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June 13-14, 2024

Nakhchivan State University, Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan

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EDITOR:

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elsevar ASADOV

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The number of abstracts from foreign countries: **105**

The number of abstracts from Türkiye: **95**

**ELEMENTS OF THE POST-SOVIET NATION-BUILDING PROCESSES OF THE TURKIC
STATES IN CENTRAL ASIA**

**ORTA ASYA'DAKİ TÜRK DEVLETLERİNİN SOVYET SONRASI ULUS İNŞASI
SÜREÇLERİNİN UNSURLARI**

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ÖZET

Bu araştırma, Orta Asya'daki Türk devletlerinin Sovyet sonrası ulus inşası süreçlerini, Sovyet mirası, primordiyalizm ve ideolojik gelişim kalıpları ekseninde ele almaktadır. Bu çalışmada temel amaç, bağımsızlık sonrasında Orta Asya Türk devletlerinde, devlet destekli oluşan primordiyalizmin gelişimini, Sovyet mirasının etkilerini ve ulusal sembollerin önemini inceleyerek karşılaştırmalı şekilde ulus inşası süreçlerinde söz konusu unsurların önemine dikkat çekmektir. Araştırmada, Sovyet öncesi dönemde bölge halklarının kendilerini tanımlarken ortak şekilde kabul ettikleri Türk kimliği ve sembolleri yerine günümüzde benimsedikleri Sovyet döneminin mirası olan yeni etnisite ve ulusal kimlik adlandırmalarının ulus inşası süreçlerini ve yeni bağımsız devletlerin ulusal kimlik arayışlarını nasıl şekillendirdiği tartışılmaktadır. Ayrıca çalışmada ulusal sembollerin önemi ve bu sembollerin karşılaştırılması da yer almaktadır. Ulusal sembollerin karşılaştırılması, Orta Asya'daki farklı Türk devletlerinin ulusal sembollerini ve bu sembollerin tarihî, kültürel ve ideolojik kökenlerini analiz ederek, benzerliklerin ve farklılıkların ortaya konulmasına odaklanmıştır. Bu bağlamda, araştırma Orta Asya'daki Türk devletlerinde ulusal kimlik oluşturma sürecinin karmaşıklığını ve Sovyet mirasının bu süreci nasıl etkilediğini anlamamıza yardımcı olmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Orta Asya, Türk Devletleri, Ulus İnşası

ABSTRACT

This research examines the post-Soviet nation-building processes of the Turkic states in Central Asia on the axis of Soviet legacy, primordialism and ideological development patterns. The main purpose of this study is to examine the development of state-supported primordialism, the effects of the Soviet legacy and the importance of national symbols in the Central Asian Turkic states after independence, and to draw attention to the importance of these elements in nation-building processes in a comparative manner. In the research, it is discussed how the new ethnicity and national identity designations, which are the legacy of the Soviet period, which the people of the region adopted today, instead of the Turkish identity and symbols that the people of the region commonly accepted when defining themselves in the pre-Soviet period, shaped the nation-building processes and the search for national identity of the newly independent states. In addition, the study also includes the importance of national symbols and the comparison of these symbols. Comparison of national symbols focuses on revealing similarities and differences by analyzing the national symbols of different Turkic states in Central Asia and the historical, cultural and ideological roots of these symbols. In this context, the research helps us understand the complexity of the process of national identity formation in the Turkic states of Central Asia and how the Soviet legacy affected this process.

Key Words: Central Asia, Turkic States, Nation Building

INTRODUCTION

The central focus of this study is the paradoxical relationship between how Central Asian states utilize national images and narratives that are still rooted in Soviet content but presented in an anti-Soviet form. Our aim is to analyze the newly constructed national images and certain selected myths associated with these symbols in the three Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, and to demonstrate their direct reliance on the Soviet legacy. Initially, the legitimizing objectives of these projects will be examined, which often involve creating formal distance from the recent past, as well as the actors or producers behind these symbols, primarily the Soviet-trained local nomenklatura (the Soviet political establishment). The phenomenon known as “political primordialism” will be examined in Central Asia, which involves a unique exploration and utilization of ancestral lines, as well as specific historical and legendary images (Smith, 1988). We contend that the utilization of political and social primordialism serves as a means of legitimizing the new regimes and their policies, as they seek to establish their legitimacy by emphasizing the ancientness of their respective nations. This study argues that ideology and the pursuit of a national idea have become tools for political speculation and manipulation by the elites in these countries. Our analysis will compare three countries, each exhibiting varying degrees of intensity in their embrace of nationalistic primordial ideas: Turkmenistan (displaying a high level), Uzbekistan (also demonstrating a high level), and Kazakhstan (exhibiting a moderate level). In conclusion, This paper identifies patterns of ideological development in these countries during the first five years of independence. This will include examining the use of historical (titular ethnic) figures, the quest to rediscover the ancient past, and deliberate efforts to distance themselves from the Soviet era.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent states of Central Asia faced the task of constructing their own national imagined communities, in part to legitimize their territorial integrity and the rights of their titular ethnicities. This process of nation-building manifested in the creation of specific symbols, myths, and rituals aimed not only at distinguishing the nation but also at legitimizing their sovereignty. All Central Asian countries were essentially drawn and created by the Soviet Union in the 1920s. In nominal terms, they comprised territories colonized by the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, inhabited by dispersed nomadic tribes that were gradually organized into entities such as the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen, alongside sedentary populations, namely the Uzbeks and Tajiks (Sahni, 1997).

The Soviets had various motivations for the territorial demarcation in Central Asia. Firstly, there was a necessity to weaken the pan-Turkic identity, which posed a potential threat to stability in the region and could fuel independence movements. Additionally, there was a goal to suppress local nationalism and the burgeoning national sentiments that had arisen since the late nineteenth century. Lenin aimed to grant all republics self-determination within the framework of the so-called pseudo-federal administrative system – a federation of nominally equal republics – with the aim of quelling nationalism and facilitating the establishment of socialist internationalism (Suny, 1989; Hirsch, 2000). Lenin advocates for the absence of privileges for any particular nation or language. He proposes resolving the issue of political self-determination of nations through their separation into states using entirely free and democratic means. Additionally, he suggests enacting a law applicable to the entire state, allowing for the implementation of various measures across different sectors such as rural, urban, or communal affairs (Lenin, 1964/1977; Suny & Martin, 2001).

After the national delimitation, the ideological shaping of ethnic distinctiveness in each republic commenced under the so-called Leninist nationality policy. This policy entailed the promotion of distinctive ethnic and primordial identities, sometimes artificially constructed, to ensure that the republics maintained a socialist in content while only transforming in form. Drawing on Stalin’s definition of a nation as a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup, manifested in a common culture, the republics underwent processes of distinct common culture formations (Stalin, 1953; Franklin, 1973). Initially, the populations of these republics experienced cultural promotion and witnessed gradual improvements in literacy levels among the indigenous populations. Educational and cultural institutions were established, and significant national cultural development organizations, such as Writers’ Unions and art galleries, were formed.

The Stalinist period was marked by autocracy, during which national writers and artists were persecuted, and several small nationalities were deported from their homelands (Suny, 1989). The sedentarization of nomads, collectivization, and the repressions and purges of the local intelligentsia during the Stalinist era created a tragic collective memory among the indigenous peoples in this region. These collective memories also encompassed events from later periods, particularly those preceding perestroika, such as the cotton scandal in Uzbekistan or the December 1986 events in Kazakhstan (Collins, 2006). Many of these historical moments were brought into discussion and re-evaluated during the glasnost period in the late 1980s. However, they generally remained suppressed, with few exceptions such as the reinstatement of jadid writers and other indigenous nationalists who had fought for independence in the 1920s but were repressed and killed in the 1930s. Later on, this historical legacy evolved into a component of political ideology. However, the symbolism and myths of nationhood in Central Asian states were predominantly fashioned by connecting with their distant and ancient past rather than their modern and immediate (Soviet) past. This phenomenon is described as state-sponsored primordialism.

THE SOVIET LEGACY AND NATIONAL SYMBOLS

The newly independent Central Asian states faced a unique challenge: Constructing a national identity that distanced itself from Soviet influence while inherently relying on it. This paradox is evident in the formation of state-sponsored primordialism, a concept that leverages ancient cultural and historical symbols to legitimize the current political regime. This process, while appearing to draw from pre-Soviet traditions, is deeply rooted in Soviet-era practices and policies.

The Soviet legacy played a crucial role in shaping the national identities of these states. During the Soviet era, the central government promoted distinct ethnic and cultural identities among its republics to manage the diverse populations within the USSR. This policy, known as the Leninist nationality policy, involved the creation and promotion of unique national symbols, languages, and histories for each republic. However, these identities were often artificially constructed or heavily modified to fit the Soviet ideology of socialist internationalism (Suny & Martin, 2001). Stalin's definition of a nation, which emphasized a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture, served as the foundation for these efforts (Stalin, 1953).

Following independence, Central Asian states continued this practice of shaping national identity through selective revival and promotion of historical symbols. This continuity can be seen as a direct result of the Soviet-trained local nomenklatura, who, despite seeking to distance themselves from the Soviet past, utilized familiar methods to construct their national narratives. The result is a state-sponsored primordialism that emphasizes ancient and pre-Soviet historical figures and myths to legitimize the current regimes.

For instance, in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the political elites have embraced symbols and narratives that highlight the ancient origins of their nations. Figures such as Timur in Uzbekistan, Manas in Kyrgyzstan, and Oguz Khan in Turkmenistan have been elevated to central roles in the national consciousness. These figures serve not only as symbols of national pride but also as tools for the political elite to assert their legitimacy and continuity from a storied past to the present. This practice mirrors Soviet strategies where selected historical figures and events were emphasized to serve the state's ideological goals.

National symbols play a pivotal role in the process of nation-building and the formation of a cohesive national identity. In the context of Central Asia, these symbols are not merely relics of a bygone era but are actively constructed and propagated by the state to foster a sense of unity and distinctiveness.

During the Soviet era, each republic was encouraged to develop its own set of national symbols, which were, however, aligned with the broader socialist goals. Monuments, flags, anthems, and other cultural artifacts were designed to reflect both the unique cultural heritage of the republics and their place within the Soviet Union. This dual identity was intended to promote a sense of belonging to both the national community and the socialist state (Hirsch, 2000).

After gaining independence, the Central Asian states retained many of these symbols but reinterpreted them to fit their new national narratives. For example, the green flag of Turkmenistan, which symbolizes neutrality and long-standing traditions, can be seen as a continuation of Soviet-era practices of imbuing

symbols with multiple layers of meaning. Similarly, the use of historical figures from the pre-Russian era serves to establish a sense of continuity and legitimacy for the new regimes.

The process of nation-building in Central Asia also involves the creation of new symbols and the reinterpretation of existing ones. Presidential speeches, national holidays, and public monuments all serve as platforms for promoting the state's chosen symbols and narratives. These efforts are aimed at creating a cohesive national identity that distinguishes the nation from its Soviet past while simultaneously relying on the legacy of Soviet practices in statecraft and identity formation.

In conclusion, the formation of state-sponsored primordialism and the use of national symbols in Central Asia highlight the complex interplay between the Soviet legacy and the construction of national identity. While these states strive to assert their independence and uniqueness, they continue to draw heavily on the methods and frameworks established during the Soviet era. This paradoxical relationship underscores the enduring influence of the Soviet legacy on the political and cultural landscapes of Central Asia.

CONCLUSION

Following the independence of the Central Asian republics, national symbols, histories, heritage, and heroes gained significant importance for national identification and legitimizing the republics, serving as a means to mitigate potential political crises. Once this relatively fragile period had passed, the political elite in these countries were able to reorganize and reinstitutionalize their nationalizing policies. However, the initial projects of national symbol creation and national ideology formation, which in some cases took as long as two decades to materialize, were influenced by the legacy of Soviet rule. Furthermore, they often replicated forms and symbols and utilized similar ideological rhetoric, evident in presidential speeches and even in the design of new monuments.

While some elements may be argued as universal, such as Turkmenistan's claim that its neutrality is symbolized by the green flag and its long-lived traditions with titular ethnicities from the pre-Russian era, these legitimizing claims are typical of post-colonial countries seeking to break from their past and substitute meanings created during the colonial era with a revival of primordial ideas. In Central Asia after 1992, while presidents did discuss colonial Soviet policies, maintaining friendly relations with a still powerful Russia made openly discussing Russian colonialism unwise. Thus, the revival of primordial ideas emerged as the best strategy to legitimize the new political class and nation-building efforts. From Timur to Manas, from Oguz to Al Farabi, pre-Russian symbols dominated the ideological landscape immediately after independence. However, the tradition of selectively reviving heritage and avoiding images that could cause conflict is also a Soviet legacy, as the Soviets selectively prescribed the form and allowed heroes.

The independent national imagination can be seen as a continuation of the Soviet project under the guise of independence. This occurred for several reasons, primarily because the architects of this ideology were originally educated within the Soviet system and lacked exposure to alternative political frameworks. Consequently, the political elites of the post-1992 era leveraged the available templates and existing state machinery to serve their own interests.

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