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Nationalising Regimes and Power

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After the two decades of post-independence post-Soviet states have produced varying degrees of nationalisation policies. These policies were studied under the term of *nationalising states* (Brubaker 1996, 2011). The nationalising post-socialist and post-authoritarian states were defined by policies of remedial action towards the core ethnicity that was believed to have suffered in the previous (Soviet) regime and underwent series of discriminations to the core of the national ideals and feelings (e.g., language, national culture and traditions, history, national symbols, historic figures and heroes, national and religious rituals and so on) and that those discriminations had to be reverted and changed for better policies of nation-building in the independent era (*idem*). The countries with significant Russian-speaking minority (currently 23,7 per cent in Kazakhstan, 26,9 per cent in Latvia and 17,3 per cent in Ukraine) became prime focus of scholarly attention and analysis (Laitin 1998; Brubaker 1996, 2011; Kuzio 2001; Kolsto 1999; Dave 2007; Schatz 2009; Bessinger 2002; Wilson 2002).

Since this definitive moment the study of post-socialist and post-Soviet nationalising states has focused on state policies of nation-building (language laws, educational reforms, citizenship and naturalisation for minorities), interactions between nationalising states, national minorities and their kin states (so-called triadic nexus proposed by Brubaker) and to a lesser extent the practices of nationalising states and their key actors. The fact that elites – political, economic and cultural, are at the core of processes defining nationalising policies and states has been taken for granted by the students and scholars of nationalism (Brubaker himself admits that more attention has to be paid to the actors of nation-building). Some of the recent studies on post-Soviet nationalisms and nationalising states have focused on both practices and elites (Adams 2010; Cummings 2007; Dave 2007; Molchanov 2000; Steen 2007; Lane 2011) whereas lesser attention is paid to the precise networks and contingent practices of actors and field players of the nationalising elites. Power elites defined by Wright Mills as “men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women,” they who are “in positions to make decisions having major consequences” (1956, p. 3) are in control and in power to define and shape discourses (programs, projects, state and leadership visions, the course of political development and power competition) and practices (policies, law making, discourse and ideology creation and shaping) of what defines nationalising states.

For the purposes of more detailed and nuanced analysis of current processes I propose a term of *nationalising regimes* to define and analyse the post-socialist elite regimes. Nationalising

regime, I contend, is the ideational and decision-making framework of nation-building that guides and controls the dominant discourses about the nation. Nationalising rhetoric is used by such regime to define elite competition and contestation in the political field (Latvia), address crucial issues during the crises (Kazakhstan) and divide powers during important political contestations and elite competitions (e.g., Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan) or to stabilise more authoritarian regimes and elites.

It is not surprising that national question and national rhetoric became a dividing line for political and cultural elites as well as for defining the electorate and political parties' agenda. This is also an essential aspect of nationalising regimes – with so much fixation on re-discovering or reviving, restoring the justice in nation-building and with so much focus on the national character of internal and ideological politics, it is inevitably affecting almost entire political field. But how do practices and policies of nationalising regimes affect the populations of the respective countries where these regimes operate? In my work I focused on the variety of post-Soviet cases and studies of states with dividing ethno-linguistic and socio-ethnic contexts.

Based on the data collected during the 2012-2015 fieldworks in Kazakhstan, Latvia and Ukraine I argued that the fixation of the elitist paradigm and elitist regimes on exclusive nation-building policies in Latvia have narrowed down the political agenda and political competition outside the nationalist rhetoric. Where the nationalising field is the prime field of operation for the political elites, it is far from societal demands and needs for economic gain on the ground. This has already led to the growing concerns over the vast migration of both non-Latvians and ethnic Latvians from the country. The controlled ambiguity of nationalising regime in Kazakhstan has resulted in radicalisation of Kazakh-speaking electorate on the one hand, and protest to radicalisation from the cosmopolitan Kazakhstanis, on the other hand. But this process of ambiguity has also resulted in the general depolitisation of the population. With the national question being unresolved on the social level in any of these cases it is important to follow the response sociologically.

The study of post-Soviet or post-communist nationalisms and nation-building projects is specifically problematic due to two persistent challenges. On the one hand, scholars of nationalism have a very limited conceptual tool kit for analysing and researching the agency behind the nation-building and nationalisation. On the other hand, although the field of nationalism studies has been prevailed by the discursive and descriptive explanations of the nation-building policies, the conceptualisation of such processes was not yet framed precisely.

The term nationalising states coined by American sociologist Rogers Brubaker was supposed to bring more clarity to the domineering nationalising nationalisms of post-communist space. Defined by the dual legacy of Soviet codification and empowerment of titular ethnicity in a given republic and by the growing Russification that endangered the indigenous identity and language, the nationalising state phenomenon aimed at to solve the puzzle of the newly independent states' desire to create more exclusive nation-building policies and frameworks. In his latest revision of the concept Brubaker has focused on four dimensions of "ethnopolitical demography, language repertoires and practices, the polity and the economy" (Brubaker 2011, p. 1788) to explain variations of four post-Soviet nationalising states of Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The logic of scholars who follow the very ambiguous path of the nationalising state framework consists of blurring the agency – the *state* that

although possesses the agent of nationalisation (political and cultural elites), these actors are rarely analysed in depth, the structure – ethnic minorities and their kin state. The goal of the nationalising state is a consistent and expanding nationalisation of all spheres of socio-political life in that given state – the discourse of titular ethnic group ought to occupy majority of state institutions from education to government and local municipalities by providing the space for the dominant titular language and allowing for the titular ethnicity to occupy the state institutions based on the nationalising framework of *state* building.

Perhaps it is the very ambiguous nature of the *state* in the nationalising state paradigm that makes it so difficult for the in-depth analysis of any political developments of nation-building practically anywhere – in post-communist space or in any other new *state-formations*. For Brubaker nationalising states is neither a theory nor is intended to be a theory. His defence of the term in its right of the term is also very ambiguous where the term nationalising state

suggests, on the one hand, that the state (narrowly understood as distinct from society) is *doing* the nationalizing and, on the other hand, that the state (broadly understood as the “country” as a whole) is *undergoing* nationalization. The state is understood in the former case as the *agent* of a nationalizing *project*, and in the latter as the *subject* of a nationalizing *process*. (...) The term ‘nationalizing state’ is at best a shorthand device, pointing to an assemblage – and not necessary a coherent one – of discourses, policies, practices and processes, not a single “thing” (*ibid.*, p. 1808).

This ambiguous definition of the state in the nationalising state that makes the term is both inadequate and incapable of grasping the *processes* (something Brubaker aims at analysing) of nation-building. If to define the state in Weberian terms where the state must be a sovereign entity ruling over the stable territory and recognised by other states, then nationalising states *per se* may exist in places where the state has been failing since the independence. Stateless nations, e.g., Catalonia, Basque Country, also form discourses, policies (to various extend of power bargaining within the federal state), and most of all practices of nationhood translated in cultural revivals, inventions of traditions and development of national indigenous languages (see Heathershaw 2010; Laruelle 2012). The ruling elites of these stateless (in Brubaker’s loose norms of “a country” or something “not a society”) nations employ these practices and discourses of nationalising nationalisms also in the contexts of prevailing minorities where language practices may differ drastically just like between Estonian and Russian. Within the span of less than thirty years the proficiency in Catalan and Basque (Euskera) languages became a prerequisite for public sphere careers in these respective autonomies.

Although the concept of nationalising state presents an interesting venue for the analysis of nationalising policies, processes and discourses, it however leaves too much ambiguous space for everything else to fit into the picture. But most importantly this term lacks the agency. Who constructs nationhood discourses? Who controls the boundaries of the nationalising entity? Who and how responds to it? Who contributes largely to the construction of the official discourses of nation-building? Who shapes these discourses under specific circumstances, e.g., during revolutions, uprising and moments of uncertainty – provided by the fierce elite competition? Who agrees on the consensus of specific mode of political (state or nation) building? These are the questions that need to be addressed and closely analysed in order to understand why specific socio-political entities (and not always states) employ more nationalistic agenda than others.

To Brubaker at the core of the national groupness are the protagonists of such movements and politics

and their organizational components such as particular ministries, offices, law enforcement agencies, and armed forces units; they include terrorist groups, paramilitary organizations, armed bands, and loosely structured gangs; and they include political parties, ethnic associations, social movement organizations, churches, newspapers, radio and television stations, and so on” (Brubaker 2004, p. 15).

But to take the general picture away for a minute, who or what is it that frames the context of nationhood in such a way that majority of players of the field have a specific vocabulary and tools for navigating in the field?

In order to locate the agents and mechanisms that define, shape and change the discourses and practices of nationhood I employ the term of nationalising regimes. Nationalising regime is a political framework of decision-making on the matters of nation-building that is governed by specific elitist interests of the elite groups who comprise such nationalising regime. Derived from comparative politics where regimes are referred to “the formal and informal structure and nature of political power in the country, including the method of determining office holders and the relations between the office holders and the society at large” (Badie 2011), the concept of nationalising regimes is introduced here to expose and analyse nation-building through the internal networks and interests of those who govern such policies – elites. Why elites matter and how does one define elites in post-Soviet context? Inarguably elites – a “tiny but powerful minorities” that are “made up of autonomous social and political actors who are interested primarily in maintaining and enhancing their power, so that their power struggles are not reducible to classes or other collectivities” (Highley & Pakulski, 2000, p. 229) – play a crucial and dominant role in major decision-making on the political and economic levels in post-Soviet states like in many other modern states. The elite paradigm that puts elite competition to the centre of the processes that shape and define “political and to some extent wider social orders, format political and many social divisions and enflame or contain major conflicts” (*idem*) is the most viable paradigm for analysis of any political, social and economic transformations in modern societies, including those of nation-building. Elites are agents of governmentality in the specific moment of their power accession.

However, another question prevails, how come different nation-building processes and projects remain uncontested and almost unchanged (in the core, e.g., defining the citizenry) in democratic settings where elites are elected and re-elected on the basis of fair and open elections and in principle no single elite member can be re-elected more than twice or three times to the office? In the case of the democratic post-Soviet state of Latvia where post-independent parliaments saw five re-elections and where only one party has remained in the parliament and in the political field since the early 1990s (being the far right pro-Latvian movement), the telos of the nationhood practices and discourses has remained almost unchanged. What defines the independent Latvian statehood and nationhood is the totality of ethnonationalist discourse of Latvian cultural, political, linguistic and traditional domination that was partially provided by 1) strict *jus sanguinis* citizenship policies restricting citizenship and naturalisation to post-1941 “Soviet migrants” (mostly Russian speakers); 2) by gradual Latvianisation of the political cadres and vast domination of Latvians in state institutions post-1990; 3) by achieving solid elite consensus over the totality of Latvian politico-nationalist ideology post-1990. I define this nationalising regime as *persisting* for even with embedded discontent and discourse of injustice experienced by the forcibly depoliticized non-Latvian non-citizen minority and with the growing popularity of so-called pro-Russian parties, the dominant discourse of the nationalising regime in Latvia remained uncontested and even more persistent towards further Latvianisation.

In another instance, Ukrainian nationalising regime deploys varying practices and contested almost incompatible discourses of nation-building dependent on elites in the office or their agenda. The discourses of ambiguity remained under President Kuchma (after very short lived presidency of Kravchuk) and develop to the ethnonationalist extend of the discourse victimhood of Holodomor (mass famine of 1932-1933) under President Yushchenko and silencing down both Holodomor and Ukrainization discourses under President Yanukovich. The post-Maidan discourse formation requires further analysis.

In Kazakhstan where the regime bases its legitimacy on the set of ambiguous discourses about nation-building – both ethno-nationalist and encompassing the minority as the powerful actor in the nation-building discourse, the logics of nationalising regime are closely intertwined with the nature of presidential regime. Those are highly volatile ambiguous projects and discourses that leave space for bargaining and power sharing on the symbolic level. The ambiguity of nationalising regime in Kazakhstan is of a constructed, intentional rather than of unplanned and unexpected nature.

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