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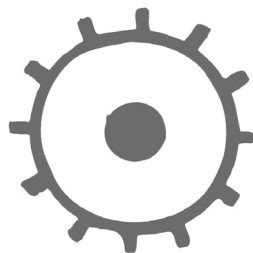
Post-Soviet Territorial Autonomy – Why So Resilient?
An overview of cases and interpretations

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Abstract

The essay addresses the reasons why most territorial autonomies in Northern Eurasia have survived to date after the Soviet Union's collapse despite authoritarian rule, homogenizing policies, and national elites' sceptical attitudes towards ethnic and regional particularism. The author questions the sufficiency of the existing explanatory frameworks resting on the notions of path dependence, contentious politics, sham arrangements, and political informality. The article seeks to offer a new supplementary perspective through analyzing autonomy arrangements in the framework of governmentality, depoliticization, and consent-based rule. The article's point of departure is that Soviet territorial autonomy was a complex institutional setting that generated ambiguous and eclectic narratives coupled with durable routines of governance. During the USSR's demise and the turn to public politics, these organizational and discursive forms demonstrated endurance. The further overview of functionable autonomy arrangements in seven countries shows similar dynamics and patterns independent of authoritarian or pluralist environment. The author concludes that these common features can be addressed as the overall societal reluctance to engage in contentious politics in favour of post-political technocratic rule. Concurrently, the formal recognition of territorial autonomy serves as a minimal necessary condition for the societal consent about the basics.

1. Introduction

Territorial autonomy and federal arrangements,[1] particularly those that reflect or seek to accommodate ethnic or linguistic diversity, are numerous but distributed unevenly around the globe and still have a mixed record (Ackrén, 2009; Benedikter, 2009; Schulte, 2020). A macro-region that features relatively many autonomy arrangements is Northern Eurasia, or the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Seven ex-Soviet countries, namely Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, have or used to have territorial autonomies (hereinafter – TAs) after 1991. Only two TAs were formally abolished by their 'mother' states (Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan and South Ossetia in Georgia). Most are inherited from the communist past, and only one functioning autonomy has been established after the USSR's collapse (Gagauzia which was set up in Moldova in 1994). Three TAs are fictive autonomies existent on paper only, and these are Abkhazia in Georgia, Crimea in Ukraine,[2] and Transnistria in Moldova, being in fact breakaway or annexed territories. Eight functioning entities have changed their formal status after 1991 but survived (all in Russia). Notably, most of both functioning and fictive autonomous entities are ethnically or linguistically distinct from their countries' mainland. The overall number of TAs is 38, including Russia's 32 'ethnic' regions.[3] The 'non-ethnic' exceptions are Adjara in Georgia and Nakhchivan in Azerbaijan.

Post-Soviet[4] autonomous entities merit scholarly attention for several reasons. First, there are numerous questions about how autonomy and federal frameworks function under authoritarian and so-called 'hybrid'[5] regimes (Busygina & Filippov, 2023; Krug & Libman, 2015; Panov & Semenov, 2018). Second, there is the issue of communist legacies, given that several countries with Marxist regimes practiced ethnicity-based autonomy and federalism.

Below I consider the third issue connected with the first two ones, and it is about the paradoxical resilience of TA in the post-Soviet space. This can in turn be divided into

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1   Below I will not draw a distinction between these two frameworks given that the issue at stake is ethnically or culturally distinct territories with a special constitutional and legal status.

2   Besides, the territories of two separatist entities – so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics – were formally granted a special autonomous status in Ukraine according to the Minsk-1 peace agreement of September 2014, but the respective national law "About the special order of local self-government in certain districts of Donetsk and Luhask Oblasts" No. 1680-VII of September 16, 2014 remained on paper and was then rescinded (see also Palermo, 2020; Wittke, 2019).

3   This singling out of a part of Russia's federative entities is not legally correct but politically justifiable in the given context; Russia-controlled territories outside the country's internationally recognized borders are not considered here.

4   This expression serves here first as an indication of a common past, and second as a neutral chronological term which does not initially connote continuity or rupture unless either is proved.

5   See Carothers, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2002.

two questions. The first one is about the reasons for the endurance of the very form of TA, while territorial governance and, if necessary, decentralization can be secured by other means. The second one concerns the ways of recognizing the historical, ethnic, and linguistic distinctness of autonomous entities (even by the fact of their retention) and the societal acceptability of this recognition. Thus, the article concerns public recognition, institutionalization, and acceptance of the form rather than the distribution of power and resources *per se*.

2. The analytical problem

Even from a statistical angle, post-Soviet autonomy arrangements demonstrate viability, and their endurance looks counterintuitive. All newly independent countries must have been concerned about securing domestic territorial control and governability after the Soviet Union's downfall, while autonomy seems to be not in harmony with these goals. Almost all post-Soviet countries qualify as "nationalizing states" as defined by Rogers Brubaker (1996), or as countries seeking to empower their "core" ethnocultural nations after a long period of alleged external suppression. The Russian Federation, although it still positions itself as a multi-national country, generally follows the same trend and increasingly exploits Russian ethno-nationalism (Blakkisrud, 2023; Kolstø, 2016). One could expect that, after communism's fall, homogenizing policies in newly independent states would put an end to territorial autonomy as a potential challenge to national sovereignty and integrity. Indeed, governments and mainstream politicians used to demonstrate negative attitudes towards autonomy as a source of potential or actual separatism or at least as something redundant and obsolete. Such reactions were most acute in Georgia (Cornell, 2001, pp. 151–170), Kazakhstan (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2007, pp. 50–51; Nurmagambetov & Ukin, 2015, pp. 52–53) and Ukraine (Barrington & Herron, 2004; Malgin, 2005), and they also took place in Russia (see Codagnone & Filippov, 2000). Moreover, autonomy arrangements, both 'ethnic' and 'non-ethnic', can be rightly perceived and thus rejected as remnants of the Soviet imperial past.

External factors barely suffice as an explanation. Indeed, fictive autonomies appear as imposed and unwelcomed by-products of armed conflicts. Some autonomy arrangements (such as Gagauzia in Moldova and Crimea in Ukraine) took place partly because of external mediation or even pressure (see Järve, 2008; Kulyk, 2002). However, although TA as a remedy for ethnic conflicts is still welcomed in European organizations, the general positive attitude of the early 1990s has basically faded away (Kymlicka, 2007, pp. 208–213), and in most cases international pressure would not be an obstacle to domestic initiatives aimed at dismantling or weakening autonomous entities.

Notably, only three countries on the list (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) can be deemed democratic or "partly free" according to the Freedom House assessment (Countries and Territories, 2024). A pluralist competitive system can (but would not necessarily) impede central governments' attempts to abolish autonomous entities, but authoritarian regimes (which are more numerous in Eurasia) must be free of this limitation. However, the latter are also generally reluctant to attack TAs.

The literature offers several general explanatory approaches. The problem is that they, while plausible, useful and probably generally correct, are not self-sufficient and require further explanations and investigations themselves. In other words, highlighting an obvious linkage or a phenomenon falls short of showing the mechanisms behind.

The first explanation rests on the notion of path dependence, or societal inertia. There is no doubt that, since modern autonomous entities have existed seamlessly in the same territorial borders with almost the same names, there is some continuity, but of what kind? The concept of legacy, which denotes a succession across historical ruptures and transformations, raises the same questions. Formulae such as "… a durable causal relationship between earlier institutions and practices and those of the present in the wake of a macro-historical rupture" (Kotkin & Beissinger, 2014, p. 7) are not self-explanatory; one needs to demonstrate that the observed linkages are genuinely causal without reifying concepts such as 'institutions' or 'identities'.

The second approach focuses on the notion of equilibrium or compromise, primarily between central and peripheral elites (Schulte, 2020; Weller & Wolff, 2005; Wolff, 2009). There is no need to refute such interpretations; any arrangement exists because the actors involved find the balance of potential gains and concessions acceptable. However, there are still questions about the kinds of participating actors and the ways in which they perceive their interests and the balance of power.

The third perspective rests on the distinction between genuine and 'sham' TAs and on excluding the latter from consideration (Aalen 2006, p. 244; Benedikter, 2009, pp. 60–64). This approach appears questionable: any kind of autonomy arrangement implies a complex institutional setting and thus a division and collision of interests, albeit hidden and informal, that merit analysis. From another angle, there is a need to explain either why the stakeholders retain a seemingly fictive or non-functionable setting or in what way it operates for the stakeholders' benefit.

The fourth explanation echoes the previous one and rests on the notion of informality; in other words, a formal TA arrangement (that can be deemed 'sham') camouflages informal bargains and power divisions. For example, the endurance of TAs in Central Asia is explained through "synergy between formal and informal authority" and the shadow clan system of the Central Asian society (Kłyszcz, 2023, p. 513). Indeed, the role

of informality and clan-based relationships has been repeatedly discussed in the literature (Collins, 2006; Stefes, 2006). However, informality takes place in many environments, and there is no uniform and clear understanding of what "clannism" is and how it functions (Tunçer-Kılavuz, 2009). A larger challenge is the need to explain the difference between autonomous and non-autonomous regions, since presumably both types of entities must rest on shadow clan-based power-sharing. The modern scholarly literature addresses territorial organization as bargaining and interest balancing between the center and peripheral elites, notwithstanding the territories' formal status (Akchurina, 2019; Busygina & Filippov, 2023). Why can the governments not rule through informal deals or 'clannism' without retaining obsolete structures of regional TA?

Finally, one can rightly say that all post-Soviet autonomy arrangements are so diverse in their origins, political contexts, recent evolutions, and institutional designs, that they are ill-suited for an accurate comparison. Nevertheless, their common origins and their common endurance prompt questions about the bottom line – the common societal mechanisms that have protected autonomy arrangements from external encroachments or internal collapse for more than 30 years despite the seeming fragility of these arrangements.

This essay does not aim at a full and comprehensive analysis equally valid for each country case in Norther Eurasia. My intention is to suggest and outline a new and supplementary theoretical perspective for explaining the phenomenon of TA resilience. For this purpose, I will first provide a general account of autonomy arrangements with a focus on Soviet legacies and second consider how the supposed explanatory scheme might be instrumental for analyzing and interpreting the presumably common effects of common factors.

The consideration of the following questions is subject to this general task. Why do territorial autonomy arrangements turn out to be ultimately acceptable for both national and regional elites while one could anticipate a negative attitude from the former? Can and shall one regard this acceptance as an outcome of political contentions and political equilibrium? How can one regard and interpret the legitimacy, or more broadly the acceptance, of these arrangements among the populace?

The overview of the country cases seeks to reveal common patterns only; by no means can it be deemed a detailed and equally accurate investigation, particularly given that individual countries are studied unevenly while accessible empirics are limited in certain cases and are provided largely from secondary literature.

3. Theoretical considerations

Modern literature about autonomy, particularly about ethnicity-based TA, shares two assumptions. The first one is a tacit reification of ethnic and territorial collectivities as cohesive entities, bearers of distinct identities and agencies. The second one is a view of TA arrangements and the functioning of autonomous units as contentious politics (Cederman, Hug, Schädel & Wucherpfennig, 2015; Ghai, 2000; McGarry & O'Leary, 1993; Weller & Wolff, 2005) also based on collective mobilization and the interaction of group agencies. These assumptions have two major consequences in scholarship: the analytical focus on ethnicity-based group interests and related political mobilization and the already mentioned distinction between 'genuine' and 'sham' arrangements, reflecting or misrepresenting group aspirations. Moreover, some authors argue that a gap between substantive institutional arrangements, such as regional self-government and group-based cultural autonomy, and symbolic recognition of distinctness jeopardizes the autonomy's durability (see Gorenburg, 2003, pp. 269–270; Swenden, 2013, p. 71).

Reification of groups is a reason why discussions around ethnicity-based TA are often confined to a dichotomy of promising compromise versus pathway to conflicts (Erk & Anderson, 2009; Roeder & Rothchild, 2005; Swenden, 2013). On the one hand, power-division and power-sharing might satisfy the conflicting parties and thus forestall both separatism and violent response. On the other hand, there is a widely spread anxiety that carving out a special status territory of and for a separate ethnicity or ethnicities may generate conflicts, presumably between the nation-wide majority and/or the central government on one side and the minority-populated autonomy on the other, or between the autonomy's holder (or 'titular') group and other groups within the same territory (Norman, 2006; Wolff, 2009).

As for the distinction between substantive and nominal arrangements, it excludes a wide range of important phenomena, and such an outlook, for example, impedes an accurate analysis of authoritarian federalism including its complex institutional structure and societal embeddedness.

Both premises – of group-based interests and political contentions as fundamentals of autonomy arrangements – are not indispensable. Social mobilization and collective action take place, but these phenomena do not predetermine group agency as such; instead of reifying groups and group identities, one can address them as a multiplicity of practices and social forms including discursive patterns, imaginaries, cognitive frames, symbols, narratives, collective actions, organizational settings and so forth (Brubaker, 2004, p. 11). From this angle, diversity issues in public space can be approached primarily as symbolic politics, or activities aimed at manufacturing and transmitting meanings and interpretations (Birkland, 2011, pp. 220–221). There is no dividing line between symbolic

and material policies since symbolic performance is inseparable from substantive actions (such as language regulations or educational law) while substantive measures can be of a performative character and contribute to the formation of social imaginaries (see Alexander, 2006; Bottici, 2014).

Power relations, control, and competition can exist beyond political contentions. A promising analytical perspective is to look at the mechanisms of aligning and reconciling the attitudes and rationalities of the rulers and the ruled. Among several theoretical approaches to such adjustments, I would employ the framework of governmentality that denotes power exercised through shaping the attitudes and perceptions of the subordinate populace (Dean, 2010; Huff, 2007). Governmentality differs from rule based on coercion, or sovereign and disciplinary power, although these mechanisms can intertwine and complement each other (Braeckman, 2019; Collier, 2009; Lemke, 2007; Watts, 2003). Notably, as Michel Foucault argued, the practices of government can be seen as independent of concrete organizational structure and regime (Foucault, 1982; 2009). This premise allows for the use of the concept of governmentality in authoritarian environments, and numerous scholars have already fruitfully applied this approach (Li, 2007; Tutumlu, 2019; Yatsyk, 2017).

Authoritarian rule rests on complex institutional settings arguably aimed at the maintenance of power coalitions and the prevention of oppositional consolidation (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Geddes, Wright & Frantz, 2018). Territorial power distribution and building relationships with ethnic elites are important parts of this process, and territorial autonomy, decentralization, and concessions serve as tools of authoritarian governance. Even if certain arrangements differ from their analogues in countries with democratic regimes, they nevertheless shall not be discarded as irrelevant.

Recent developments in the world prompt a closer look at the proliferation of governance that rests on the substitution of agonistic politics and political collisions by technocratic rule and tacit societal consent about the basics. These situations, that can be denoted as post-politics (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2001; Wood, 2016) and briefly outlined as a replacement of the rights of active citizens with the interests of the customers (Swyngedouw, 2018), have been extensively studied with regard to urban management and environmental agendas (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015), and we can assume that this outlook applies in other areas as well.

4. Soviet federalism and autonomy

The territorialization of ethnicity was one of the two major forms of diversity institutionalization under Soviet rule, with the other being ascribed individual ethnic affiliation (Brubaker, 1996). Federative and autonomous arrangements were widely employed during the Soviet period (Bowring, 2010; Bunce, 1999; Kahn, 2002), and they made up a large part of TAs in the world. Although the Russian Bolsheviks had, until the 1917 takeover, been against any kind of autonomy as undermining the unity of the working class, they subsequently pragmatically accepted the idea and actively promoted ethnicity-based substates and local territorial autonomy as the backbone of their statehood (Pearson, 1991, pp. 13–32; Slezkine, 1994, pp. 419–420). Notably, federative and autonomy arrangements within the former Russian Empire after the Bolshevik coup were not a unique or *sui generis* phenomenon. In the early 20th century, the idea of territorial autonomy as a form of homeland for a designated ethnic group and thus a way to resolve ethnic and territorial disputes gradually became a part of political thought across Europe, being recognized, and to some extent promoted, within the Versailles system (see Pearson, 1983).

Indeed, under the Bolshevik rule, the establishment of autonomous entities was underpinned by coercion and the related rhetoric of class struggle and class liberation, but a rationale behind it was to make new power structures adoptable by non-Russian ethnicities. The founding declarations, constitutions, and legislations of Soviet Russia and then, from 1922 on, of the Soviet Union and constituent entities, contained the concepts of group rights, such as national self-determination, national statehood, and autonomy, as well as the right of all nationalities to free development (Brubaker, 1996; Hirsch, 2005; Slezkine, 1994; Zaslavsky, 1997). State-building in non-Russian peripheries rested on the preferential recruitment of minority cadres to the system of government and on the development and promotion of non-Russian languages and cultures (Martin, 2001; Rolf, 2021).

The promises of national and social liberation, centered on ethnicity-based statehood and autonomy, turned out to be attractive for minority intellectuals and grassroots elements, and thus effective in consolidating the new regime. Throughout the 1920s, the country's rulers set up a ladder of federative and autonomous entities, from the upper-tier union republics down to local, community and district-level autonomies. Local territorial autonomies for minorities were abolished by the late 1930s, and a large part of the national elites were imprisoned or executed. Nevertheless, federation units and autonomous areas were institutionally developed and entrenched: they obtained their structures of government, bureaucracy, literary languages, cultural institutions, symbols, and legitimizing narratives (Fowkes, 1997; Kahn, 2002; Martin, 2001). As such they survived until the end of the USSR and beyond.

Territorial autonomy with an ethnic profile is a conception with an internal contradiction, potentially leading to divergent outcomes, given that almost all federative or autonomous entities were multi-ethnic and had their 'titular' co-ethnics dispersed over the country at large and abroad. The creators of Soviet ethnic federalism and autonomy had to reconcile conflicting principles discursively and in practice.

First, the official metanarrative was eclectic, mechanically combining conflicting elements: the rhetoric of group entitlements with individual equality, and class-based legitimacy with ethnonational self-determination (Smith, 1996; Zaslavsky, 1997). The discourse of group rights and group cohesion was well developed; this vocabulary included such concepts as national sovereignty (in the meaning of the sovereign rights of ethnic groups (Shevtsov, 1978)), ethnic groups' developments, and even group dignity. One can interpret this as a smokescreen hiding real practices of coercion and unification. Alternatively, one can also look upon the combination of conflicting utterances as a ritual and prescribed, or normatively acceptable, mode of narration and public communication (Gill, 2011; Rigby, 1990).

Second, issues that could provoke rejection and controversy were narrated in an ambiguous way or silenced. The 'belonging' of an administrative territory to a certain titular ethnicity was an implication and common knowledge; it was never clearly stipulated and specified in constitutional or legal texts or in Communist Party declarations. From the late 1930s, institutions such as state or official languages were abolished in all but a few constituent entities. Diasporas were officially invisible; there were no articulated and structured policies toward co-ethnics within the country, and the very existence of such groups in the outside world was almost taboo. Third, the system generated positive expectations for all population segments: there were imaginaries of participation and upward mobility for minority nationalities, institutions that retained local ethnic cultures and languages, and a factual protection for ethnic Russian and other 'non-titular' groups. Fourth, ethnicity-based statehood as a symbolic and organizational framework was banalized and routinized as part of the social landscape (Rolf, 2021, p. 79). It was in line with the general trend – Soviet rule and the common sense of the ruled after Stalin's death largely rested on the reproduction of social forms and rituals that lost their meaning (Yurchak, 2005). Additionally governmentality, or the adjustment of rationalities, was intertwined with disciplinary practices, and unauthorized activities were suppressed and punished.

5. The shift towards public politics in the 1980s

The Soviet liberalization and the overall "restructuring" (*perestroika*) of the late 1980s gradually brought about public discussions and then competitive politics; issues of nationality moved from the area of propaganda and closed decision-making to the domain of open deliberations and contentions, first involving experts and then the general public (Gorenburg, 2003, pp. 54–76; Medushevsky, 2017, pp. 553–554; Zubok, 2017, pp. 256–260). The lifting of censorship, the actual authorization of a multi-party system, and the introduction of competitive elections in 1988–1990, along with official promises of political reforms, was echoed in the growth of oppositional ethnic movements. The latter raised a range of demands, from extended public support for minority languages to territorial rearrangements and even the full state independence of constituent republics (Drobizheva, 2013, pp. 68–80; Fowkes, 1997, pp. 124–142; Smith, 2005, pp. 73–77). The authorities of the union (first tier), and partly autonomous (second tier) republics from 1988 on, voiced similar concerns and plans, starting a variety of 'nationalizing' policies aimed at the empowerment of the core, or 'titular', ethnicities. In turn, the USSR leadership suggested its own plans for reforming the federation and the policy of nationalities.

Surprisingly, the actors of newly emerged ethnic politics largely retained earlier discursive patterns (except for references to Leninism, which gradually vanished) and demonstrated the persistence of the same rationality. Policy statements and legislation on all levels reproduced the features of the old metanarrative: the same terminology and conceptualizations, ambiguity, eclecticism and/or non-articulation of controversial issues. The process was, however, double-sided; on the one hand, old forms kept circulating, on the other, the balance of articulated and silenced issues shifted. Such topics as the ethnic underpinning of statehoods and autonomies, the precedence of 'titular' and autochthonous ethnicities, and accordingly the status and rights of 'non-titular' groups, were brought to the surface (Kolstø, 2018; Tishkov, 1997, pp. 44–67).

The declarations of sovereignty that all union and most autonomous republics adopted in 1988–1991 referred to them as "national" or ethnicity-based entities, simultaneously acknowledging the self-determination of the entire population regardless of ethnicity and guaranteeing equal individual rights (see Hale, 2000; Kahn, 2000; Treisman, 1997). The new regional pieces of legislation declared 'titular' languages to be state languages and defined Russian as a language of interethnic communication but fell short of clearly defining the operational principles and the exact scope of application (Kirkwood, 1991, pp. 74–77; Lapidus, 2004, p. 134). The USSR law on languages was based on the same conception ((1) Russian as the country's official language and the language of interethnic communication plus (2) a republican 'titular' language as a state language plus (3) the languages of local minorities in the places of their dense residence with an official status)

but suffered from similar uncertainties. With respect to the guarantees of equal rights, the new laws and policy statements, as in Soviet times, did not go beyond general declarations about all ethnicities' equal right to development. The acquisition of sovereign rights during the Soviet demise was a step to full independence or maintaining an autonomous status after the USSR's collapse.

6. Country cases

After the Soviet Union's breakdown most autonomies survived, and it makes sense to briefly overview individual cases and the patterns that unite and divide them. The overview below skips the nominal autonomous entities except for the Crimean autonomy, which was functional up until February 2014.

6.1 Russia

Russian TAs outweigh the rest of the post-Soviet space quantitively and qualitatively, and thus Russia is on the top of the list. For this country, the term "autonomy" requires several clarifications and reservations. Russia under Soviet rule had the status of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). However, despite its name the RSFSR was a unitary statehood composed of ordinary administrative units and numerous autonomous entities (autonomous republics, autonomous *oblast*s (provinces), and autonomous districts) which were deemed ethnicity-based (Bowring, 2010; Bunce, 1999; Henderson, 2011). Since then, these territories are colloquially and by inertia referred to as autonomies, although legally and officially only the Jewish autonomous *oblast* in the Far East and four autonomous districts bear this name.

There was some reshuffle during the Soviet demise and in the early 1990s (including the upgrade of four autonomous *oblast*s to republics and the foundation of the Ingush Republic), and Russia became a genuine federation albeit with some symbolic advantages of the republics over other regions (Bowring, 2010; Heinemann-Grüder, 2007). At that time of turbulence, there were three kinds of political contestations: republics claimed more power and resources from the central government, in some cases tending to separatism; the 'nationalizing' policies in the republics led to conflicts with 'non-titular' dwellers; and territorial entities other than republics demanded an upgrade of their status and equal entitlements with the republics (Hughes, 2002; Solnick, 1998; Treisman, 1997). These conflicts were partly resolved by the adoption of the new federal constitution and a series of treaties and political deals with the regions.

In accordance with its 1993 constitution, the Russian Federation was initially composed of 89 territorial units. Of them 57 were purely territorial entities (*krai*s, *oblast*s and federal cities); the remaining 32 were assumingly ethnic: 21 republics, one autonomous *oblast* and 10 autonomous districts. In 2003–2008, six autonomous districts ceased to be constituent units of the federation but retained some lower-level special status within larger regions (Oracheva & Osipov, 2010). Although numerous scholars refer to Soviet and Russian federalism as ethnicity-based, the Russian constitution and federal legislation do not explicitly stipulate the linkage between ethnicity and territory. Some – but not all – regional constitutions contain indirect indications of this by stipulating that a certain republic embodies the right of the eponymous ethnicity, along with the entire population, to self-determination. There were some other indirect indications, such as the concept of 'autochthonous' nationality, in the constitutions of Gorny Altai, Komi and Tyva[6], but they were rescinded in the early 2000s.

Politically, some republics were bargaining with the federal center for privileges in taxation, budgeting, control over natural resources, and other assets. Moreover, throughout the 1990s, some republics *de facto* asserted the superiority of their legislation over the federal constitution (Kahn, 2000; Lynn & Novikov, 1997; Treisman, 1997). From the early 1990s, the republics, and to a lesser degree other 'ethnic' entities, tended to empower their 'core' ethnicities through privileges in access to regional citizenship, investments in cultural programs and institutions, a special status of representative nationality conventions, support to co-ethnics in other regions, and some other measures (Safin, 1997; Zamyatin, 2013). These policies did not, in fact, go far beyond declarations and symbolic gestures, and by the mid-1990s they had largely ceased (Shabaev, 1998). Notably, also at the same period, republican authorities stopped articulating their primary care about 'autochthonous' ethnicities (Kolstø, 2018); policy statements of this kind had no follow-ups, and republics turned to promoting the common interests of their subordinate populaces as territorial and supra-ethnic corporate entities (Solnick, 1996, p. 21). According to the federal constitution, all republics except for Karelia declared their 'titular' languages as state languages along with Russian. Although these measures widened the usage of regional languages in education and media, hardly any qualifications for public servants were established, and Russian has remained the dominant language in public communications (Zamyatin, 2015).

Since the year 2000, the federal government has pursued recentralization. Regional constitutions and laws have been brought in line with federal ones, and special agreements have been lifted (Bowring, 2010, pp. 60–63; Henderson, 2011, pp. 100–101; Mitin, 2008). Unification has concerned education, party and electoral systems, public media, taxation

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6   The texts of the constitutions of the Russian republics are available in the online legal database "Consultant+" at http://www.consultant.ru.

and many other spheres. "Nationalizing" attempts and the promotion of regional languages were stopped and partly reversed; the teaching of and in minority languages has been impeded and reduced since 2018 by the legal recognition of parents' right to choose the "native" language of their children in school (Arutyunova & Zamyatin, 2021). In fact, regional elites were unable and unwilling to resist Moscow's advancement and opted to join the winning coalition formed around the centralized autocracy (Busygina & Filippov, 2023, pp. 99–120; Gel'man, 2008). Regional populaces, including the speakers of minority languages, have also demonstrated inability or reluctance to protest (Yusupova, 2022).

Nevertheless, the federal skeleton is still in place; the formal status of most regions is intact. All ethnic underpinnings of Russia's autonomies persist (albeit ambiguous as before), and non-Russian languages still enjoy official status in the republics. Formally and symbolically, the situation is largely unchanged.

6.2 Ukraine and Moldova

Both of these two countries have internally competitive political systems. The two autonomous entities – Crimea in Ukraine and Gagauzia in Moldova – were established in 1991 and 1994 respectively, during the crumbling of the Soviet Union and the formation of independent states. In both cases, autonomy was an outcome of complex maneuvering caused by threats of secession and of violent conflicts. In ethnic and linguistic terms, both regions are different from the rest of their countries. Crimea is a Russian speaking area with a Russian ethnic majority which objectively had no reason to be part of a Ukrainian national project and thus to support Ukraine's independence. A circumstance that made the situation more complex was the mass return of the formerly deported Crimean Tatars in the late 1980s – early 1990s and the demands of the Crimean Tatar movement for a national Crimean Tatar territorial autonomy in the entire peninsula (Stewart, 2001; Wilson, 2013). The Gagauz are a Turkic people different from Moldovans; the Gagauz movement of the late 1980s claimed autonomy and protested against the Moldovan nationalizing policies and majority nationalists' plans for the country's merger with Romania (Chinn & Roper 1998; Neukirch 2002).

The Gagauz territory and Moldova were on the brink of violent conflict in 1990 when the region declared its independence from Moldova (Järve, 2008). The Crimean Peninsula, already an officially recognized autonomy, passed through deep crises in relations with the Ukrainian government twice, in 1992 and 1994 when Crimean authorities demanded extended rights and tended to separatism (Sasse, 2007, pp 142–173; Ryabushkin, 2009, pp. 24–102). Conflicts regarding both regions were resolved peacefully: Gagauzia became an autonomous territory with broad but nebulously formulated rights (Protsyk, 2010;

Wöber, 2013), and in 1995 the Crimean elite agreed to a limited administrative autonomy (Bowring, 2005, pp. 87–92; Sasse, 2007, pp. 175–200; Ryabushkin, 2009, pp. 69–70).

In both cases, relations between the autonomous entities and the central governments were not smooth. Gagauzia generated more tensions: the Moldovan authorities tried to gradually curtail the region's rights using the ambiguity of related legal provisions; the Gagauz elite in turn demonstrated disobedience (Alber & Cuijuclu, 2023; Cuijuclu, Cioaric, Berbeca & Levitskaia, 2016) and repeatedly encouraged mass protests such as consultative referenda about the region's independence in February 2014 (Necsutu, 2024). The Crimean ruling groups were also bargaining with the central government and sometimes faced interventions by the center, particularly in 2011–2013 (Fumagalli & Rymarenko, 2023; Matsuzato, 2016). However, despite some turbulences, the regional elites in both cases were acting within the established institutional frameworks, collaborated with the central governments and largely relied on backdoor negotiations mainly concerning public property and finance (Sasse, 2007, pp. 175–200; Osipov, 2019). Gagauzia has been functionable for 30 years, while the Crimean autonomy existed for 23 years, including almost 19 years in its mutually agreed and constitutionally entrenched form, and ceased to exist because of external intervention.

A difference between two autonomous regions is that Gagauzia is explicitly acknowledged as an entity of and for its core ethnicity[7] (Järve, 2008). This difference was not significant for real political developments. The Gagauz authorities were uncapable and unwilling to pursue a "nationalizing" policy, and the region remained a predominantly Russian-speaking area (Sirkeli & Lysenco 2012, p. 14; Wöber, 2013, pp. 27–28). In the case of Crimea, both Ukrainian and regional Crimean authorities refrained from articulating ethnicity-based aspirations and demands (Malyarenko & Galbreath, 2013). Russian was traditionally the *lingua franca* and the main language of communication in Southern and Eastern Ukraine, and in this respect Crimea as a Russophone region was not drastically distinct from the adjacent territories. Notably, the constitution and legislation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea[8] did not refer to the region's ethnic profile, did not define the region's population as a distinct entity, and did not set up state or official languages (Osipov, 2023).

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7   The related Moldovan and Gagauzian legislation are available at the website of the People's Assembly of Gagauzia, see https://halktoplushu.md/normativnaya-baza.

8   The text of the 1998 Crimean constitution is available in the database of the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada). http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/krym/show/rb239k002-98 (in Russian).

6.3. South Caucasus

There are two autonomous entities in the South Caucasus: Nakhchivan in Azerbaijan and Adjara in Georgia. Both are inherited from the Soviet period, both are parts of countries that have been tending toward centralization from the outset of their independence, and both are in a formal sense non-ethnic.

Adjara has a Georgian ethnic majority, but a large segment of its population is Muslim while the overwhelming majority of Georgians are Orthodox (Cornell, 2001, pp. 163–164; Pelkmans, 2006). If one resorts to the concept of distinct and non-ethnic regional identity, it might seem appropriate in the Adjara case (Blauvelt & Berglund, 2016, pp. 27–28). Adjara was unified with Georgian lands within the Russian Empire relatively late, in 1878, retaining cultural distinctness for a long time (Hoch & Kopeček, 2011). In 1991, a large part of the region's population vehemently protested the Georgian government's intention to abolish the autonomy (Cornell, 2001, pp. 164–165; George, 2009, pp. 121–122; Toft, 2003, pp. 111–112). From this time until 2004, the region was under the authoritarian rule of local strongman Aslan Abashidze and was not fully controlled by the central government (George, 2009, pp. 122–124, 140). In May 2004, following the 'Rose Revolution', the new leadership of Georgia regained control over Adjara (Blauvelt & Berglund, 2016, p. 38) but retained its autonomous status guaranteed in a special constitutional law.[9]

Nakhchivan is an exclave ethnically similar to the rest of Azerbaijan. During the Soviet demise, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic played a role in the turbulent developments in the South Caucasus: it hosted Nakhchivan-born Azerbaijani strongmen (and later a president of Azerbaijan in 1993–2003) Heydar Aliev after his retirement from the Soviet government in 1990. Nakhchivan was also the first Soviet territory that declared its secession from the USSR in 1990 (de Waal, 2003, pp. 85–94).

Nowadays, both Nakhchivan and Adjara are full-fledged constitutionally entrenched autonomous entities that have their own constitutions and enjoy legislative (albeit limited) competencies (Savitsky, 2018; Tarabara, 2018). Since the center-periphery relations in both cases are not well studied, one can only assume that both autonomies' durability stems from a combination of factors. Both regions were contested territories after the collapse of the Russian Empire, and both autonomies were established through agreements between the Kemalist government of Türkiye and the Bolsheviks (Askeroğlu Arslan, 2015; Nodia, 2016, p. 66). In both cases, the international dimension and Türkiye's involvement still matter; it is no coincidence that the preamble of Nakhchivan's constitution[10] explicitly

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9   Constitutional Laws of Georgia "On the Status of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara" of 2004 and 2017; see Legislative Herald of Georgia, https://www.matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30442?publication=2 and https://www.matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/3811829?publication=0.

10   The Constitution of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. https://constcourt.gov.az/en/legislation/49.

refers to the Kars Treaty of 1921[11] as the legal ground for the autonomy's establishment (Garibli, 2024). Both regions play a significant role in their countries' economy and occupy strategically important positions. Nakhchivan is a transit territory which provides direct ground connection between Azerbaijan and Türkiye (Şimşek, 2022); a large part of Georgia's maritime and ground communications goes through Adjara. Finally, regional elites arguably play a significant role in the politics and economy of their countries.

6.4. Central Asia

The Republic of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan and the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region (Gorno-Badakhshan) in Tajikistan are ethnically and culturally distinct from the rest of their countries (Moisé & Polese, 2021). Karakalpaks make up about 1/3 of Karakalpakstan's population along with comparable shares of Uzbeks and Kazakhs (Hanks, 2000; Savin, 2021). The exact data about Gorno-Badakhshan's population is not available, but most residents belong to Pamiri peoples, different from Tajiks in terms of language and confession, as well as to the Kyrgyz minority (Bliss, 2006, pp. 90–242).

Both cases demonstrate a gap between the regions' formal status and actual position vis-à-vis the central authorities, although both autonomies are constitutionally and legally entrenched. Uzbekistan's constitution acknowledges the Republic of Karakalpakstan as a "sovereign" statehood with the right to secession.[12] In addition to national constitutional guarantees, Karakalpakstan is protected by the treaty with Uzbekistan regarding the delimitation of competencies. Gorno-Badakhshan is a province with administrative autonomy, and its status is guaranteed both by the national constitution and a separate constitutional law.[13]

The ethnic and cultural distinctness of both autonomous regions is blurred in constitutions and legislation. The Karakalpak language has an official status in Karakalpakstan, but its legal guarantees are vague, and the language sees only limited use in officialdom, within the school system, and in several specialized periodicals (Savin, 2021; Schlyter, 2005). The 2007 Tajikistani constitutional law on Gorno-Badakhshan refers to the region's distinctness as "cultural and linguistic values". Currently, national legislation does not recognize the Pamiri languages, although the previous constitutional law[14] listed some of them.

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11   Between Kemalist Türkiye, the three Sovietized South Caucasian states, and Russia.

12   The Constitution of Uzbekistan. https://constitution.uz/en/clause/index; the Constitution of Karakalpakstan in Karakalpak, Russian, and Uzbek is available at: https://joqargikenes.uz/ru/qar-res-konstituciyasi.

13   The Constitutional Law "On the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region" No. 303 of July 30, 2007 (with further amendments). Available at: The Ministry of Justice of Tajikistan, http://www.portali-huquqi.tj/publicadliya/view_qonunhoview.php?showdetail=&asosi_id=8111 (in Russian).

14   The Constitutional Law "On the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region" No. 108 of November 4, 1995. Available at: The Ministry of Justice of Tajikistan, http://www.portali-huquqi.tj/publicadliya/view_qonunhoview.php?showdetail=&asosi_id=14 (in Russian).

In terms of politics and government, both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are highly centralized, and in their competencies neither autonomous entity differs substantively from other, purely administrative territorial units (Kłyszcz, 2023; Schlyter, 2005). Though both regions contributed to turbulent national politics (and in Gorno-Badakhshan's case even in the Tajik civil war) in the early 1990s, for about 30 years the two autonomies have been strongly dependent on the central authorities regarding resource supply and administration (Bliss, 2006: 271–343) and thus have not demonstrated substantive separatist inclinations. The capabilities of the central governments nevertheless vary. The Tajikistani government is unable to secure effective control over the Badakhshan highlands and considers the region a stronghold of political opposition and even terrorism. The central authorities carry out police operations and detentions of people whom they find suspicious (Pannier, 2018); a side back effect is an almost complete blockade of information about Gorno-Badakhshan inside and outside the country.

The obvious question of why two authoritarian regimes with overcentralized systems of government still tolerate autonomies lacks a convincing answer. One may assume, first, that national governments were cautious about potential protests and ethnic conflicts. The 2022 events in Karakalpakstan make this explanation plausible. The draft of the new national constitution initiated by the Uzbekistani president envisaged the lifting of Karakalpakstan's 'sovereign' status and the right to secession but not of the autonomy as such (Uzbekistan's, 2022). Some Karakalpaks responded with protests that led to violent clashes with the police and human casualties (Horak & Lepic, 2025; Lillis, 2022). Afterwards, the controversial draft provisions were revoked. However, it is not clear why Uzbekistani authorities did not attempt to revise the region's status much earlier, given that the country's repressive machinery was effective, the Karakalpaks are in a minority position within their 'own' republic, and the region is totally dependent on the central government due to poor economic performance and environmental troubles (Hanks, 2000; Savin, 2021). Badakhshan has even less human potential for resistance as an economically weak highland that is dependent on the center.

7. Discussion

Despite their social, political and demographic differences, the listed cases have something in common:

(1) Almost all of them are inherited from the Soviet past; the only exception is Gagauzia, which was established later but according to a similar template. This common historical background has meant that, over decades, autonomy has served as a form that signified, but did not clearly articulate, some regional and ethnic distinctness

and did not provide for local political mobilization and regional decision-making powers.

(2) During the USSR's demise and for a few years afterwards, all these autonomous entities, as represented by their elites and mobilized social movements, played a proactive role in national politics and made claims aimed at a higher political status or even independence from their 'mother' countries. Noteworthy is the use of eclectic Soviet discursive formulae about the territorialization of ethnicity, group entitlements, and individual equality. In some cases, the claims and sometimes related institutional arrangements included a clear articulation of the autonomous territories' ethnic and linguistic distinctness, the promotion of local languages, and some initiatives aimed at the precedence of autochthonous ethnicities.

(3) Regional claim-making and proactive politics ended after a brief period. From the early 2000s the Russian regions agreed to the overall recentralization. From its very outset Gagauzia in Moldova has repeatedly voiced its disagreement with the central government's policies but has been reluctant or unable to resist politically or judicially. A part of the Crimean general public and elites took action amounting to separatism and aimed at confederative relations with Ukraine in 1992–1995, but afterwards the region agreed with a limited administrative autonomy. Nakhchivan has not made any claims since Azerbaijan's independence. The poor political control of the Georgian government over Ajara allowed the local leadership to benefit from transit trade, but the central authorities took over and faced no significant resistance in 2004.

(4) The assertion of autonomous regions' cultural or ethnic distinctness is either absent (as in South Caucasus) or manifests itself in minimalist and ambiguous forms. The Russian republics basically discarded ethno-nationalist agendas, including patronage towards 'titular' ethnicities, by the mid-1990s. Gagauzia is formally an ethnicity-based entity, but it falls short of promoting the Gagauz language and culture. Crimea refrained from articulating its ethnic profile. The Central Asian autonomies basically silence these issues.

The first and barely new observation is that analyzing the listed cases at face value, as a self-organization of collective entities, moreover as bearers of a distinct cultural or regional identity, would be misleading. Collective subjectivity is produced and reproduced as part of common sense, social imaginaries, metanarratives, and the practices of claim-making or silencing. At best, one can speak of a type of institutional pockets (such as symbolic settings as well as cultural or educational organizations) which are designed to demonstrate regional or ethnic specificity.

The second and more important conclusion is that autonomous entities – whether they existed in authoritarian or pluralist environments – are not areas of political contentions, or in a broader sense, motions to construct, articulate, or suppress collective interests or identities bound up with territorial autonomies. Of course, there have been developments that do not fit in this general scheme, such as protest voting in Gagauzia in 2014 or spontaneous rallies against changes in the formal status of Karakalpakstan in 2022. However, all the cases demonstrate similar evolutions: public contestations and attempts to articulate and mobilize collective identities and aspirations took place during the Soviet Union's collapse and the subsequent period of uncertainty; afterwards, the overall situation came to some equilibrium. The most striking development is probably the fading away of the ideas and claims aimed at the precedence of 'rooted' ethnicities shortly after the Soviet collapse.

One may argue that contentious politics and the imagery of collective interests and collective action is neither the only analytical perspective for approaching territorial autonomy arrangements nor an indispensable one. In certain cases, one can approach territorial autonomy arrangements from the perspective of depoliticization, or as frameworks to avoid contentions, particularly collisions around collective 'selves' and their imaginary interests. Indeed, territorial autonomy is routinely addressed in the literature as a compromise, preventing both partition of states and the suppression of minorities. One can imagine another sort of compromise based on the evasion of collisions on controversial issues rather than the adjustment of conflicting collective interests. The metaphor of a specific contract – a tacit deal based on an equilibrium of mutual expectations. The potentially conflicting parties recognize the bottom-line aspirations of the potential opponents and cease reiterating these issues further. Another metaphoric explanation is that autonomy, in certain circumstances, can be a banner of ceasefire and *status quo*, or the choice of non-contentious politics. Moreover, empirical data shows that TA might carry symbolic value in itself and that symbolic recognition can be decoupled from substantive arrangements.

Generally, the framework of governmentality neatly applies here. Autonomy arrangements can endure since they are compatible with the rationality of the rulers and the ruled as part of common sense and acceptable routines and they retain positive expectations among the population. Of course, the achieved equilibrium does not imply that all stakeholders are fully satisfied with the result. Notably, the political mainstream in post-Soviet countries recurrently demonstrated its attitude towards autonomy, which was skeptical at best; in turn, politicians and scholars speaking on behalf of autonomous entities tend to complain about their limited entitlements. Presumably, the major cause of acceptance is negative equilibrium: autonomy arrangements are part of a 'normal' and predictable social landscape, whereas few are ready to take the risk of initiating changes that may lead to the worse.

In the given cases, the functioning of this model is partly predetermined by post-Soviet conditions. First, Soviet rule created certain templates for organizing and representing ethnic diversity; post-Soviet metanarratives and organizational settings resemble Soviet ones, and this similarity requires further investigation. Second, post-Soviet societies are highly atomized, and there is a broad tendency for Eurasian populaces to prefer individual adaptation to collective action. These phenomena and their reasons need further analysis, since we have, thus far, only narrowly focused case studies (Greene, 2018; Kapustin, 2016).

Of course, the proposed explanatory framework leaves many questions behind. Among the pressing issues are the reasons why and how political actors opt for evading contentions around autonomy arrangements instead of investing in public mobilization. At the top of the list are also the differences between authoritarian and pluralist frameworks. One can assume that a weak or absent regional political mobilization in countries with pluralist regimes, such as Moldova and Ukraine, might be explained through "pluralism by default" – a condition when no leading political group at a certain level is able and willing to impose its vision of nation-building upon the society (Way, 2003). One can add that in this environment leading political forces may be led by the "multiculturalism of fear" (Levy, 2000), or reluctance to unleash political mobilization that they cannot further control. In any case, the abstention from engagement in politics and the preference of individual adaptation to collective action does not imply any coordination or masterplan.

8. Conclusion

The overview of territorial autonomous arrangements in the post-Soviet space brings about the following explanatory outline. The central government recognizes the very existence of an autonomous entity and its distinctness; people affiliated with the autonomous region refrain from reasserting their special claims on behalf of distinct cultural or ethnic groups. The very minimalist recognition of the autonomous region's existence and special status suffices as a sign of *status quo* and of the framework societal contract. Eclectic and ambiguous narratives (including legal discourse) along with mutual silencing of controversies are the tools that contribute to the equilibrium's endurance. The stakeholders then turn to 'regular' politics or authoritarian governance through backdoor informal bargaining. The framework secures "functionality" (McEvoy & Aboultaif, 2022) or provide for the government's sufficient performance as well as for the adaptability of the populace. Elites can somehow negotiate and secure access to power and economic assets; both elites and the citizenry demonstrate "adoptability" (ibid.) and loyalty since

they feel no rejection of the established institutional and symbolic order[15] and no incentives to engage in protest mobilization.

This general perspective fits in the conceptual framework of depoliticization and post-politics: a condition in which political disagreements and debates about the society's life are replaced by a general consent about the basics and a technocratic rule. In the given cases, the overall consent is partly secured by conceptual and discursive eclecticism which satisfies all actors involved. The Northern Eurasian case shows that such a model can be durable and, in some way, legitimate. Modern scholarship tends to understand legitimacy broadly as the correspondence between the expectations of the ruled with the behavior of the rulers (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2018); besides, the boundary between legitimacy and other forms of acceptance, such as toleration and acquiescence, are blurry if conceivable at all (Pakulski, 1986; Schoon, 2022).

This research essay does not offer a fully-fledged model but rather a hypothesis and an outline of a promising research avenue. One may suppose that TA can and shall be examined from the perspective of depoliticization and consent-based governance. Assumingly, social atomization and disengagement from politics, which seem to be global trends, may favor the depoliticization of autonomy arrangements as well. Of course, these considerations raise questions about their relevance beyond the Northern Eurasian context, and they do not negate the need to employ the perspective of contentious politics. Doubtless the proposed approach leaves numerous questions about how to instrumentalize it in individual cases and the very limits of its applicability in general.

From a normative angle, autonomy arrangements in which symbolic components overweigh substantive ones while the latter evolve into simulations should not be regarded as exceptions or deviations but rather as variants of normality. Moreover, one may suppose that identity post-politics may be regarded as a remedy for identity-based mobilization and conflicts. Of course, the conditions must be specified in concrete contexts; the post-Soviet developments show that it is feasible in principle.

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15 Recent empirical evidence shows that a violation of the established order, rather than the order itself, can spark protests (Horak & Lepic, 2025).

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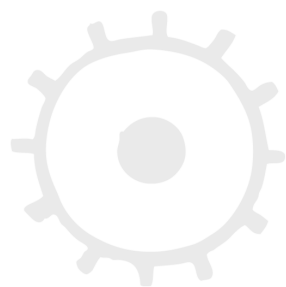
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