handsomely claims in this context:

“The instrumentalization of history under Stalinism also established a Soviet paradigm of historical thinking according to which history became both a way to build nations and a tool to be used in the political relations and legal treaties between nations ... At the end of the 1980s historiography debates directly nurtured ethnic conflicts. In particular, this trend can be seen in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict whose ‘ideological foundation’ had been established through decades of debates among historians.” (Maisuradze, 2009)

This paradigm of historical thinking also influenced legal reasoning during and after the conflicts in the South Caucasus that broke out by the end of the 1980s. Law in this context functions as transmitter of politics so that inaccurate claims are often transported by invoking and deliberately misreading certain legal principles.⁷ Yet, law in this particular context, where disputed territories are at stake, is disfigured into discourses of justice and so-called historical rights. And a number of laws, some of which were adopted only in 1990, allowed to follow along this pattern: For instance, the 1990 Soviet law on secession, which was supposed to specify the constitutional provisions on

self-determination, provided that “in case the Soviet Republic has autonomous republics, autonomous regions or autonomous territories within its borders, referendums are to be conducted separately in each of the autonomies.” This led to a problematic encounter of historical narratives and official interpretations of law – both public and international law – when defining a position or providing a solution. The potentially toxic idea that ethnically defined territories do automatically translate into bearers of external sovereignty was thereby conveyed to both the public and the political elites. Alarmed by these developments, also the rhetoric in those affected SSRs started to change. In this regard, Ghia Nodia provides an accurate observation on the early post-Soviet discourses in Georgia about minorities and how diversity should be institutionally accommodated in Georgia:

“They could stay if they behaved, but if they started to question the fundamentals of the Georgian national project or express nationalist aspirations of their own, they could legitimately be pressed to move to their respective homelands, where they could pursue their own national agendas.” (Tishkov, 1997)

3.2 *Arbitrariness under formal legal rules*

Based on the thorny ethno-federal design outlined above, three preliminary findings can be drawn to explain the features that describe the process of Soviet ethnic engineering that took place throughout the historical existence of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, this territorial-administrative differentiation, corresponded, by and large, with the widespread hierarchical thinking of the political architects of the Soviet Union. The question why one ethnic group was furnished with a Socialist Republic and another was merely incorporated on the basis of autonomy within this very republic had no sound argumentative foundation. Only sometimes, numerical arguments were raised to justify a given territorial categorisation.⁸

In fact, the subdivision into these four federal units as mentioned above did not follow objective criteria (Mirsky, 1997). Indeed, why the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh ‘ended up’ as autonomous *oblast* within the Azerbaijani SSR cannot be answered conclusively. The historical record actually shows long back and forth deliberations on what to do with the inhabitants of this spot until a final decision was made by Stalin.⁹ Thus, the ‘basic nations’ of the SSR and ASSR were simply assigned more importance and political significance than the institutionally subordinate ethnic territorial units of the autonomous *oblasts* and the *okrugs* (Mirsky, 1997). However, even the institutional distinction between the SSR and the ASSR, as far as legislative and administrative competences are concerned, was more than unclear, even if the autonomous republics were subordinate to the SSR to which they belonged. In all constitutions of the Soviet Union – even the ‘Stalin Constitution of 1936’ was not an exception to this rule – the SSRs enjoyed the formal right to secession¹⁰ and the possibility to conclude bilateral treaties with other states, as well as to exchange diplomatic representatives with them.¹¹ On the other hand, the ASSR had no explicit right to secession on the basis of the Soviet Constitution, but they still possessed similar (proto-) state attributes. This is particularly due to the fact that autonomous republics were initially conceived as a basis for national self-determination of a titular nationality occupying a territory, which was not located along an external border of the Soviet Union

(DeBardleben, 1997). Yet, the right to secede for union republics illustrated the legal nihilism of the very text of the USSR Constitution, as well as of the drafters and ideologues behind the Constitution.¹²

To make things even more complex and muddy, the division of powers between the union and its federal levels appeared to be very unclear. Union republics were nominally allowed, in accordance with the provisions of Article 76 of the Soviet Constitution of 1977, to act in all areas, which did not fall within the competence of the union. As far as the subordinate autonomous republics were concerned, Article 82 of the Constitution was a 'catch-all' provision according to which those entities could exercise power, provided that the particular field of action would not fall into the competence of the union or the respective SSR. However, Article 73(12) of the Soviet Constitution, according to which questions of 'importance for the whole union' fell within the competence of the Union Centre, ridiculed the image of a solid and genuine federation, thereby rendering the differentiated system of territorial entities to a masquerade with some legalese texts. Kahn (2002) interpreted this particular clause as a possible emergency brake on potentially defiant republics or autonomous republics, as it reserved to the union the permanent right to decide what should be of all-union significance. Besides, pursuant to Article 74 of the 1977 Constitution, laws of the USSR were superior any other law in the case of collision.

3.3 The 'handling of territories' as source of instability and competing legal claims after 1991

Let us move to the second important descriptive element of the Soviet nationalities policy, which can be identified as complete deficiency of formal federal stability and which depicts the practice of dealing with the federation in the form of institutionalised arbitrariness. With the adoption of the first Soviet Constitution in 1924, the process of finding and creating ethno-territorial administrative units and sub-units was by no means completed. Those administrative boundaries were subject to continuous fluctuation, in which autonomous territorial structures were created, eliminated, transferred, or merged.

For example, the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic only existed between 1924 and 1941, when their predominantly ethnic German inhabitants were deported to Central Asia as a collective punitive measure for the German attack on the Soviet Union. The Moldavian ASSR – which equals the present territory of the self-declared Republic of Transnistria – can also be invoked in this context. This narrow strip of land along the Dniester River was only incorporated into the artificial Moldavian SSR after World War II. In addition, until this very day the administrative incorporation of the Crimean Peninsula into the Ukrainian SSR remains politically relevant and keeps on fuelling political and legal controversies. The same holds true with respect to the downgrading of Abkhazia's status into an ASSR on the territory of the Georgian SSR, although, prior to this decision in 1931, this entity was on institutional eye level with the Georgian SSR. Hence, the image of the Soviet Union in the moment of its disintegration in December 1991 with 15 SSR, 20 ASSR, eight autonomous oblasts and ten autonomous okrugs, is no more than a momentary snapshot (Tishkov, 1997), which could have turned out very differently. However, it must not go unnoticed that this seemingly unstable fluctuation, which was executed by a policy of 'handling with territories', could only be possible under dictatorial and totalitarian circumstances.

The extremely problematic consequence of the continuous change of administrative boundaries started to emerge when the Soviet Union fissured, since the controversial question was always about the very territorial lines along which it fissured. The issue of the widespread unconventional use of legal terminology, as we see it numerous times in the Constitution of the Soviet Union¹³, became relevant concerning the application of the principle of *uti possidetis* in the post-Soviet context. For instance, Abkhazia could point to its status prior to 1931 according to which it was on institutional eye level with Georgia. And even apart from this, the ASSR Abkhazia was still labelled a *republic*. This legacy is also omnipresent in Crimea: had this peninsula not been handed over the Ukrainian SSR as a 'present' in 1954 by Khrushchev, its belonging to Russia would not have been disputable under international law after 1991. Nevertheless, the population of Crimea can at least claim a high moral ground, since it was never asked about being part of Ukraine – not in 1954 and not in 1991 either (Feldbrugge, 2014).

3.4 A sham federation with real outcomes

Therefore, as a third and final element, it is obvious that this form of ethno-political federalism amounted to nothing else but a legal façade. Thus, the Soviet Union was a pseudo-federation, which deprived the individual nationalities of their political sovereignty (Suny, 1993). *Real* political power was not regionalised – the core function behind federalist devices proclaims at least some form of vertical power sharing – but exercised exclusively by the Communist Party, the police, and the Soviet domestic secret service (Nodia, 2005). The general idea behind federalist concepts in multi-ethnic polities, particularly the mitigation of the danger of political concentration through diverse features of regionalisation and political autonomy, was simply incompatible with the centralist claim for political leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and its organs, such as the politburo.

The party leaders of a couple of autonomous republics, such as the ASSR Chuvashia or the ASSR Tatarstan, who, also inspired by the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1920s, sought more political autonomy in pivotal areas such as economic planning, soon learned that the Soviet ethno-federal model was never really about transfer of power from central authorities to local units. The proponents of these demands were always persecuted on political grounds, sometimes even excluded from the party and – after being publicly accused of nationalism and counter-revolutionist activities – executed (Tishkov, 1997). One of the first victims of Stalin's purge in this context was Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, a Tatar member of the so-called People's Commissariat for Nationalities in the Soviet Government in 1924 (Tishkov, 1997).

Nevertheless, and despite the legalese sham that dominated the Soviet Constitution, the character of a façade federation must not blur our view on its very effective mode of operation, since this façade had produced a great deal of *real* outcomes. And those outcomes very probably went beyond what the Soviet ideological architects had actually imagined, let alone intended. It is fair to reason that the process of ethnic territorialisation also led to ethnic purification of many regions, which had used to be ethnically diverse before. The ideologically informed belief that the concept of a nation had to be intrinsically linked to a formal territorial claim confirmed by a legal substratum led in many places to the stagnation of prior mobility of the Soviet citizens. Since members of titular nations always received 'preferential treatment' in their 'home entity' in many

different respects¹⁴, new ethnic majorities emerged only through migration to these territories (Suny, 1993).

The Georgian capital of Tbilisi is a particularly impressive case in point: for a very long time this city was regarded as a multi-ethnic melting pot of the South Caucasus, being home to various ethnic groups, especially Russians and Armenians whereby not one single group could have claimed absolute majority status. It is only since 1960 that Tbilisi has a stable ethnic Georgian population majority, mainly due to immigration waves during the Soviet era [Suny, (1993), p.111]. In addition, there was hardly any politically intended incentive furthering intra-Soviet mobility. A very particular example can be found in the field of higher education. University professors largely remained at their chairs in universities of 'their' titular nations, and scientific exchange was hardly promoted beyond the borders of the respective republic (Armstrong, 1977). Hence, the theory of Lenin – according to which the communist nationality policies would lead to the fusion of collective identities – did not materialise at all.

4 Selected examples

Yet, the issues that gradually developed their potentially toxic effect on the cohesion of the Soviet system went far beyond the above examples. Even though the system of ethno-political federalism in the Soviet Union in no way whatsoever reflected the true mechanisms of political power, it also had a substantial impact on a second, equally important, dimension. The officially propagated ethnic particularism contributed to the development of national political and intellectual elites and helped design national-cultural systems accordingly (Nodia, 2005).

One has to give credit to those who stood out as the designers of the ethno-federal concept for grasping, at an early stage, an underlying key tenet of nationalism: The architects of the Soviet nationalities policies understood from the very beginning that national formation always contains elements of an elite-driven project (Mirsky, 1997). The Soviet system, hence, promoted ethnic political elites in all titular republics and autonomous republics and provided critical support for the establishment of national cultural institutions for communist cadres (Schwartz, 2013). Members of the titular nations, of course only if they were party members, were offered career perspectives and incentives in the state and the party administrations, both in the respective titular entity and at union level (Suny, 1993). It is therefore hardly surprising that many Georgians such as Joseph Stalin, Lavrenti Beria or Eduard Shevardnadze came to political prominence in the Soviet Union.¹⁵ In particular, the former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who failed to have a local power base in his native Georgia before his return to Tbilisi in 1992, accommodated himself willingly to embrace the Georgian nationalist wave to maintain a level public support and popularity before and after the civil wars in Georgia.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are further examples illustrating the opportunities of upward mobility of non-Russians in the Soviet Union, the consequences of this ideology have to be kept in mind. Also institutionally, the Soviet ethno-federal system provided those critical instruments through which nationalist demands were voiced and which were thereby accorded the appearance of both legality as well as legitimacy. The frequent demands of the communist leadership of autonomous formations to be upgraded to a Soviet Socialist Republic were channelled through formally legal institutions. This

has also misleadingly appeared to be not only legitimate, i.e., *just* from the perspective of the political agenda, but also *legal*. In this spirit, the conflicts between minority and majority communities, shortly before they turned bloody, had moved to the respective legislatures of autonomous formations and their metropolitan SSR. Thus, Soviet nationalities policies thereby allowed these ethnic grievances to follow a pattern of an institutionalised war of laws.

Thus, the package of the Soviet nationality policies consisted of additional two interrelated aspects. On the one hand, the development of national universities, the promotion of training programs and the publication of textbooks in respective national languages were stimulated (Tishkov, 1997). The spread of ethnic identity and the codification of different languages were an essential expression of this policy (Suny, 1993), which has also come to be known as indigenisation project.¹⁶ Yet, this policy must not be mistaken for an altruistic-minded or benign tool to empower formerly disadvantaged ethnic groups. This leads us directly to the second thorny aspect. The underlying ideology furnishing the Soviet nationalities policies explicitly recognised the aspect of national identity as a social reality, and tried to operationalise it in order to generate – and that is the most important aspect – political loyalty to the communist worldview as well as to recruit new cadres (Tishkov, 1997). By the same token, the privileges for the respective titular nation resulted in the creation of national intelligentsia communities that were, as Kahn (2002) aptly argues, difficult to mollify by the 1980s.

That may explain why, despite the centralist power exercised by the CPSU, ethno-regional centres of power also arose within the party structure, such as a Georgian power apparatus (Armstrong, 1977), which increasingly opposed the demands of the Abkhaz power apparatus of the Abkhazian branch of the CPSU starting with the end of the 1980s. The case of Georgia provides in this context also another important example: Starting with the years of perestroika, the ruling communists in Georgia tacitly started to support an open critical expression of Georgian intellectuals of whom many were dedicated to express an utterly chauvinistic sense of Georgian superiority over non-Georgians in their titular republic [Suny, (1996), p.510]. Needless to stress that this politically sanctioned ‘official nationalism’ rhetoric favouring the titular nationality and stressing the inferiority of ethnic minorities provided some significant share for the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This also is a reminder how little effort was invested by the Soviet authorities to find both an inclusivist rhetoric and political program. In addition, the social reality of the Soviet citizens was further cemented in exclusively ethnic terms by the introduction of the internal passport system, according to which Soviet citizens were obliged to indicate their national identity, irrespective of their place of residence. Similarly, the indigenous cadres of the respective entities were given diverse means of institutionalised monopoly over the public expression and their ethnic identity. This very monopoly was also often used as political instrument in the increasingly hostile environment of the 1980s. For instance, the widespread and massive Armenian demonstrations in both Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast (NKAO) in 1988 took place with the explicit blessing of the local party leaderships including the formal legislative endorsement for attaching Nagorno-Karabakh to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia (Roeder, 1991).

This, too, was an essential instrument, since, as Brubaker (1994) correctly points out, both sanctioning and incentivising measures could be exercised on the basis of the respective individual ethnic identity of the Soviet citizen. Members of a titular nation –

such as ethnic Abkhaz in the ASSR of Abkhazia – were, therefore, by and large better off in many areas and better represented numerically in administrative posts. Only children from mixed marriages were able to choose between the nationality of the mother and that of the father, but even the list of eligible nationalities was subject to permanent change in a fashion of political arbitrariness (Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l’Homme, 2005).

5 Concluding remarks

Hence, the interested observer may ask: what is the lasting legacy of the Soviet nationalities and what impact did it have on political decision-making on the eve of the collapse of communism? The ethnification of the social reality, coupled with formal legal claims whose normative contents have never been critically reflected, has, as outlined above, triggered processes which developed a significant degree of dynamism that started to surface particularly in the late 1980s. While transition and the formation of newly independent states out of the Soviet estate occurred by and large peacefully, this holds especially true for the disastrous ethnic conflicts that still haunt the South Caucasus and other regions of the former USSR, in particular in Central Asia. In this regard, Cornell (2002) aptly argues about the impact of this ideology:

“In sum, Leninist nationality policies were definitely characterized by affirmative action. However, these policies were occasionally somewhat exaggeratedly affirmative: they created and amplified distinctions that were not previously significant, without asking the opinion of the ‘affirmed’ peoples.”
(Cornell, 2002)

And indeed, the underlying ideological leitmotif of the ethno-federal system was based on the naïve belief that the overthrow of capitalism in the Russian Empire had changed social relationships in such a profound way that both the development and promotion of nationhoods would not lead to conflict (Hodnett, 1967). Aside from this, practical considerations dictated the particular design of such a system as well: It made use of the mobilisational sources of ethnopitics and generated loyalty to the communist cause (Roeder, 1991).

In fact, both the installation of proto-elements of statehood and the promotion of national consciousness were at the core of Soviet nationality policies. This was amplified by the four-tiered ethno-federal structure, through which the titular nations of these entities were not given state symbolism, but tapped into important administrative resources and retained a certain degree of decision-making rights. This, however, was granted as long as they did abandon cooperation with the CPSU (Brubaker, 1994). The irony of history is that these measures, which were actually intended to strengthen the totalitarian Soviet regime, have ultimately contributed, to a significant extent, to their very destruction. In this way, ‘reserve nations’ (Suny, 1993) were created, which made use of the favourable conditions under *glasnost* and *perestroika* and the opening of the political space for political mobilisation in the 1980s. And this process was not completely surprising or unpredictable. As early as 1977, Armstrong – in contrast to other so-called or self-declared ‘sovietologists’ – wrote that there is less inter-ethnic rapprochement and merging, but rather much more conflict potential in the thorny Soviet nationalities policies. On the example of the transfer of Crimea to the Ukrainian SSR, he

had already sketched possible scenarios that were not anticipated by the political leaders, and could ultimately, as he had argued in 1977, destroy the legitimation base of the Soviet Union. More than two decades after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, this example highlights the relevance of this topic. Many Western observers considered the Soviet Union to be stable even at the outset of *perestroika*, described its institutions as legitimate in the Soviet peoples' perception, and grossly underestimated the factor of nationalism as a potential centrifugal force (Beissinger, 2003).

To sum up, the federal Soviet system created with its ethnically-based territorialisation solid demographic bases¹⁷ and built up cultural institutions. It permitted to educate and promote intellectual and political cadres from the respective dominant nationality. Paradoxically, this policy occurred without flamboyant nationalist expression but created the seeds for ethnic consolidation and growing cohesion of the major nationalities in their respective titular settings. These entities, though not being nations in a modern sense, have, however, become national in character, both politically and culturally. The different Communist Party leaderships, particularly in Armenia or Abkhazia, which sided with 'their' respective national movements managed to mobilise large numbers of people for their 'just cause'. Also in Georgia, the regional communist elite were both ethnically and personally cohesive and their solidarity rested on an ethnic colouration. Besides, the respective autonomous formations had a significant political weight and could invoke their formal legal claims in accordance with Soviet law.

The Soviet-engineered ethnic consolidation provided thereby both content and context for powerful nationalisms from below by taking advantage of the erosion of political power in the centre. The continuous demise of central Soviet power has, therefore, ventilated hostilities between majority and minority communities, which have themselves excellently learned to resort to the products of those policies, which were actually designed in the first place to secure communist rule. The continuous demise of the Soviet Union provided the perfect opportunity to politically act on ethnic myths and fears (Kaufman, 2001).

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Notes

- 1 It must, however, be noted that even West European and American observers were highly praiseful for the institutionalisation of the ethno-federal Soviet model. Austro-American sociologists like Rudolf Broda, for instance, got so carried away by this policy that he claimed that “the problem of the peaceful coexistence of nationalities without the centrifugal tendencies seems to have been solved.” See Broda (1931).
- 2 The preamble reads: “It is a society of mature socialist social relations, in which, on the basis of the drawing together of all classes and social strata and of the juridical and factual equality of all its nations and nationalities and their fraternal co-operation, a new historical community of people has been formed--the Soviet people” (see translated version of the 1977 Constitution of the USSR, <http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/77cons01.html#preamble>). In this context, a critical question cannot be avoided: did the drafters of the Constitution seriously believe that the peoples have come together and are in the process of eliminating their differences? Or was this particular formulation driven by ideological considerations?
- 3 This was a popular option for children of mixed marriages as well as for members of the Yugoslav armed forces.
- 4 By the late 1880s, the Austrian Social Democrats started to advocate the devolution of educational and cultural matters to autonomous institutions, which were representing the individual ethnic groups. At the same time, this non-territorial personal autonomy did not aim at abolishing the rather centralised state. Accordingly, also the Social Democratic Party started to split up into different national parties.
- 5 This policy subsequently came to be known as ‘korenizatsiya’, which can be translated with ‘indigenisation’. It covered a wide range of different measures to promote and empower national identity for the different peoples of the Soviet Union. To provide one vivid example: in 1918, the Sovnarkom (Soviet Council of Peoples’ Commissars) issued a decree that called for the establishment of native language schools for all national minorities whenever the threshold of 25 pupils was reached. Before 1938, the inclusion of Russian into school curricula was left to the discretion of the respective local administrations. See Raffass (2012, p.150).
- 6 Despite all, it must be noticed that Lenin was initially opposing the very idea of federalism as something detrimental to the Marxist cause. See Kahn (2002, p.70).
- 7 For instance, Abkhazia’s often raised claim that its course to independence reflects the right to remedial secession is both on very weak ground apart from the fact that remedial secession is still very much disputed among scholars of international law.
- 8 Sometimes it was announced by party officials that ASSRs should have a minimum population of about 100,000 inhabitants.
- 9 It must not be forgotten that the Soviet take-over of Azerbaijan in 1920 became a real dilemma for Armenia since it was allied with anti-Bolshevik forces. At the same time, the Armenian anti-Soviet military uprising in Zangezur may have also influenced the decision to place Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. See Saparov (2012, pp.295, 308).
- 10 See Article 72 of the USSR Constitution of 1977. A genuine federal constitution would very unlikely contain such a provision.
- 11 See Article 80 of the USSR Constitution of 1977.
- 12 The Soviets had a rather naive belief that such an explicitly benign constitutional setup will make other nations eventually to join. Besides, they thought that if a republic is serious about exiting the Soviet Union, persuasion could avert this outcome. See Raffass (2012, p.103).

- 13 For instance, Article 76 stipulated that Union Republic is a 'sovereign socialist state'. Yet, did it exercise a *government* pursuant to the Montevideo Convention?
- 14 In this respect, Bhavna Dave aptly describes how Soviet developmental and equalisation measures had helped to significantly narrow the gap between Kazakhs and Russians through economic affirmative action policies in the SSR of Kazakhstan. See Dave (2007, p.156).
- 15 Also other Soviet statesmen have to be mentioned. For instance, the Latvian Alfreds Rubriks, who has until quite recently been member of the European Parliament, was also member of the last politburo of the CPSU. Other examples can be seen with Heydar Aliyev, the first President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, who also was full member of the last Soviet Politburo and became first deputy chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers. Thereby, he attained the highest Soviet position ever reached by an ethnic Azeri. See East et al. (2002, p.34).
- 16 The term that was used in Russian was *korenizatsiya*.
- 17 This was also done by promoting in-migration of persons belonging to the titular nationality.