

The resurgence of national identities

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The resurgence of national identities

The organisation of the USSR continued without any structural changes from 1956 to 1990. The Soviet federal State comprised 15 federal entities, the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs). As sovereign republics, they kept their own constitution and were divided into regions (or *oblasts*), except for Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Moldavia which had a unitary structure. Some federal republics (Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) contained Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) that enjoyed a degree of self-government. Furthermore, some territories in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) itself and the SSRs of Tajikistan, Georgia and Azerbaijan were given the status of autonomous regions.

As long as the Soviet Communist regime was able to contain and control the civic and social demands of the peoples of the various SSRs, no one questioned the underlying need for the Union. The policy of the Party leadership naturally sought to maintain a cohesive whole, whereas each national group tried to obtain the most advantages. To achieve its aims, the Party leadership used the various resources at its disposal, granting loans and allocating varying degrees of cultural autonomy. At the same time it acted to repress 'exaggerated nationalism' if the central power loosened its grip. The national factor consequently encouraged decentralisation of power. However the Kremlin was careful to ensure that the limits set by the central power were not exceeded.

Until the mid-1980s Moscow repressed any movements deemed to be 'exaggerated nationalism', which sometimes degenerated into sporadic uprisings and civil war. When the process of democratic reform set in motion by Gorbachev undermined the central Soviet power base and its outposts in the SSRs, nationalist movements cited Articles 70 and 72 of the 1977 Constitution to back their demands for greater autonomy or even independence.

In the Baltic countries, which had been fought over for centuries by the Slavs, Germans and Swedes, and had been independent from 1920 to 1939, revolts occurred throughout the Communist era. Inspired by the hopes of independence voiced by the Eastern Bloc countries and encouraged by the establishment of a semi-democratic government in Poland, demonstrations in favour of a return to independence were held simultaneously in the three Baltic countries between 1988 and 1989. Particularly violent demands also surfaced in the Transcaucasian republics, which recalled their past history of independence, sometimes spanning several centuries. When the national popular fronts first threatened to invoke Article 70 of the Constitution, they were really asking Moscow for an end to the dominance of the central powers and the RSFSR over the other SSRs.

Confronted with a difficult political and economic situation, Gorbachev endorsed the constitutional reform of 1 December 1988, which allowed multiple candidates for the next elections. The new Legislative Assembly, elected on 26 March 1989, consequently sought to restore the legitimacy of the central power and consolidate the Union. Two thirds of the Congress of People's Deputies were now elected by universal suffrage, with a secret ballot and several candidates. But the first free general election was marked by defeat for candidates sympathetic to Gorbachev and the election of radical and nationalist reformers. The arrival in the Supreme Soviet of representatives of national popular fronts, such as the *Sajudis* from Lithuania, revealed the scale of the disaster facing Gorbachev. The nationalists gained a formidable platform from which to promote their ideas of independence and national liberation. By allowing national movements to express themselves freely, the democratisation

of the regime fuelled tension, which in turn caused unrest and even civil war between peoples nursing deep-rooted enmity, such as the Orthodox Armenians and the Muslim Azeris.

To thwart nationalist forces and secure the survival of the USSR in one way or another, Gorbachev tried to rally the republics around a new proposed Union. The new Union would serve as a basis for the renewal of Soviet federalism as part of an increasingly democratic USSR. The new Treaty was well received in the Central Asian republics, which above all wanted the economic support of the RSFSR and access to the markets of the USSR. In March 1991 Gorbachev called a referendum on the future of the Soviet Union in nine republics. The electorate voted in favour of the New Union Treaty. Armenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia and Moldova, governed by their respective national popular fronts, did not take part in the referendum. In April 1991, at the summit of Novo-Ogaryovo, Gorbachev and the leaders of the nine republics decided to speed up the establishment of the New Union Treaty. Gorbachev thought that if an initial group of SSRs signed the new Treaty it would encourage the other republics to follow suit.