



Research Article

International Journal of Kurdish Studies

11 (1), pp. 192-205

<http://www.ijoks.com>

Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Türkiye: Theoretical Perspectives on Russia's Republics, and the Kurdish Issue (1980–2004)

Deniz DİNÇ¹ 

Received: Feb 17, 2025

Accepted: Feb 28, 2025

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of ethnic division in Russia and Türkiye during the period from 1980 to 2004. Drawing on comparative insights derived from the legacies of Soviet and Kemalist nation-building, the study investigates how multinational inclusivity in Soviet Russia and the assimilationist, French-influenced model in Türkiye shaped minority mobilization and state responses. Focusing on cases such as Tatarstan, Chechnya, and the Kurdish movement, the analysis underscores the roles of state capacity, historical legacy, and emerging ideological discourses. The findings reveal that both the multinational and assimilationist approaches involve intrinsic tensions that create enduring challenges in managing minority nationalism. Despite these tensions, the concept of state capacity remains a crucial political notion in explaining the quelling of ethnic separatist demands. Although rising state capacity manifested in various dimensions in both Türkiye and Russia, it has greatly diminished the strength of ethnic separatism in each country. In this context, separatism in Türkiye gradually evolved toward demands for autonomy, whereas in Russia, ethnic republics, linked to Putin's centralizing policies, lost their asymmetric federal privileges and were integrated into the central authority. Moreover, the period between 1980 and 2004 was chosen not merely as a chronological interval but because it corresponds to a phase during which ethnic separatism experienced both a surge and a subsequent decline in both countries. After 2004, while Türkiye did not witness a linear decline in the spiral of separatism and violence, in Russia, ethnic separatism faded from the agenda following the Beslan massacre due to excessively centralizing and security-focused policies.

Keywords: Russia, Türkiye, Kurdish Issue, Ethnic Separatism, Ethnicity regimes, Comparative Politics

Recommended citation:

Dinç, D. (2025). Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Türkiye: Theoretical Perspectives on Russia's Republics, and the Kurdish Issue (1980–2004). *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, Volume 11 (1), 192-205,

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21600/ijoks.1641704>

¹ Assist. Prof. Dr., World Peace University, Nicosia, North Cyprus (TRNC), e-mail: denizyeniden@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7894-0439>

Rusya ve Türkiye'de Etnik Ayrılıkçılık: Rusya'nın Cumhuriyetleri ve Kürt Meselesi Üzerine Kuramsal Perspektifler (1980–2004)

Öz

Bu makale, 1980 ile 2004 yılları arasındaki dönemde Rusya ve Türkiye’de etnik ayrışmanın evrimini incelemektedir. Sovyet ve Kemalist ulus inşa miraslarından elde edilen karşılaştırmalı içgörülere dayanarak, çalışma; Sovyet Rusya’daki çok uluslu kapsayıcılık ile Türkiye’deki asimilasyonist, Fransız etkisindeki modelin azınlık mobilizasyonunu ve devlet tepkilerini nasıl şekillendirdiğini araştırmaktadır. Tataristan, Çeçenistan ve Kürt hareketi gibi vakalara odaklanarak, analiz; devlet kapasitesi, tarihsel miras ve gelişen ideolojik söylemlerin rolünü vurgulamaktadır. Bulgular, hem çok uluslu hem de asimilasyonist yaklaşımların, azınlık milliyetçiliğini yönetmede kalıcı zorluklar yaratan doğuştan gelen gerilimler içerdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Tüm bu gerilimlere rağmen devlet kapasitesi kavramı etnik ayrılıkçı taleplerin sönümlenmesinde açıklayıcı önemli bir politik kavramdır. Türkiye ve Rusya’da artan devlet kapasitesi çeşitli boyutlarda olsa da, iki ülkede de etnik ayrılıkçılığın gücünü muazzam derecede azaltmıştır. Bunla bağlantılı olarak Türkiye’deki ayrılıkçılık zamanla özerklik taleplerine doğru evrilmiştir. Rusya’da ise Putin’in merkezileştirici politikalarıyla bağlantılı şekilde etnik cumhuriyetler asimetrik federal ayrıcalıklarını kaybederek merkezi otoriteye eklenmişlerdir. Bu çalışmada, 1980 ve 2004 yılları arası sadece bir kronolojik dönem olarak seçilmemiştir. Bu dönem her iki ülkede de etnik ayrılıkçılığın yükseldiği ve düşüşe geçtiği bir döneme tekabül etmektedir. 2004 sonrasında Türkiye örneğinde ayrılıkçılık ve şiddet sarmalında doğrusal bir düşüş yaşanmasa da Rusya örneğinde Beslan katliamı sonrası etnik ayrılıkçılık aşırı merkeziyetçi ve güvenlik politikaları sebebiyle gündemden düşmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Türkiye, Kürt Sorunu, Etnik Ayrışma, Etnisite Rejimleri, Karşılaştırmalı Siyaset

Introduction

In his seminal work *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*, Dimitry Gorenburg argued that if the Soviet state had adopted an ethnicity model akin to Türkiye’s assimilationist approach, Russification might have proceeded with even greater success (Gorenburg 2003, p. 270). At the same time, he warned that the creation of ethnic institutions

does not necessarily neutralize minority nationalism (Gorenburg 2003, p. 25). While his insights hold in the Soviet context, where an institutionalized ethnicity regime spurred nationalist mobilizations from the Baltic states across other union republics during Perestroika, they reveal limitations when applied to Türkiye.

Indeed, the Turkish Republic's Kemalist state-led development strategy achieved tremendous progress in terms of civil rights and development; for example, its laicist principles granted women's suffrage well before many European countries did. However, in the realm of ethnicity, non-compromising policies were adopted that challenged its official state ideology and discourse. Kurdish-led mobilizations, which both reacted by defending traditional lifestyles (as exemplified by the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925) and proactively sought integration and democratic civic rights (as seen in left-wing Kurdish organizations during the 1960s and 1970s), were eventually suppressed by the Turkish state and military (Toktamis & David, 2018). The most recent Kurdish separatist mobilization in Türkiye, however, began with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the guerrilla warfare it initiated against the Turkish state. This process, viewed largely as a terrorism issue by mainstream Turkish state discourse, has continued until today and, following MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) leader Devlet Bahçeli's proposal for Öcalan's release, has evolved into a complex issue with international dimensions since late 2024. Moreover, legal Kurdish parties that did not adopt the PKK's methods and terrorism politics achieved to be represented in the parliament since early 1990s. The legal pro-Kurdish parties in Türkiye, though not organizationally affiliated with the PKK, they operated ideologically within its sphere of influence. Even though this was met with criticism from almost every political sector outside the Kurdish movement, it did not prevent the Kurdish movement from becoming one of the three or four main political forces shaping Turkish politics.

In the case of Russia, we observe that Soviet nation policies institutionalized ethnicity and developed a Soviet nation-building model based on multinationalism. This ethnicity regime or nation-building model continued in post-Soviet Russia without undergoing significant structural changes. Consequently, a system based on multinational and multicultural pluralism developed culturally. Minority rights were not denied in cultural terms; rather, they were institutionally developed and strengthened by the state. The Russian state largely lost its state capacity during the late 1980s and the 1990s, during which minority nationalist separatist movements gained

significant momentum. With the advent of Putin's rule and the subsequent strengthening of Russian state capacity, ethnic separatist and nationalist dynamics in Russia lost substantial power

This article sets out to compare and contrast the dynamics of ethnic separatism in Russia and Türkiye between 1980 and 2004, a period marked by pivotal political and social changes. Both Russia and Türkiye share legacies as multiethnic states emerging from vast empires, yet their nation-building projects and subsequent ethnicity regimes diverged significantly. Whereas the Soviet model institutionalized ethnicity through mechanisms such as territorial federalism and passport identification, the Turkish approach enforced assimilation with a strong emphasis on a unitary national identity. Through a comparative analysis of historical trajectories, state capacity, and discursive practices, this study addresses key research questions: What catalyzed the minority ethnic mobilizations in late Soviet Russia and modern Türkiye? And why did both the sovereignty demand in Russia and the separatist aspirations of Türkiye's Kurdish movement ultimately recede despite their initial potency?

This paper consists of six sections. In Section 2, the legacy of Soviet nationalism policies will be examined. After exploring the structural foundations of ethnic mobilization, Section 3 analyzes minority ethnic mobilization and ethnic separatism in Russia by focusing on the examples of Tatarstan and Chechnya. Section 4 addresses the historical legacy of Nationality policies in Türkiye. In Section 5, the development of the Kurdish issue and changes in discourse between 1980 and 2004 will be discussed. In the final section, Russian and Turkish cases will be compared, bringing the study to a conclusion

2. Legacy of Soviet Nationality Policies

The Soviet Union's approach to nationality was characterized by a unique blend of institutional pluralism and central control. Contrary to the "nation-killing" narratives that sometimes dominate discussions of Soviet policy, the early decades of the USSR witnessed robust state-led nation-building efforts in non-Russian republics. Under the Soviet system, the institutionalization of ethnicity was based on a top-down, hierarchical structure that included Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs), Autonomous Regions, Autonomous Provinces, and Autonomous Districts. At the apex of this hierarchy, the SSRs and ASSRs were endowed with a comprehensive range of national institutions, operating in a manner very similar to independent states. This stratified system

enabled the Soviet regime to manage its diverse ethnic populations by allocating different levels of autonomy and institutional authority: the SSRs and ASSRs enjoyed the highest degree of self-governance, whereas subordinate entities like Autonomous Regions, Provinces, and Districts held comparatively limited power. Between 1923 and 1939, the Soviet leadership actively promoted the development of national identities among its myriad ethnic groups; a policy that has been described as creating an “Affirmative Action Empire” (Martin, 2001). New national elites were cultivated in each republic with the intention that they would later channel the energy of minority mobilizations.

A key innovation was the formal inscription of ethnicity on Soviet passports, implemented from 1932 onwards. This bureaucratic device served both to acknowledge and fix ethnic identities, reinforcing a multinational state framework (Dinç, 2022, pp. 75–86). At the same time, policies under Lenin and Stalin evolved into a system that emphasized territorial institutionalism. As Slezkine (1994, pp. 414–452) famously observed, the Soviet Union resembled a “communal apartment” in which each non-Russian nation occupied a private room, while the public space remained dominated by Russian language and culture. Although Stalin’s later policies favored a more centralized union republic structure, thus intensifying assimilative pressures, the legacy of early Soviet nationality policies continued to influence ethnic mobilizations during the Perestroika period. This institutional legacy set the stage for the later mobilization of ethnic groups. With clearly demarcated national boundaries and an entrenched bureaucratic recognition of ethnic differences, the Soviet system generated deep path dependencies that proved resilient even as the state began to unravel. In the twilight years of the USSR, these historical structures provided both the means and the impetus for nationalist movements to articulate long-suppressed aspirations.

3. Minority Ethnic Mobilization and Ethnic Separatism in Russia

The late 1980s witnessed a dramatic expansion in ethnic mobilization within the Soviet Union, a process that ultimately contributed to the state’s collapse. As reforms under Gorbachev loosened central control, previously dormant nationalist sentiments erupted across the republics. In examining this phenomenon, two cases—the republics of Tatarstan and Chechnya—offer contrasting insights into how informal elite networks and historical legacies shaped the course of ethnic separatism.

In Tatarstan, for example, well-established informal ties between regional elites and Moscow facilitated negotiations that avoided violent conflict. These networks enabled Tatarstan to press for greater autonomy while remaining within a negotiated federal framework. Moscow and Kazan reached an agreement in 1994, known as the February Treaty (Dinç, 2021). Several articles of the February Treaty granted Tatarstan substantial autonomy regarding economic and administrative relations and even paved the way for Tatarstan to engage in international relations and establish treaty-based relations with foreign states (Sharafutdinova 2003; Graney, 2009; Fallor, 2011). Tatarstan, along with Chechnya, was among Russia's ethnic autonomous republics that did not sign the 1992 federal treaty of Yeltsin.² Although Moscow and Kazan managed to address separatist and violence issues through negotiations, the Chechen case evolved into violent conflict.

The Chechen experience underscores the dangers of a breakdown in central-regional dialogue. Chechnya was marked by a shortage of effective communication channels between local leadership and central authorities, which contributed to an escalation of separatist demands and ultimately to violent conflict (George, 2009). The weak informal networks between Moscow and Grozny allowed violence and separatism to escalate. In fact, similar issues are, to some extent, valid in the Kurdish issue in Türkiye as well, where unsuccessful peace talks only became possible through the mediation of the imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan during the 2010s and 2020s. Before Öcalan's capture, there were virtually no informal networks between the Turkish state and the PKK. Likewise, the informal ties between Yeltsin and Dudayev almost no existed during the highest moments of the ethnic tensions. Consequently, in the absence of informal ties, we observe that ethnic separatism falls into a cycle of violence. Conversely, if informal ties are strengthened, more peaceful solutions leading to consensus can develop.

In the Russian case, similar centrifugal dynamics can be observed in other ethnic republics. However, Chechnya and Tatarstan were among the most nationalist republics within Russia. It is important to note that the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) are excluded from this argument since SSRs, such as the Baltic and Central Asian republics found institutional opportunities to develop a much stronger national consciousness and pursued distinct Soviet-type

² The 1992 Federal Treaty of Yeltsin balanced substantial regional and republican autonomy with central authority by granting constituent ethnic republics significant self-governing rights.

nation-building strategies. Beyond these regional case studies, the broader narrative of post-Soviet Russia is characterized by an evolving relationship between the center and its peripheral regions. During the Yeltsin era, a period defined by fragmented federalism and diminished state capacity, titular republics and regions enjoyed a relative degree of autonomy. However, the initial successes of these separatist or autonomy movements were not destined to last. Putin's ascendance to power opened a new phase in center–periphery relations, making the protection of vernacular languages and cultures a more significant issue for ethnic republics.

3.1. The Decline of Sovereignty in Russia in the Putin Era

The ascent of Vladimir Putin marked a significant turning point in the management of ethnic and regional diversity in Russia. Putin's policies, frequently criticized in Western scholarship for their authoritarian overtones (Langdon & Tismaneanu, 2021, pp. 20–25), heralded a re-centralization of power that dramatically altered the landscape of Russian federalism. The so-called “asymmetrical federalism” of the Yeltsin era, characterized by concessions to various republics and regions, gradually gave way to a model in which the central state reasserted its authority over peripheral territories.

One of the driving forces behind this shift was Russia's resurgent economy. As state capacity improved, the Kremlin found itself in a stronger position to impose standardized policies across the federation. The informal networks that had once enabled negotiated autonomy in regions like Tatarstan were gradually undermined by Moscow's renewed administrative and economic competence. In effect, what had been a dynamic, albeit unstable, system of decentralized power was replaced by a pseudo-federal structure reminiscent of the Soviet model: a “sham federation” where peripheral autonomy was truncated in favor of central control (Ross 2002; Kahn 2002; George, 2009).

This rollback of autonomy in the Putin era not only transformed the political landscape of Russia but also had significant implications for ethnic separatism. The re-centralization of power effectively stifled the momentum of separatist movements that had flourished in the chaotic years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this context, state capacity emerges as a critical concept for understanding how a resurgent central government can diminish the political space available to regional nationalist claims. The Beslan massacre of 2004 was a crucial turning point. After that date, Vladimir Putin substantially increased pressure on ethnic republics and gradually dismantled the Yeltsin-era federal structure. Putin eliminated treaty-based federal arrangements

with all republics and terminated the political autonomy of these regions through several centralization policies, such as the “dictatorship of law” and the institutional expansion of vertical power in the regions, which had started in early 2000s. (Kahn, 2002). The rise of state capacity in Russia, driven by increased oil revenues and the reestablishment of centralized economic policies that replaced the excessive neoliberalism of the Yeltsin era, granted the Putin regime sufficient power to ultimately end not only the threat of separatism but also the prospect of regional autonomy in the eyes of Putin and his administration.

4. The Legacy of Nationality Policies in Türkiye

In contrast to the multinational framework of the Soviet Union, the modern Turkish Republic was forged along a markedly assimilationist path. Influenced by the French model of nation-building, Türkiye’s Kemalist project sought to construct a homogeneous national identity: a project that was inherently inclusive in its rhetoric yet exclusive in its practice (Brubaker, 1994). Unlike overtly racist regimes, such as apartheid South Africa, the Turkish model was rooted in the assimilation of diverse Muslim ethnic groups under a singular Turkish identity. In the Turkish ethnicity regime, there was no segregation against the Kurds on racial grounds; rather, Kurds were expected to become future Turks, just like the other Muslim minorities living in Türkiye (Yeğen 2006).

Historically, the nation-building process in Türkiye was complicated by the legacies of the Ottoman Empire, whose demographic transformations, especially following the population exchanges and deportations after World War I, resulted in a heterogeneous Muslim society. Despite this diversity, the Kemalist state imposed a stringent cultural hegemony that demanded the assimilation of all minority identities into a unitary Turkish narrative. While this strategy was largely successful for many groups, it met staunch resistance from the Kurds, who constituted approximately 20 percent of the population and maintained a distinct linguistic and cultural identity (Yeğen, 1999). For many decades, the exclusion of Kurdish identity was rationalized through historical discourses that portrayed Kurdish resistance as a remnant of a pre-modern past filled with banditry, tribalism, and sheikhdoms. However, this marginalization also sowed the seeds of radicalization. The sustained denial of cultural and political rights eventually transformed the Kurdish movement from one seeking cultural recognition to a full-fledged struggle for political autonomy or even an independent Kurdish state. This assimilationist

approach, while effective in forging a unified Turkish state, carried significant long-term costs. The rigidity of the Turkish ethnicity regime created persistent challenges for incorporating minority identities into the national narrative, setting the stage for recurring episodes of ethnic tension and conflict.

The roots of the PKK trace back to class-based leftist movements in Türkiye during the 1960s and 1970s. Many politicized Kurds became involved in these leftist movements from the 1960s until the military coup of 1980. During the 1960s, the pro-Kurdish political movement emphasized the underdevelopment and backwardness of Kurdish-populated regions in Türkiye. The 1980 coup suppressed civil liberties and banned the Kurdish language, creating an atmosphere that fostered the radicalization of the Kurdish political movement. The PKK rapidly enhanced its influence under the military junta regime in Türkiye after the 1980 coup (Al, 2015; Güneş, 2012). This period was a milestone for both the Kurds and the PKK, as the emphasis shifted from class-based issues to ethnicity-based grievances soon after the military coup of 1980.

5. The Kurdish Issue: From an Independent State to High-Level Autonomy in Türkiye

The Kurdish question in Türkiye epitomizes the tensions inherent in an assimilationist nationality regime. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, dissatisfaction with state policies culminated in the formation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978, which launched its armed uprising in 1984 with the aim of establishing an independent Kurdish state. The ensuing low-intensity conflict, which claimed over 50,000 lives over three and four decades, reflects the tragic interplay between state repression, ethnic mobilization, and rebellious terror.

From its inception, the PKK navigated a complex ideological terrain. Initially grounded in Marxist thought, the organization gradually embraced new leftist ideas and, following the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, began to shift its discourse toward democratic confederalism. After Öcalan's imprisonment, both he and the broader Kurdish movement increasingly adopted the libertarian, autonomous ideas of anarchist philosopher Murray Bookchin as their guiding theory and practice (Akgün, 2018). This ideological transformation was paralleled by significant changes in the operational dynamics of the Kurdish movement. As Turkish state capacity increased in both military and economic terms during the early 2000s, the viability of armed struggle diminished. Technological advances in warfare, coupled with the

reformation of state institutions and channels for political participation, forced a reconfiguration of Kurdish separatism.

The PKK did not exclusively target military objectives in Türkiye. At times, civilian targets also suffered from PKK violence. Sometimes terrorist attacks claimed by pro-PKK client organizations (Akgün, 2018: 15). In contrast to the Zapatistas, the organization lost its transnational image due to its violent and terrorist activities. Consequently, it was designated as a terrorist organization by the USA (United States of America) and the EU (European Union) (Al, 2015). Unlike the Zapatistas, the PKK also failed to garner sufficient support from non-Kurdish audiences. Apart from the HDP's (Peoples' Democratic Party) achievement in the 2015 parliament—securing 80 seats out of a 550-member body—the Turkish public, outside of the Kurdish community, generally maintained the image of the PKK as an organization that seeks to destabilize the Turkish state through terrorism and violence.

The decline in overt separatist violence, however, did not signal an end to the Kurdish question in Türkiye. Instead, the movement transitioned from an illegal, insurgent struggle to a more legally mediated, politically negotiated form of resistance. This shift illustrates how state repression and enhanced state capacity can push ethnic movements from a path of violent confrontation to one of political negotiation. In the broader context of Turkish politics, the decline of the PKK's armed campaign was accompanied by a rise in the influence of legal Kurdish political parties, which began to articulate demands for high-level autonomy rather than outright independence. Discourse analysis further illuminates this evolution. The transformation of Kurdish nationalism, from an exclusive focus on armed separatism to a broader critique of state policies and an embrace of radical democratic ideals, demonstrates that nation-building is not a static process. Instead, it is continually reinterpreted in light of shifting political, economic, and social conditions (Sutherland 2005). Thus, the Kurdish case underscores the fluidity of nationalist ideologies and the ways in which they adapt to changing state capacities and external pressures.

6. Conclusion: Discussing Ethnic Separatism in a Comparative Framework

A comparative examination of ethnic separatism in Russia and Türkiye during the 1980–2004 period reveals both convergences and divergences rooted in historical legacies and state practices. In both contexts, a legacy of authoritarian modernization and limited channels for

democratic participation created conditions conducive to the mobilization of minority nationalism. Yet, the underlying ethnicity regimes, Soviet multinationalism versus Turkish assimilationism, produced distinct trajectories and outcomes (Aktürk, 2012). In Russia, the Soviet system's early efforts to foster national identities unintentionally institutionalized ethnic differences, generating a multifaceted legacy that facilitated later mobilizations. The collapse of the Soviet Union unleashed deeply rooted nationalist demands, as seen in republics such as Tatarstan, Chechnya, and Bashkortostan. However, the resurgence of centralized power under Putin, and the concomitant increase in state capacity, effectively reversed these gains, a process that accelerated after the Beslan massacre in 2004. The Putin era's re-centralization of authority not only diminished regional autonomy but also curtailed the political space for ethnic separatism, leading to what some have described as a "pseudo-federal" system reminiscent of Soviet-era control.

Conversely, in Türkiye, the nation-building project pursued under Kemalist ideology was premised on the exclusion of non-Turkish identities. While this approach succeeded in forging a unified national identity for much of the population, it also fostered deep-seated resentments among minority groups, most notably the Kurds. Although the Kurds were not politically excluded on a racial basis, the suppression of the Kurdish language in the public sphere marginalized Kurdish cultural expression and delegitimized Kurdish political claims, created the conditions for political violence. Yet, as state capacity and modern military technologies advanced, the feasibility of sustained armed separatism declined. The Kurdish movement's gradual pivot from violence to legal political engagement reflects the inherent tensions in an assimilationist ethnicity regime that cannot fully accommodate minority identities without significant reform.

The concept of state capacity proves central to understanding these dynamics. In both Russia and Türkiye, improvements in economic performance and administrative effectiveness enabled the central state to reassert control over peripheral regions. This re-centralization, in turn, precipitated the retreat of separatist demands. However, the comparative analysis also highlights that the decline in overt ethnic separatism does not equate to the resolution of underlying ethnic grievances. Instead, these grievances are transformed, often reemerging in new political forms, such as legal opposition or discursive critiques of national identity. Furthermore, the comparative framework challenges essentialist views of nationalism and ethnicity by emphasizing their

ideological and discursive dimensions. In both cases, nation-building is shown to be a dynamic process, one that is continuously contested and reinterpreted by state and non-state actors alike. Whether through the institutional legacy of Soviet multinationalism or the assimilationist policies of the Turkish ethnicity regime, ethnic identities remain a potent force in shaping political trajectories. The interplay between historical legacies, state capacity, and evolving nationalist discourses underscores the complexity of resolving ethnic conflicts in deeply divided societies.

All in all, the period from 1980 to 2004 represents a critical juncture in the evolution of ethnic separatism in both Russia and Türkiye. In Russia, the dissolution of the Soviet Union unleashed longstanding nationalist aspirations that were later reined in by the re-centralization of power under Putin. In Türkiye, an assimilationist nation-building project that excluded minority identities, particularly those of the Kurds, eventually gave rise to an armed separatist movement that had to adapt to the realities of modern state capacity. This comparative study demonstrates that neither the multinational model of Soviet Russia nor the assimilationist model of Türkiye provides a solution for ethnic conflict. Instead, both approaches generate persistent challenges: the former by institutionalizing ethnic differences that can later catalyze separatist mobilization, and the latter by excluding significant minority identities from the national narrative. In each case, the evolution of ethnic separatism is deeply intertwined with historical legacies, state capacity, and the dynamic, contested nature of nationalist discourse.

By framing nationalism as an evolving ideology rather than a fixed, essentialist phenomenon, this article contributes to a more developed understanding of ethnic conflict. The use of comparative analysis and discourse frameworks reveals that successful management of ethnic diversity requires not only the recognition of historical grievances but also the creation of flexible political structures that can accommodate evolving identities. While state capacity can temporarily suppress separatist tendencies, sustainable peace may ultimately depend on reconciling the demands of both majority and minority communities within an inclusive national framework. Future research should further explore the transformative potential of political discourse in redefining nation-building processes. In both Russia and Türkiye, shifts in nationalist ideologies point to the possibility of reimagining state–society relations in ways that move beyond rigid, exclusionary models. As ethnic conflicts continue to shape the political landscapes of multiethnic states, the lessons drawn from the experiences of Soviet-Russia and modern Türkiye will remain invaluable case studies for scholars and policymakers.

References

- Akgün, R. C. (2018). *The possibilities and limitations of articulations and political subjectification mechanisms in Türkiye* (Doctoral dissertation). Middle East Technical University, Ankara.
- Akgün, R. (2021). Bookching and the Kurdish movement in Türkiye. In Y. Transki (Ed.), *Enlightenment and ecology: The legacy of Murray Boochin in the 21st century* (pp. 129-142). Montreal, Chicago, & London: Black Rose Books.
- Aktürk, Ş. (2012). *Regimes of ethnicity and nationhood in Germany, Russia, and Türkiye*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Al, S. (2014). Local armed uprisings and the transnational image of claim making: The Kurds of Türkiye and the Zapatistas of Mexico in comparative perspective. *Globalizations*, 12(5), 677–694. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2014.991541>
- Brubaker, R. (1994). *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dinç, D. (2021). The rise and decline of ethnic mobilization and sovereignty in Tatarstan. *Bilig*, 98, 123–146.
- Dinç, D. (2022). *Tatarstan's autonomy within Putin's Russia: Minority elites, ethnic mobilization, and sovereignty*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- Faller, H. (2011). *Nation, language and Islam: Tatarstan's sovereignty movement*. Budapest, Hungary: CEU Press.
- George, J. (2009). *The politics of ethnic separatism in Russia and Georgia*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gorenburg, D. (2003). *Minority ethnic mobilization in the Russian Federation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Graney, K. (2009). *Of Khans and Kremlins: Tatarstan and the future of ethno-federalism in Russia*. Lexington, KY: Lexington Books.
- Güneş, C. (2012). *The Kurdish national movement in Türkiye: From protest to resistance*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kahn, J. (2002). *Federalism, democratization, and the rule of law in Russia*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Langdon, K., & Tismaneanu, V. (2020). *Putin's totalitarian democracy: Ideology, myth, and violence in the twenty-first century*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Martin, T. (2001). *The affirmative action empire: Nations and nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Ross, C. (2002). *Federalism and democratization in Russia*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Sharafutdinova, G. (2003). Paradiplomacy in the Russian regions: Tatarstan's search for statehood. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 55(4), 613–629.
- Slezkine, Y. (1994). The USSR as a communal apartment, or how a socialist state promoted ethnic particularism. *Slavic Review*, 53(2), 414–452.
- Sutherland, C. (2005). Nation-building through discourse theory. *Nations and Nationalisms*, 11(2), 185–202.
- Toktamis, K. F., & David, I. (2018). Repression and resistance – fragments of Kurdish politics in Türkiye under the AKP regime. *Turkish Studies*, 19(5), 661–670. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2018.1508350>
- Yeğen, M. (1999). *Devlet söyleminde Kürt sorunu*. İstanbul, Türkiye: İletişim.
- Yeğen, M. (2006). Turkish nationalism and the Kurdish question. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(1), 119–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870601006603>