

# LESSONS AND MANY MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT NATIONALISM AND SELF-DETERMINATION

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**Abstract:** This article briefly summarizes what the post-Soviet experience teaches us about nationalism, understood here as claims that a population constitutes a people that should have a sovereign state of its own.

The creation of fifteen independent countries from the Soviet Union provided us a rare opportunity to observe processes of nation-state formation, for at no other time have so many new nation-states been created by secession. The Soviet successor states constitute about half of the thirty new states created between 1941 and 2011, and most of these were created following growing secessionist movements. The break-up of the Soviet Union in December 1991 occurred when its three founding members chose to withdraw from the union. The European and Caucasian states that had not already been recognized as independent chose this occasion to make good on previous attempts to secede. Only in the Central Asian states were there few significant political actors seeking independence until it was thrust upon them by the dissolution of the union. The experience of the Soviet Union and the successor states offers lessons that challenge some of our well-established views or provide us opportunities to refine these views on the consequences of secessionism and self-determination.<sup>1</sup> I will focus

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the themes in this essay I am developing more fully in a book manuscript

on some of these lessons and venture several questions for further inquiry where we may speak not only to one another, but also to our colleagues who study other parts of the world.

### **1. Granting independence to secessionists is not that bad an option after all.**

The prevailing approach in policy circles prior to 1991 was to discourage or resist secessionists' demands for independence. Indeed, as late as August 1991, in his Chicken Kiev speech, the American president warned Ukrainians against "suicidal nationalism" and reaffirmed the American commitment to the Soviet federation. The usual policy argument against granting independence is that it makes democracy less likely, increases the likelihood of ethnic oppression, turns domestic conflicts into international conflicts, and serves as inspiration for a proliferation of demands in neighboring states.

The transition from the Soviet Union should have dispelled many of these fears. What may be most remarkable about the transition to new nation-states is how few of the maladies attached to the labels "partition" and "secession" have actually been manifest in the Soviet successor states. Moreover, it is precisely in the republics that were most secessionist prior to December 1991 that independence has produced the most positive results. First, unlike the transition in Yugoslavia, there have been few wars among the successor states and these were far more localized and limited in their mayhem. The primary post-Soviet exception was the Karabakh war. The Abkhazian and South Ossetian wars and the Transnistrian altercation were far more limited. The peacefulness of this transition is not fully appreciated and certainly not well explained by the prevailing literature of the social sciences. Second, democracy has flourished in some successor states precisely because they have been permitted to develop independently. We cannot know with any certainty what the Soviet government would have looked like if it had held together after August 1991, but any government that sought to hold together the union would face an up-hill battle in democratizing the Soviet Union. We can observe, however, that the more political distance a successor state has established from Moscow, the greater its likelihood of democratizing. Third, the independence of fifteen new states did not unleash a herd of copy-cats in the neighborhood; the contagion was largely limited to the Soviet space itself.

This should not lead us to champion secessionist causes everywhere but to ask whether and how the Soviet experience should inform our responses to current secessionist conflicts—not only in the intractable, frozen conflicts in the successor states, but also around the world: *Under*

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(in progress), tentatively titled *Nationalism, Self-determination, and Independence*.

*what conditions* should we be more supportive of the demands of secessionists in the future?

## **2. Nationalist mobilization usually occurs without warfare.**

For many of our colleagues in the social sciences, manifest in an explosion of articles in the political science journals, nationalist secessionism is understood primarily through the frame of civil wars. Yet, in the experience of the Soviet Union and its successor states—and in a surprising number of other successful secessions—civil war was not a significant factor in the progress to independence. Our studies of the Soviet secessions have emphasized popular movements and mobilization of protest rather than armies and warfare.<sup>2</sup> The focus on warfare, including the origins, endings, and outcomes of civil wars and the strategies and tactics of armed groups, puts at the center of analysis issues that are usually only secondary in the origins and success of national self-determination movements. We have much to share with our colleagues studying other parts of the world about the nature of national self-determination movements and the successful strategies and tactics of secessionists who do not turn to warfare. Vladimir Lenin told his followers that the success of a revolutionary movement—and this may apply to nationalist movements as well—often depends on its ability to survive the long, dull periods when there is no prospect of heroic armed struggle and then to strike without significant bloodshed.

## **3. Nation-state conflicts are often intractable even when civil wars are not.**

Although the social sciences literature has given much attention to the ways in which civil wars have ended, it has given little attention to the ways in which disagreements over competing nation-state projects might end. The so-called “frozen conflicts” in the successor states (such as the confrontation between the Georgian and Abkhazian projects) provide substantial evidence that it is more difficult to narrow the substantive differences between the supporters of incompatible nation-state projects than to end civil wars. The faith (so widespread among students of civil wars) that there is always a contract that will leave all parties to these disputes better off seems to apply only to controlling the *means* used by the parties and not their *ends* in a conflict over competing nation-state projects. This should lead us to ask: What are the conditions that favor the emergence of nationalist movements that carry the prospects of intractable

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<sup>2</sup> Mark R. Beissinger. 2002. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Dmitry P. Gorenburg. 2003. *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

conflicts? Can we preclude the emergence of intractable conflicts either by removing those conditions or by granting independence early on?

#### **4. Democratization may be a primary cause of nationalist conflict.**

National self-determination and democracy are two sides of the principle of popular sovereignty. As the Soviet experience made clear, it is difficult to democratize a multi-ethnic society in the name of government by and for the people without raising questions of who are “the people.” Democratization not only provides the opportunity for the nation-state question to come forward, but encourages us to ask it. National self-determination conflicts occurred in some of the more democratic successor states (Georgia, Moldova) and at times of greater democracy (Russia in the 1990s). Is it going too far to conclude from this experience that the nation-state question is inherent in democracy and that conflicting nation-state claims will arise in multi-national societies as they democratize? Does the Soviet and post-Soviet experience speak to the current dilemmas of such countries as China or Myanmar that may empower secessionists by democratizing? Does the post-Soviet experience suggest strategies to democratize multi-national states that limit these dangers?

#### **5. Ethnofederalism may threaten the unity of existing states.**

The experience of the Soviet Union and its successor states has produced a lively, productive, and continuing debate over the consequences of ethnofederalism for secessionism. The original challenge came from analysts (including this author) who conclude that ethnofederalism is a singularly imprudent response to the threat of secession: Ethnofederal institutions, which assign constituent jurisdictions such as republics or provinces to different ethnic groups, give leaders with secessionist projects unique opportunities to consolidate support within their own communities and press their claims against central governments.<sup>3</sup> Once these movements have consolidated their movements within their homelands, any last minute change in the ethnofederal structure of the state is unlikely to reverse secessionism; in fact, this is likely to spark a jump to independence. This conclusion has been challenged by analysts who argue that the proper design of ethnofederal institutions can eliminate these dangers and reduce secessionism. The research and debate among analysts of the

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<sup>3</sup> Valerie Bunce, 1999. *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Philip G. Roeder, 2007. *Where Nation-States Come From: Institutional Change in the Age of Nationalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Soviet successor states continue in the article literature as we sharpen our definitions and institutional distinctions.<sup>4</sup>

### **6. Diasporas are not so dangerous for nation-states after all.**

Despite concerns in the social sciences at large about the inherent dangers associated with diasporas, including problems of irredentism and inter-state wars, the largest post-Soviet diasporas (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, Tatars) have not become the source or focus of major secessionist movements. The most significant exceptions are the Armenian minority in Nagorny Karabakh and the Slavic-language minority in Transnistria. Other exceptions are minor or only marginally diasporas—such as the Ossetians in Georgia. Few of these have produced the mayhem predicted for the successor states or actually observed in such countries as Yugoslavia. The explanation does not appear to be more extensive assimilation of the post-Soviet diasporas.<sup>5</sup> This should lead us to ask: Is the concern about diasporas overdrawn in both scholarly and policy communities? Do only some types of diasporas become a focus or source of conflict and only under very specific and exceptional circumstances?

### **7. The foundational, yet remote, importance of national identities for normal politics.**

The transition from the Soviet Union to successor states highlights a seemingly contradictory quality of national identities. (And here we enter a more abstract realm.) On one hand, for most issues on the agenda of politics most of the time national identities are a remote and not actively invoked consideration. In normal politics, national identities are seldom issues for political contention or bases for making political choices. On the other hand, national identities provide individuals one set of benchmarks on which they construct many other views of the world that are active in normal politics. These benchmarks are essential for anchoring, making sense of, and maintaining coherence among these other views. For example, although we regularly debate the best way to serve the national interest, in normal politics we seldom question the human and geographic boundaries of the nation-state that demarcate the nation and its interest.

It is usually only in extraordinary circumstances, such as the transition from the Soviet Union to successor states, that we directly observe

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<sup>4</sup> For just one example of this healthy and respectful debate, see Henry Hale. 2004. "Divided We Stand: Institutional Sources of Ethnofederal State Survival and Collapse." *World Politics* 56:2 (January): 165-93. Philip G. Roeder. 2009. "Ethnofederalism and the Mismatch of Conflicting Nationalisms." *Regional and Federal Studies* 19:2 (May): 203-19.

<sup>5</sup> David D. Laitin. 1998. *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

the consequences of the foundational quality of national interest. In these extraordinary circumstances, changes in national identities change the agendas of politics. At the individual level, when this foundational view of the “proper” organization of the world shifts, a consequence can be personal disorientation, incomprehension, or directionlessness among many who anchored their world views to the old order; and this will shape their approach to politics. During the transition, particularly if it is accompanied by civil war, contention over national identities may temporarily become hegemonic, determining the stakes that each of us sees in virtually all political issues.

Reconciling these seemingly contradictory elements of national identities—foundational, yet normally remote—is not a simple intellectual task. Indeed, many scholars, whether analysts of the Soviet Union and its successor states or elsewhere, tend to emphasize one quality at the expense (or even to the exclusion) of the other. Is there a more nuanced synthesis to inform our understanding of the role of national identities in normal politics? Do comparisons of the Soviet successor states before and after independence offer us a unique analytic opportunity to understand the consequences of these foundational identities for normal politics?

### **8. The situations in which national identities become salient.**

National identities are immediately relevant and actively invoked in only specific situations. Thus, the salience of national identities varies both spatially and temporally, moving between foreground and background of politics with varying circumstances. Can we identify the conditions under which national identities become more salient?<sup>6</sup> Can we identify types of national identities that are most sensitive to those conditions?

For example, the temporal variation in salience is illustrated by the contrast between the intensity of conflicts concerning national identities in the early 1990s and the growing marginalization of such issues in succeeding years. Analysis that embraces both phases of national identity is not as common as analysis that stresses only the moments of intense conflict. The most intense moments of secessionism in places such as Tatarstan or Chechnya often lead analysts to conclude that the parties to these disputes cannot reach a peaceful compromise, that secessionists will never become reconciled to remaining within the larger state from which they fervently want independence, and that no normal politics can ever again engage the different sides of these disputes in constructive decisionmaking. Developments in less intense periods often lead analysts to conclude that the secessionism of many like Mintimer Shaimiev or Ramzan Kadyrov

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<sup>6</sup> Elise Giuliano. 2011. *Constructing Grievance: Ethnic Nationalism in Russia's Republics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

was purely cynical, that nationalism is no more than an instrument used to advance individual political ambitions, and that nationalism is not an independent, powerful force in politics. There are elements of truth in all these observations.

Rather than emphasizing only the fervent or marginal quality of national identities that emerges from snapshots of particular situations, should we develop more nuanced understanding of the situational specificity of nationalism? Comparisons across time in the life of various Soviet and post-Soviet nationalisms offer us an unusually rich body of evidence to understand the conditions under which national identities come to the foreground. Even though our inclination is to study the moments when national identities are in the foreground, there may be particular value in studies of the periods when nation-state projects are in the background (or marginalized) to identify the conditions and strategies that permit these projects to survive under adverse conditions and to mobilize rapidly in other circumstances. In addition, comparisons among the different national groups offer a wealth of evidence to identify “types” of national identities that are better able to survive and then to surge when opportunities present themselves.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Yitzhak Brudny. 1998. *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Ronald Grigor Suny. 1993. *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Andrew Wilson. 2009. *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Space does not permit me to list the many exceptional studies of nationalisms in the Soviet period published by historians in the past two decades.

