



UDK: 327.5

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REGIONALISM AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

Аннотация

This article explores the evolution and processes of regionalism in Central Asia, focusing on the formation and consolidation of regional identities within their unique historical, socio-political, and cultural contexts. Drawing on diverse theoretical approaches, the article examines the legacy of Soviet-era regional policies and their impact on post-independence regional identity formation. It highlights how regionalism in Central Asia has oscillated between ethnic and civic conceptions, reflecting historical legacies and the challenges of globalization. The analysis emphasizes the need for an inclusive vision that accommodates ethnic and cultural diversity while fostering pluralist democracy and regional cooperation. The research underscores the interplay of historical narratives, cultural revival, and political transformations in shaping regional identities and suggests pathways for sustainable social cohesion and stability.

Key words: Regionalism, Central Asia, Regional Identity, Post-Soviet Transformation, Ethno-Regionalism, Civic Regionalism, Cultural Pluralism, Soviet Legacy, Regional Cooperation, Social Cohesion.

РЕГИОНАЛИЗМ И ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

Аннотация

В данной статье исследуются эволюция и процессы регионализма в Центральной Азии с акцентом на формирование и консолидацию региональных идентичностей в их уникальных исторических, социально-политических и культурных контекстах. Опираясь на различные теоретические подходы, статья рассматривает наследие региональной политики советского периода и ее влияние на формирование региональной идентичности в период после обретения независимости. В ней подчеркивается, как регионализм в Центральной Азии колебался между этнической и гражданской концепциями, отражая историческое наследие и вызовы глобализации. Анализ подчеркивает необходимость инклюзивного видения, учитывающего этническое и культурное разнообразие и способствующего развитию плюралистической демократии и регионального сотрудничества. Исследование подчеркивает взаимодействие исторических нарративов, культурного возрождения и политических трансформаций в формировании региональной идентичности и предлагает пути для обеспечения устойчивой социальной сплоченности и стабильности.

Ключевые слова: Регионализм, Центральная Азия, региональная идентичность, постсоветские трансформации, этнорегионализм, гражданский регионализм, культурный плюрализм, советское наследие, региональное сотрудничество, социальная сплоченность.

MARKAZIY OSIYODA REGIONALIZM VA IDENTIFIKATSIYANING SHAKLLANISHI

Аннотация

Ushbu maqola mintaqaviy o'ziga xosliklarning tarixiy, ijtimoiy-siyosiy va madaniy sharoitlarida shakllanishi va mustahkamlanishiga e'tibor qaratgan holda Markaziy Osiyodagi mintaqaviylik evolyutsiyasi va jarayonlarini ko'rib chiqadi. Maqolada turli nazariy yondashuvlarga asoslanib, sovet davridagi mintaqaviy siyosat merosi va uning mustaqillikdan keyingi davrda mintaqaviy o'ziga xoslikni shakllantirishga ta'siri ko'rib chiqiladi. Maqolada Markaziy Osiyoda mintaqaviylik tarixiy meros va globallashuv muammolarini aks ettiruvchi etnik va fuqarolik tushunchalari o'rtasida qanday tebranib qolgani yoritilgan. Tahlil etnik va madaniy xilma-xillikni hisobga oladigan hamda pluralistik demokratiya va mintaqaviy hamkorlikni rag'batlantiradigan inklyuziv qarashlar zarurligini ta'kidlaydi. Tadqiqot mintaqaviy o'ziga xoslikni shakllantirishda tarixiy hikoyalar, madaniy tiklanishlar va siyosiy o'zgarishlarning o'zaro ta'sirini yoritib beradi hamda barqaror ijtimoiy hamjihatlik va barqarorlikni ta'minlash yo'llarini taklif qiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: Regionalizm, Markaziy Osiyo, mintaqaviy o'ziga xoslik, postsovet o'zgarishlari, etnoregionalizm, fuqarolik mintaqaviyligi, madaniy plyuralizm, sovet merosi, mintaqaviy hamkorlik, ijtimoiy birlik.

Introduction. There is a vast body of literature on the concepts and discussions surrounding regionalism and region hood, ethnic/regional identities, ethno-politics, and issues related to regionalism worldwide. Scholars who analyze and write about regions and regionalism are often categorized based on their approaches, such as 'primordialist,' 'modernist,' 'ethno-symbolist,' 'constructivist,' and others. Although modern regions have primordial roots in history, their current forms and content differ significantly from their earlier prototypes. Each region has its own historically constructed and socio-politically institutionalized mental image of regionality and regional identity. Typically, this unique imagination[1] in a country is further developed through an official regional development or identity policy tailored to that region.

This article highlights the process of regionalism in Central Asia and examines issues related to regional identity in the context of the region's historical background. It also explores

whether the regional identity model in the region is primarily ethnic-based, civic-based, or a synthesis of both.

Literature review. Thinking in historical terms is essential for understanding the psychological dimensions and the development of an enduring regional identity that spans across historical periods. Even relatively young regions have a historical background. History demonstrates the existence of ethno-regional entities that have persisted over extended periods, characterized by deeply rooted essence. If the "we" of the present and future aligns with the "we" of the past, then a constant identity emerges across time. The "mankurt" concept in Chyngyz Aitmatov's novel, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, underscores the strong relationship between identity and memory. In this novel the captive man, Djolaman, forgets everything—his past, culture, mother, and even his name. Regional history and its narratives act as the collective memory of a region. A region cannot construct or sustain its identity without a historical narrative. Every region possesses its symbols and heroes, and understanding regional

history and these figures helps individuals understand themselves. Their character reflects the broader regional character, and the way they are portrayed in history shapes how the members of a region perceive themselves[2].

Central Asian regions have coexisted and interacted intensively throughout their rich history. At times, they united to resist external forces. Two prominent entities in the region, the Turks and Mongols, encompassed a wide variety of ethnic and tribal affiliations. The term "Turk" referred to various kin groups that spoke closely related languages, such as Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Kipchak, Uzbek, Turkmen, and others. These horse-breeding, highly mobile nomads of Eurasia and Inner Asia collectively established numerous khanates and empires. Environmental conditions or conflicts often drove significant migrations, transformations, and political regroupings[3].

Research Methodology. The limited administrative and cultural autonomy granted to the Central Asian regions during the 1920s was abolished during Stalin's era of intensified political centralization and mass terror. Stalinist officials established uniform administrative institutions across all republics, promoting widespread cultural uniformity[4]. Stalin's "Great Purge" of the 1930s led to millions of arrests, including social leaders and intellectuals in Central Asia[5]. Russians were regarded as the "elder brother," receiving a privileged status over other non-Russian ethnicities[6]. However, during the Brezhnev period, native cadres gained more privileges, marking a shift from earlier Stalinist policies.

In theory, Communism aimed to eliminate all regional differences in the USSR to create a homogenized "Soviet region." This ideal was partially realized; however, "Homo-Sovieticus" often implied the assimilation of other regions into the dominant Russian culture. Members of the Soviet elite viewed the Russian language and culture as symbols of privilege. Consequently, many Central Asians faced challenges in maintaining fluency in their native languages[7]. However, Sovietization did not erase all elements of regional identity; rather, it transformed original identities into Soviet formations.

Analysis and results. Regional Identity in Post-Soviet Central Asia. Regional identity refers to those characteristics, symbols, and institutions that make a human group a region. In other words, it refers to historical-political, real or constructed, socio-cultural, and psychological markers that make a region distinguishable from others. Being a region requires having a regional identity. Without regional identity, there cannot be a boundary marker that separates a group as a region from other human communities, and so, one cannot mention about the presence of a distinct region (Nash, 1996). Smith (2001) defines regional identity as "the maintenance and continuous reproduction of the patterns of values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of regions, and the identifications of individuals with that particular heritage and those values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions." A region is a kind of large-scale community whose members feel a shared identity in terms of "understanding of who they are and of who other people are, and reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)"[8]. The state has a central role in the construction of regional identity. It is also the center of political competition over identity orientations. "Region" and "state" constitute two sides of the same coin.

The state represents the formal and institutional side, while the region is its human side[9]. A regional-state is, on one side, the product of regionalism and regional identity, and on the other, the main source and base of regional identity. Modern regional identity is shaped by modern regional-states. Regional-states have emerged in recent centuries as modern entities. Modern states, in diversified patterns and degrees, have engaged in region-building policies to consolidate regional identity either in civic or ethnic terms, ensuring the cohesive region feels strong loyalty toward the central government. Region-building policies, for the most part, have relied on official regional ideologies and/or programs. Official regional ideologies, especially in newly independent regional-states, often aim to preserve and emphasize the sovereignty of the state while integrating or assimilating subordinate groups[10].

The conceptual and introductory paragraphs above set up for an analysis of region building and regional identity in post-Soviet Central Asia. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991, a number of newly independent regional-states emerged in the post-Soviet space.

After gaining independence, there were some similarities in their region-building or state-building policies with those adopted in many other post-colonial states, as they also aim to remove some of the inherited colonial legacies. The titular regions of Central Asian republics have been in search of a new regional ideology since the fall of communism. They began to strongly emphasize their regional values, such as religion, traditional ceremonies, regional memorial days, and regional consciousness. Region-state building has relied on the revival of regional history, regional language, regional pride, and glory. The ruling elite adopted a new political-legal framework to this end, including the adoption of regional constitutions. Emphasis on the name, history, and historical homeland of the titular regions became manifest in these regional constitutions, which provided special protection for (titular) regional cultures. Soviet idols began to be replaced by regional heroes, such as Manas in Kyrgyzstan, Timur in Uzbekistan, Abai in Kazakhstan, and Mahdumguly in Turkmenistan. Sovietized names of cities, streets, schools, factories, and other landmarks began to be replaced with regional counterparts. As these countries established their own language, territory, and political systems, they can now be considered modern region-states. Russians living in the region were no longer the dominant group but a minority. They began to lose their former privileged status as key posts in administrative bodies and vital sectors were taken over by the natives (e.g., Kazakhization, Uzbekization in cadres) in place of Russians. While these countries attempted to distance themselves from certain legacies of the past, they also sought integration into the global community and reoriented toward nations outside the former Soviet space.

A central aspect of overcoming this legacy has been the revival of their authentic identity and history, alongside the creation of regional historiography that helps consolidate the new regional-state. The revival of regional history and language has reduced the influence of ideological history and the Russian language. History has been rewritten to remove the half-truths of ideological narratives. In the post-Soviet era, the revival of historical memory and regional historiography required the regaining of self-esteem and the removal of the inferiority complex imposed by Soviet teachings. Historians in this period were tasked by ruling elites with claiming the right of the titular regions to possess a separate history. Without such a regional history, and as passive subjects of history, they would not be able to determine their own future. Post-Soviet states are in the process of recovering their "lost" history from the pre-imperial era to assert that they possess "golden ages" and create a new historical narrative to legitimize their newly independent states. New regional heroes were being drawn from these golden eras as part of the revival of authentic history[11].

History textbooks have been rewritten to provide students with an ethno-region-based understanding of history, which is required for the region-building policy. These efforts involve a re-reading of pre-Soviet history and the revitalization of historical myths associated with the titular regions in each republic.

In the post-Soviet multiethnic context, a new regional identity policy had to be crafted, balancing the titular groups' demands for ethnic regionalism with the desire of other minorities to maintain the civic regionalism that had characterized Soviet identity[12].

Some post-colonial region-states in the Middle East or Africa, emerging from European colonial empires, were artificially created entirely by imperialist initiatives. Similarly, some Western scholars have viewed the Central Asian regions as invented constructs, fabricated during the Tsarist Russian and Soviet periods through the works of Russian/Soviet ethnologists. This modernist perspective fails to capture the full reality. Instead, an ethno-symbolist approach better defines the historical reality of Central Asian regions. Before the Russian occupation of Central Asia or the Soviet demarcation into Socialist republics, there were no region-states named Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, or Uzbekistan

with their current borders. However, traditional khanates established by native peoples existed in the region, along with Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek, Turkmen, and Tajik communities speaking their native languages.

Conclusion. Region building and regional identity formation or consolidation policies by the state elite in Central Asian republics have had contradictory directions since independence. The contradictory nature of the policies can be viewed as a quest for a sensitive balance as well. However, though a sensitive balance has been maintained, emphasis on ethnic identity of the titular groups has prevailed over an inclusionary civic identity since independence. The pre-eminence of an ethnic conception of the region over a civic conception at the state level has a foothold in Central Asian societies. At the societal level, the primordial notion of ethnicity and regional identity with references to kinship and tribal-local identities is not only manifest in daily speeches but also resides deep within the subconscious mind of the peoples. Consolidation of a civic inclusionary vision requires a radical mentality transformation and the development of prerequisites for a democratic culture, such as belief in civic equality and respect for diversity and for the rights of others in these societies.

Until recent decades, most states around the world tried to adhere to a conventional region-state model, in which the state

was regarded as the possession of a dominant regional group, which defined the state as the expression of its regional identity, and accordingly used the state to privilege its identity, history, culture, language, and so on. Instead, the multicultural and pluralist democratic model of a state has become a new trend among intellectual circles in the postmodern globe. In this model, the state must be seen as belonging equally to all citizens. A pluralist democratic state repudiates the assimilation or exclusion of non-dominant minority groups. Citizens should have equal access to state institutions without hiding their ethno-cultural identity.

An all-inclusive new vision referencing the region-wide human, historical, and geographical realities is essential for fostering pluralist democracy and sustainable stability. This approach should move away from narrow-minded, ethnocentric, sectarian, clannish, and exclusive conceptions of regionalism that emphasize differences rather than commonalities. Such an inclusive vision and concurrent policies relying on integrative dynamics, equal citizenship, a shared civic culture, cultural tolerance, meritocracy, and the impersonal rule of law would promote peaceful coexistence and social solidarity at the domestic level and foster friendly relations and regional cooperation at the international level.

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