Comparing Regional and Ethnic Conflicts in Post-Soviet Transition States: An Institutional Approach

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Political Transformation in Soviet Successor States: The States of the CIS in Comparative and Theoretical Perspective

Comments Welcome

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The rapid retreat of communism from Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s was closely chased by an upsurge of violent upheavals that are almost universally referred to as ‘ethnic’ or ‘nationalist’ conflicts. One of the most common observations on the conflicts that arose from the collapsing power of communism is that they are an echo of earlier struggles. This view is shared across the spectrum of thinkers on nationalism, from Modernists to Marxists, and to those who favour a primordialist account of the origins of nationalism. For a Modernist liberal like Ernest Gellner Soviet communism was an ‘intervening’ force that ‘defeated’ nationalism so long as it captured and controlled the state. In this sense, communism had been a deep freeze for nationalism, and its demise had thawed conflicts whose outcome, even within his own schema, was difficult to predict (Gellner, 1997: 86). Similarly, the Modernist Marxist, Eric Hobsbawm, argued that ‘fear and coercion kept the USSR together’ and helped to prevent ethnic and communal tensions from degenerating into mutual violence. The nationalist disintegration of the USSR, according to Hobsbawm, was more a ‘consequence’ of the breakdown of the regime in Moscow than a ‘cause’ of it (Hobsbawm, 1990: 168). Primordialist inspired understandings of conflicts are generally the provenance of parties to the conflict, though the crude stereotyping of ‘ancient hatreds’ is often widely disseminated by policy-makers and journalists interested in the promotion of specific global or regional security frameworks. We do not propose to challenge the notion that many potential nationalist, ethnic and regional conflicts in the Former Soviet Union were kept dormant under communism. As Ian Lustick has demonstrated, suppression or control is a remarkably effective means of conflict regulation in deeply divided societies (Lustick, 1979 and 1993). Furthermore, the control regime of the USSR cynically manipulated nationalisms by the use of quasi-federal institutional devices, in particular the theoretical right of union republics to secession and pseudo-cultural rights. This helped not only to secure internal stability, but also to project an external image of the Soviet Union as a model of a multinational state for anti-colonial movements in the Third World. The hollow Soviet claim to be the ‘sentinel for self-determination’, as Walker Connor explains, began with Lenin and Stalin and continued through the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras (Connor, 1984: 53).

It is undeniable that the end of the Soviet regime released conflict potential. Many of the Soviet successor states have fought ethnic and regional wars with each other or within themselves as part of their nation- and state-building projects. Such conflicts are not so surprising since previous cases of end of empire led to similar conflicts, with battle lines drawn along ethnic and regional fissures. We do contest, however, the widely held notion that the contemporary conflicts in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) can be primarily explained as resurgent unfinished business from past nationalist or ethnic conflicts. We do not deny that the momentum for the half-tied knots of history to be undone or completed is undoubtedly a significant factor in the origins of some conflicts, perhaps most obviously in Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia. We should not overlook, however, the critically important contingent factors, in particular, the political-institutional changes and adjustments to Soviet legacies made as part of the transition, in the causation and prolongation of the conflicts. Furthermore, the ‘unfinished business’ explanation does not account for the fact that some conflicts have simply not happened, others have been amenable to management by strategies of accommodation, while a few have degenerated into
violence for which there is no ready solution. In our view, the non-conflict cases are as important as those where conflict has occurred. One can be easily seduced into complacency by the routine passivity of certain conflicts. The routine, however, is generally a product of structured behaviour, and consequently the routines of non-conflicts may yield guidance as to the structures and codes of conduct which work in the management of post-Soviet conflicts.

We explore regionalism and ethnic conflict in the FSU from a comparative perspective by examining the factors that account for the causation or prevention of conflict. The cases investigated here allow us to evaluate whether the successor states to the USSR exhibit common trends and differences in their responses to the challenges of state-building in ethnically and regionally divided societies. One of our recurring themes is how ethnic and regional conflicts impact critically on other aspects of post-communist transition, such as constitutional design, marketisation and nation and state-building. To clearly identify the conceptual parameters of the dynamics of conflict and conflict-regulation, we begin by applying the principal theoretical propositions of the significant literatures on ethnic conflict, regionalism and transition to the analysis of post-Soviet conflicts. In particular, we pivot our analysis on four key sets of questions:

1) What are the causes of post-Soviet conflicts? How unique or comparable are these conflicts when measured against the explanations suggested by comparative politics theory?
2) To what extent are the post-Soviet conflicts ethnic or regional in nature? What do they tell us about the distinct regional and ethnic dimensions of post-Soviet transition?
3) What is the relationship between conflict-management or conflict-prevention and the wider challenge of post-communist institutional engineering? Why are some conflicts apparently intractable, while others have been resolved or stabilized?
4) How does the interaction between domestic and international factors shape the issues involved in post-Soviet ethnic and regional conflicts?

Ernest Gellner argued that there was no ‘third way’ for cultural pluralism between the assimilatory and the nationalising state (Gellner, 1997). For this lack of sensitivity to the political mechanisms, constitutional architectures and the role of political engineers in the ‘thwarting’ and managing of nationalist conflicts, he has been rightly criticised (O’Leary, 1998). By now there is a significant body of writing in political science and political philosophy which holds that societies that are deeply riven by ethnic and national divisions can be stabilized by political strategies of regulation. The solutions broadly involve two main instruments: an institutionalist approach that focuses on constitutional and institutional design with a preference for consociational devices, federalism, or autonomy arrangements; and a ‘group-differentiated rights’ approach (O’Leary, 2001). Our analysis of post-Soviet conflicts focuses on the former approach. It is not, however, so much concerned with how institutions per se affect state stability by preventing or promoting conflict, or the efficacy of new power-sharing devices during transition, or indeed whether the state under consideration is a democracy or non-democracy. Rather, it focuses on the institutional foundation for the state building process itself, democratic or otherwise, which is, in the main, inherited from the Soviet ethno-federal state architecture. This legacy which has been termed ‘institutionalised multinationality’ by Brubaker is
presented in many studies as the key contributory factor in the ethnification of politics and the ‘ethnoconstitutional’ crises during the fall of the Soviet Union (Brubaker, 1996; Roeder, 1999: 867). We argue that the Soviet institutional legacy for managing ethnicity and how it was disassembled or reassembled as part of state-building after the fall of the Soviet Union, is the crucial contingent factor in the causation of post-Soviet conflicts. Since it was the combination of control and quasi-federal institutional constraints that had managed historical antagonisms in the Soviet Union, it was inevitably that the end of the control regime would focus attention on the institutional dimension of the Soviet settlement of the nationalities question.

The Internationalization of Ethnic and Regional Conflicts

Cold War Legacies

Whether the Cold War was a condenser of certain types of conflicts, literally taking the steam out of them, is debatable. For most analysts, the Cold War led to a stabilized Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe as part of the international system that allowed it to consolidate a strong control regime that insulated it against ethnopolitical movements. Certainly, we can say that the Cold War had no such effect in Western Europe where prolonged nationalist conflicts occurred in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country. By the end of the Cold War many analysts were deprived of one of their most widely employed labels of convenience for national and ethnic conflicts: the ideological conflict between East and West. From around 1990-1 conflicts in most parts of the world were no longer explained by reference to East-West ideological competition. For Carment and James the correlation of a failed ‘New World Order’ and the eruption into internecine violence of states with previously stable inter-ethnic relations is what led to a redefinition of the causes of conflict (Carment and James, 1997: 1). The disintegration of the Soviet Union and, in particular, Yugoslavia (FRY) realised the worst possible scenario for potential post-communist conflicts. For the first time since the Second World War, waves of genocidal massacres and mass population expulsions occurred in Europe. This caused many analysts to view the rise of ethnic and regional conflicts in Eastern Europe and the FSU as the continuation of a global trend for such conflicts to move from the developing to the developed world, rather than being a regional phenomenon unique to post-communist countries (Gurr and Harff, 1994: 13).

Of the 300 or so politically active ethnic and religious groups in the twentieth century Gurr singles out the European ethnic warfare of the early 1990s as the culmination of a long-term trend that began in the 1950s and reached its peak shortly after the end of the Cold War (Gurr, 2000: 53). According to Gurr, ‘initiations’ of ‘ethnopolitical’ protests and ‘rebellions’ in the FSU peaked in 1992 (Gurr, 1996). Following Gurr, Rubin has argued that the lack of new ‘initiations’ of conflict since 1992 equates to a ‘stabilization of the post-Soviet space’ (sic) which is accounted for by three factors: state-building, Russian influence and processes of internationalization (Rubin, 1998: 166-8). The house may have burnt down but the situation is stable, seems to be the argument. A focus on the absence of new occurrences of conflict in the FSU misses the point, in our view, which is to explain why the conflicts arose and what mechanisms are used in conflict management and resolution. In fact, Gurr and Rubin,
like most analysts subsume a wide range of different types of post-Soviet conflict, whether political, economic or social, religious and regional under the generic label ‘ethnic conflict’, thus creating an ubiquitous negative association for the successor states (Walker, 1996: 3). To some extent this confirms a North American prejudice for the ‘Third Worldization’ of the FSU.

Secession and the Limits of Universal Standards

Secession is a claim that is generally legitimated by the act of self-determination. The right to self-determination today is almost universally applauded in theory, but is highly circumscribed in international practice. The principle of national self-determination was embued with a qualified moral status in international relations after World War I by the Wilsonian principles of ‘government by consent’ for certain national groups in Europe.3 Non-Europeans were included only with the universalist claims of the UN Charter of 1945, where Articles 1 (2) and 55 enshrined the ‘principle’ (not the ‘right’) of ‘self determination of peoples’. The shift from principle to enforceable right came with the UN Charter of 1948, adopted just as the era of decolonisation, voluntary and forced, began. Chapters XI and XII of the Charter stipulated that colonial powers must promote ‘self-government’ of ‘territories’ not ethnic groups, thus reaffirming the norm for colonial adminisitrative demarcations to become the basis for new states (Halperin et al, 1992: 20).

Historically, the ‘morality’ of secession has rarely been an uncontested claim (Buchanan, 1991). Although strictly limited and geographically confined in practice, in the Twentieth Century there were three concentrated periods of self-determination, all of which fell after periods of extreme chaos in the international order: after the First and Second World Wars, and after the Cold War (Lapidoth, 1997). It is the latter period which we may characterise as the era of ‘post-communist self-determination’.

The stability of borders was the guiding logic of the CSCE balance of power in Europe established at Helsinki in 1975. Consequently, the key pillars of international norms in Europe during the height of the Cold War were, firstly, the inviolability of recognized state borders, and secondly, the demarcation of zones where states had conditional sovereignty dependent upon the interests of Superpowers and Great Powers. The greatest tests for the principle of self-determination came after the Second World War in the post-colonial new states in Africa and Asia. Decolonisation embedded the doctrine of *uti possidetis juris* in the creation and maintenance of new states, which held that the established colonial status quo with respect to borders was to be preserved at all costs, and any unilateral redrawing of the boundaries of states by secession was to be strongly discouraged (Shaw, 1996). Exceptionally, disputed territories were given an indeterminate status. Until the Kosovo War, these territories were overwhelmingly outside Europe, or on its periphery.4

The recognition of secession in international practice falls into five principal categories (Kingsbury, 1992, 487): 1. Mandated territories, trust territories, and territories created as non-self governing units under Chapter XI of the UN Charter; 2. Distinct political-geographical entities subject to *carence de souverainete* (the only possible example being Bangladesh); 3. Territories in respect of which self-determination is applied by the mutual agreement of the parties involved; 4. Highest level constituent units of a federal state which has been, or is in the process of being, dissolved by agreement among all (or at least most) of the constituent units. The
precedent for the practice of \textit{uti posseditis} was set by the decolonisation of Latin America, when the internal colonial boundaries of the Spanish empire became, by mutual consent, the international boundaries of the successor states (though they were subsequently reconfigured by war). This precedent was generally followed in the decolonisation of Africa and Asia after 1945. In advising on the secessions from FRY the Badinter Judicial Commission for the EU in late 1991 and early 1992 recognised this principle as a ‘pre-emptive’ element of customary international law when empires or federal states dissolve. We should note, however, that the EU itself did not follow the Badinter recommendations on recognising secessions but was driven by Germany-led unilateral recognitions (Kumar, 1997: 49-50; Woodward, 1995: 199-222); 5. Formerly independent territories that are joined to another state which reassert their independence with at least the tacit consent of the established state, especially where incorporation into the other state was illegal or of dubious legality. The problem with the latter category, of course, is that the international order can tolerate illegal occupations over the long term, as the case of East Timor demonstrates.

During the collapse of the Soviet Union Western international practice on the recognition of secession lacked a consistent rationale. Until late 1991 Western states, in particular the EC and USA, adopted a policy of extreme caution and non-recognition in their foreign policy reasoning on secession in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{5} This policy of caution was overturned dramatically in the second half of 1991 in FRY, leading to, as noted above, unilateral recognition of the secession of Slovenia by Germany in December 1991. Claims of sovereign independent statehood by many of the USSR’s constituent union republics went unrecognized until the August Coup of 1991 and the physical disintegration of Soviet governance structures. In contrast, a good case can be made that the EC recognition of Slovenia prompted the disintegration of FRY (Woodward, 1995). The conflicts that arose from the collapse of the USSR became hinged on the two conflicting principles: recognition of state territorial integrity versus self-determination. In fact, post-communist state-and nation-building has been informed by a conceptual delusion that is a sine qua non for recognition in the international system - the idea of the nation-state - despite the fact that the homogenous 'nation-state', as envisaged by liberal democratic theory, is to a large degree fictional. Only very few states fit this ideal-type. Most states have to continuously engage in the accommodation of ethnic or regional diversity within their boundaries. Many states have had learning curves that lasted decades, if not centuries, to manage competing ethnic and regional claims by regionalization, autonomization, and other forms of self-government, including some West European states, such as Spain, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

The \textit{de facto} collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991 forced Western states to follow the \textit{uti possidetis} doctrine established in previous decolonisations, and the right to recognition as a new ‘state’ was tied to the highest level of administration immediately below the state. In the FSU, as in many of the cases of decolonisation in Africa and Asia, \textit{uti possidetis} legitimated an artificial pattern of state territoriality which had been defined by the colonising power. This pattern was generally, and often deliberately, designed irrespective of ethnic and other cleavages. While Leninist and Stalinist ‘planned’ bounding of ethnicity in the Soviet Union was not characterised by the kind of colonial ‘scramble’ for territory that occurred in Africa, its outcome was often just as arbitrary, creating administrative units without regard to history, ethnicity, or geography. In the East European communist federations it was
the constituent union republic administrative entities that gained recognition as new states in the period 1991-2. The new ‘successor states’ were soon confronted with similar secessionist demands from within their own boundaries, as a kind of ‘matreshka nationalism’ kept shifting the challenge to the sub-state level. Whether secessionist governments were democratically mandated or not, in the interests of international order Western states recognized no new secessions in the former communist states, including the USSR, apart from the fifteen union republics of the USSR.⁶

This policy of recognition by Western states was justified by the need to maintain stability in the post-Soviet space and conformed with previous international norms. In the collapse of the USSR the rationale for accepting the union republics as incubators for new states is questionable. Leaving aside the obvious issue of the ‘administrative’ nature of most union republic boundaries, and the generally ‘titular’ nature of their ethnic definition, let us concentrate on the ‘legal’ reasoning (which was also applied to FRY). Recognition of union republics was based on their right of secession under the Soviet constitution, most lately that of 1977. Accordingly, only the union republics were founding constituent ‘members’ of the USSR. Thus, they were the only administrative tier that approximated to ‘states-in-the-making’. This ignores key developments in the USSR federal system in the late perestroika period. Gorbachev supposedly once claimed ‘perestroika ne perekroika’ (reconstruction is not a restitching). What he meant by this was that his reforms did not entail a reassembly of the ethno-territorial patchwork of the USSR. In fact, this was precisely the policy that he drifted into during 1989-90. The groundwork for the refederalization of the USSR was laid by Gorbachev’s new treaty-based (dogovornyi) constitutional arrangement for power-sharing between the federal centre in Moscow and the constituent units of the federation. A generous interpretation is that his goal was to renegotiate with the union republics the Union Treaty of 1922 on which the USSR was founded (Hough: 1997, 379). A crucial landmark in his policy, however, was the ‘Law on the Division of Powers between the USSR and the Subjects of the Federation’ passed by the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies on 26 April 1990 which radically altered the federal arrangement of the Soviet Union. Previous to this law the principal constitutional distinction between union republic and autonomous republic was that the former was technically ‘sovereign’ and had the right to secede whereas the latter did not. The new law eradicated this distinction and treated both types of federal unit as ‘subjects of the federation’. By equalising the status of union republics and autonomous republics, and making both equally subordinate to the federal government, Gorbachev may have hoped to deter secessionism by the union republics and strengthen his leverage on them to negotiate a new Union Treaty. Gorbachev had introduced an institutional mechanism for the mutually assured destruction of the territorial fabric of the Soviet Union. Once this law was passed, a secessionist union republic exercising its constitutional right to ‘sovereignty’ and secession (though there was no clearly defined legal means of so doing) could be faced by similar secessionist demands from an autonomous republic (if it contained one).

There can be little doubt that the law, which coincided with the creation of a powerful Soviet presidency, was a manoeuvre by Gorbachev aimed at the one union republic that was in the vanguard of the moves to decentralize the Soviet Union – Boris Yeltsin’s Russian government – and which contained the largest number of autonomous republics.⁷ After the passage of this law, the language of ‘delimiting
powers’, ‘power-sharing’, ‘sovereignty’ and ‘secession’ became the common currency of the political discourse over refederalization, whether of the Soviet Union, Russia, or other union republics with autonomous units or territorialized minorities. This new federal arrangement was reiterated in the New Union Treaty of June 1991, though its passage into law was preempted by the failed August 1991 coup. The concepts embodied in the new Gorbachevian federalism strengthened the claims of secessionists across the Soviet Union, from Crimea to Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia, and in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in Russia.

Gorbachev’s tactic backfired badly, for rather than bringing Yeltsin and the other leaders of union republics to heel, it incited them to intensify the ‘war of sovereignties’ against the centre. In the course of 1990-1 Yeltsin mobilised Russian nationalism and accelerated Russia’s disassociation from the USSR, in the process turning Gorbachev’s April 1990 law on its head by appealing to Russia’s ethnic republics to ‘take as much sovereignty as you can stomach’ during a visit to the Tatarstan capital, Kazan, in August 1990. This was a message that horrified nationalist leaders in other union republics with autonomous units, who feared an empowerment of the federal structures and favoured nationalising state-building projects. Given this context of extreme instability and a rapidly weakening central authority, it is not surprising that the once protected minorities that enjoyed a measure of institutionalised self-government in the Soviet Union feared the resurgent nationalism of titular groups in the union republics. It was this clash between two conceptual approaches to state-building in a multi-ethnic environment, federalisation versus nationalising state, that sparked many of the post-Soviet conflicts.

Secession and Post-Soviet State-Building
Post-Soviet states have been confronted with the immediacy and simultaneity of two contradictory challenges: they are engaged in a process of nation- and state-building and consolidating the new central ‘national’ authority, while concurrently grappling with challenges to the centre posed by ‘sub-national’ ethnic or regional political mobilization and demands for autonomy or secession. Moreover, due to the nature of the post-communist transition process, where state assets are being redistributed and appropriated by elites through so-called ‘privatization’ schemes, the political and economic incentives involved in the struggle for power are immense - a configuration which significantly increases the conflict potential. In such conditions, issues of self-determination and autonomy may be raised instrumentally by territorialised elites as a response to the central state being captured by a rival elite network or networks. There may be a substantive ‘ethnic’ content to inter-elite or mass struggles, or this element may be instrumentally employed in conflicts as part of a mobilizing strategy. Consequently, it is important to pay due attention to how ethnic and regional conflicts may also be part of a struggle between elites to ‘short-circuit transition processes, to forestall change, and to reimpose authoritarian rule under the guise of “limited democratization”’ (Walker, 1996: 11).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, there have been six violent ethnic and regional conflicts in the FSU and seven significant conflicts which did not occur (conflicts here being defined by their sustained nature, as opposed to one-off episodes of rioting).
Table 1: Post-Soviet Conflicts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violent Conflicts</th>
<th>Initiation</th>
<th>Resolution Status</th>
<th>International Mediation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan/Nagorno-Karabakh/Armenia</td>
<td>02/1988-</td>
<td>ceasefire</td>
<td>Russia/OSCE/Minsk Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova/Transnistria</td>
<td>09/1991-</td>
<td>ceasefire</td>
<td>Russia/Ukraine/OSCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia/Chechnya</td>
<td>12/1994-08/1996</td>
<td>truce and treaty war</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia/Abkhazia</td>
<td>04/1989</td>
<td>ceasefire</td>
<td>Russia/CIS/UN/OSCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia/South Ossetia</td>
<td>01/1991</td>
<td>settlement</td>
<td>Russia/OSCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>05/1992-04/1999</td>
<td>settlement</td>
<td>Russia/CIS/OSCE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Violent Conflicts</th>
<th>Initiation</th>
<th>Resolution Status</th>
<th>International Mediation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan/Ferghana Valley</td>
<td>06/1989</td>
<td>control regime</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine/Crimea</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>constitutional autonomy</td>
<td>OSCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia/Tatarstan</td>
<td>03/1990</td>
<td>treaty autonomy</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia/Bashkortostan</td>
<td>03/1990</td>
<td>treaty autonomy</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova/Gagauzia</td>
<td>09/1991</td>
<td>constitutional autonomy</td>
<td>OSCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Kazakhstan</td>
<td>01/1992</td>
<td>control regime</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia/Ajaria</td>
<td>01/1991</td>
<td>constitutional autonomy</td>
<td>No</td>
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With the sole exception of the civil war in Tajikistan, the post-Soviet cases of violent conflict have involved attempted secession. Additionally, there have been cases of potential conflicts that have not degenerated into violence. Understanding why potential conflicts do not occur is as important as accounting for those that do lead to violence. In the potential conflicts demands for greater autonomy short of secession, on the whole, shaped political mobilization in the region and the settlement package. The violent post-Soviet conflicts are a significant contribution to the some 30 odd wars, most of them internal, that were ongoing globally by the mid-1990s. The politicization of ethnicity and mobilization for conflict that followed the collapse of the FSU has also added weight to the argument that the late 20th century saw a fundamental shift in the nature of conflicts away from inter-state conflicts within the international order to intra-state conflicts (Carment and James, 1997: 2). By the mid-1990s while we see a return to the policy of non-recognition of secession in the international order (Kosovo and East Timor excepted), we also see a shift towards a much more interventionist approach by a plethora of international organizations and multilateral organizations (UN, OSCE, NATO, EU, PACE) in the domestic affairs of ‘sovereign’ states which is primarily geared to managing the increase in intra-state conflict. This new interventionism is justified partly by the ideology of ‘global governance’ and partly by the political rhetoric of ‘ethical foreign policy’ among certain Western governments. The weakening of Russia as a Great Power has also created space for rival powers to expand their influence in post-Soviet states, from the NATO/ EU enlargement eastward, to the increasing role of the USA, Turkey, Iran and
Afghanistan in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. These international influences on regional and ethnic conflicts and the interaction between their endogenous and exogenous factors are poorly theorized and deserve much greater attention.

**Explanations of Post-Soviet Conflicts**

*Comparative Studies*

Existing academic studies of post-Soviet conflicts generally fall into three main categories. Firstly, there is a rather disparate body of descriptive studies of ethnic and regional conflicts, which while being empirically rich lack a broader engagement with comparative theory (Arbatov, 1998; Drobizheva, 1996). Secondly, there is by now a vast literature on post-Soviet nation-building which rests on the assumption that ethnicity and, in particular, the question of the Russian diaspora scattered across the FSU are the key factors in post-Soviet conflicts (Szporluk, 1994; Kolstoe, 1995; Melvin, 1995; Chinn and Kaiser, 1996; Bremmer and Taras, 1997; Laitin, 1998; Smith et al., 1998). Thirdly, there are those studies which are informed by theory, whether theories of nationalism and ethnic conflict regulation, or theories of democratic transition, or more rarely a combination of the three (Brubaker, 1996; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Bunce, 1999).

Previous studies of post-Soviet conflicts have not, in our view, established the appropriate balance between comparison and generalization on the one hand, and rigorous empirical study on the other. Van Evera, for example, emphasizes the role of weak states in the link between nationalism and war using a ‘danger scale’ that expresses the likelihood of nationalism turning violent on the basis of three types of factors: structural (arising from the geographic and demographic arrangement of a nation), political-environmental (arising from the past or present conduct of a people’s neighbours) and perceptual (arising from the nationalist movement’s self-image and images of others). He concludes that Eastern Europe and the FSU are danger zones characterized by a rising tide of nationalism and violence, yet offers little empirical evidence to ground his hypothesis (Van Evera, 1994: 34). Similarly, surveying the obvious in several centuries of state-building, Snyder views the dynamics of the historical process of democratization as the main cause of ethnic conflict (Snyder, 2000). In a sketch of post-communist conflicts, he surmises that they are a product of Soviet-era ethnofederalism and regional autonomy, without any elaboration of this point (Snyder, 2000: 40). Comparative studies are sometimes characterized by a lack of regional knowledge which gives rise to serious factual errors. A recent article by Carment and James, for example, confuses the Soviet Union and Russia, stating: ‘Antagonisms within Russia proper – i.e. Tatarstan, North and South Ossetia, Donbass and the Crimea and the Trans-Dniester region – are ongoing.’ (Carment and James, 2000: 190).

One of the few studies that attempts to go beyond the three literatures discussed above is that of Roeder (1999: 854-882). Roeder’s argument about post-communist state-and nation-building reiterates the doubts inherent in liberal-democratic theory about the sustainability of democracy in ethnically divided societies and about the efficacy of institutional mechanisms for managing ethnicity. Roeder criticizes the promotion of
power-sharing as aggravating the ethnification of politics through a polarisation of preferences, which ultimately undermines the consensus for democracy. Power-sharing institutions are considered less important for conflict management than demographic and cultural factors. One of these factors is a quantifiable dimension - the size of the ethnic minority relative to the core nation -, the other, however, is an unquantifiable one – the cultural distance between the core nation and the minority (Roeder, 1999: 873-876). Cultural proximity, however, is no panacea for national or ethnic tensions, as the relations between Russia and Ukraine demonstrate. Most importantly, Roeder’s argument appears to be shaped by the notion of ‘democracy from scratch’. It neglects the fact that a certain institutional architecture was in situ when the USSR collapsed and successor states began their state-building projects, and stresses the weakness of institutions, erroneously in our opinion, as a means of democratic conflict-resolution. In contrast, our approach emphasises the critical role of institutions both for the initiation of conflict, and for how states may stabilize, regulate or prevent conflict. Roeder assumes that most successor states have experienced conflicts amidst democratization. If this were so, then his conclusion, that a stable democracy cannot triumph in countries that have not solved their ‘nation-ness problems’, would be valid. For most post-Soviet states, however, a focus on the question of the ‘survival of democracy’ is premature and tells us little, if anything, about state-building and conflict-management in states that are very much unconsolidated democracies, never mind those that are strongly authoritarian and sultanistic in character.

Ethnicity, ‘Stateness’ and Democratisation
The core commonality of theories of nationalism, ethnic conflict regulation and transition to democracy is that they all take the nation-state as the main unit of analysis and, thereby, tend to limit their focus on central elites and institutions. Since national and democratic state-building are viewed as state-level processes, the role of regions in conflicts during transition tends to be downplayed. Drawing on liberal democratic theory, transitology assumes that ethnicity, or multi-ethnicity to be precise, is destabilising, especially where there is a territorialization of difference. The ‘ethnification’ of transition politics is presented as an almost insoluble problem (Offe, 1996: 50-81). A comparison with Central and Eastern Europe confirms the trend that democratization and transition in general have been most successful in those countries that are most homogeneous and have few or no serious ethnic cleavages, such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. It is not coincidental that these are states which ‘benefitted’ most from the ethnic and racial policies of Hitler, Stalin and Tito. Transitologists emphasise that the zero-condition for transitions is, as Rustow observed, ‘national unity’, by which he meant that the ‘overwhelming majority’ of the population concur on national identity (Rustow, 1970: 351). The origins of this pessimistic view lie in J.S. Mill’s mid-nineteenth century liberalism which claimed an incompatibility between ethnic diversity and democracy in a common state. This understanding of democracy is the cornerstone of democratic theory today, for as Dahl observed: ‘The criteria of the democratic process presuppose the rightfulness of the unit itself’ (Dahl, 1989: 207). The logic of the liberal pessimism on the combination of democracy and multinationality is that such states must assimilate or break up. For as Walzer argued: ‘If the community is so radically divided that a single citizenship is impossible, then its territory too must be divided’ (Walzer, 1983, 62). Linz and Stepan have paraphrased this as the ‘stateness’
question. They argue that agreements about ‘stateness’ are logically prior to the creation of democratic institutions and that democracy and the nation-state form complimentary logics (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Their theoretical proposition clearly diverges from the multi-layered simultaneity dilemmas inherent in post-Soviet transition. They also claim that the rise of nationalism in the FSU was due to the flattened social landscape left by the destruction of civil society by totalitarianism, presumably because civil society would have created the cross-cutting cleavages perceived as a necessary condition for liberal democracy.

These arguments do not bode well for the prospects of successful post-Soviet transition and state-building, let alone interethnic peace. Can they be re-appropriated to make sense of real or potential, violent or non-violent post-Soviet conflicts? It follows that firstly, the commitment problem attached to a territorialized minority in a newly democratizing state creates a voice or exit option in terms of secession-potential. Linz and Stepan single out two institutional means as having a stabilizing effect: consociationalism and ‘electoral sequencing’. Consociationalism is a complex political system with a limited record of stabilizing ongoing conflicts (Lijphart, 1977; Horowitz, 1985; O’Leary and McGarry, 1993). On the other hand, Linz and Stepan compare Spain, Yugoslavia and the USSR to claim that ‘electoral sequencing’, whereby the first democratic and legitimating ‘founding elections’ are conducted at the statewide level rather than at the regional or local level, may be an important factor in warding off ethnopolitical mobilization. (Linz and Stepan, 1992: 123-139). They misattribute, however, the stabilization achieved in Spain to elections rather than to the institutionalized autonomies created as part of the overall constitutional settlement in 1978.9

Secondly, transitology emphasizes the importance of elite pacts at the central state level during transition (Rustow, 1970; Higley and Burton, 1989). For transitologists, the key decision for elites in a transition state is whether, as Linz put it, to make democracy ‘the only game in town’, while democracy itself is widely seen as being ‘crafted’ or built ‘from scratch’ (Di Palma, 1990; Fish, 1995). Inter-ethnic issues or regional diversity in elite bargaining strategies do not figure in transitology. We need to take account of the elite factor in at least two respects. Whether ethnic differences become conflictual or are accommodated largely depends on how elites interact during transition. If as part of the overall constitution-making process an elite pact is inter-ethnic and links centre and periphery we are more likely to get a strategy of accommodation in a power-sharing agreement (as in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the Russian Federation, Crimea in Ukraine, Ajaria in Georgia and Gagauzia in Moldova) or in partial elite cooption in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse (as with Russophone elites in Northern Kazakhstan). The absence of an ethnic or regional dimension to the elite pact inflates the potential for a destabilizing political mobilization along these cleavage lines. This instability can impede the overall state transition and consolidation process, as the conflicts in Chechnya, Transndistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh on Russia, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively demonstrate.

There can be little doubt, in our view, that the successful management of ethnic and regional diversity and conflict-potential is a prerequisite for political stability as well as the foundation for successful democratic consolidation and economic transition – though not for the onset of the transition process itself. Transitology’s persistent focus
A Neo-Institutionalist Explanation of Ethnic and Regional Conflict in the FSU

Logically, we should begin our analysis with those institutions for managing ethnicity and regional issues which were already in place when the USSR collapsed. Since the ethno-federal institutional structure was one of the key interlocking mechanisms for integrating national and sub-national level politics (the other being the CPSU), what was the fate of these institutional legacies of the Soviet era in the state-building projects of the successor states? It is crucial to remember that we are dealing with new states which have suffered a severe institutional debilitation as a result of Gorbachev’s disastrous mismanagement of reform and the strains of transition. By 1991 many of the successor states are in a steadily accelerating spiral into anarchy. In such conditions, how was the Soviet institutional legacy re-engineered or re-tooled to manage issues of autonomy and centralization? What was the relationship between the handling of the institutional legacy and the descent into conflict and anarchy? In addressing these questions our framework diverges from the existing approaches to post-Soviet ethnic conflicts in three key aspects.

Firstly, we suggest that the unit of analysis be shifted away from the nation-state level per se to a multi-level analysis, examining the relations between territorial authorities within states and the role of external states. The latter has two dimensions: first, the impact of the international community on potential and violent conflict, and second, the impact of successor states and their conflicts and non-conflicts on each other, including most importantly the role of the Russian Federation in all of the violent and potential conflicts in the FSU. We can view this as a type of interdependence of transitioning states and conflicts in terms of control and contagion effects. Secondly, we try to systematically disentangle and address both regional and ethnic issues which are often either subsumed under the generic term ‘ethnic conflict’ or conflated in the discussion about regionalism. The key question here is whether or not ethnicity was in fact the main cause of conflict or its driving force. Thirdly, we compare the different strategies of accommodation and coercion pursued in the new states and at the same time assess their relative impact on the process of transition or democratic consolidation as a whole.

Ethnic and regional conflicts are fought in the name of emotionally charged identity issues such as ethnicity, language, territory and historically conditioned memories and rights. A contested territorial issue that is tied to a sovereignty claim is usually at the root of an ethnic and regional conflict. If competing claims are not prevented, regulated or managed by political control or institutional compromise, the resulting discontent can develop into radicalized zero-sum conflicts that eradicate or
marginalize the space for political compromise. Such competing claims may be mobilized by ethno-historical mythologies as well as by socio-economic grievances. They may be essentially domestically driven (endogenous), or they may involve the interference of significant external (exogenous) factors and agencies. Brubaker has encapsulated this interference in his notion of the ‘triadic nexus’ between ‘nationalising state’, ‘national minority’, and ‘homeland state’ (Brubaker, 1996: 23-54; 55-76). Brubaker’s notion depicts national minorities as the key state- and nation-building issue, and assumes a degree of political mobilization on the part of these minorities, but nevertheless fails to address the often overarching influence of great powers or international organizations in the management of ethnic and regional conflicts. Sometimes wider diasporas also may have a significant impact on the nation- and state-building process of a homeland state.

While primordialists see ethnicity as an innate category that has existed continuously throughout history, both the instrumentalist and constructivist approach see ethnicity and nationalism as a modern phenomenon. For primordialists, ethnic conflict is a struggle for hegemony between competing claims of identity based principally on common language, shared history, and appropriated territory. Instrumentalists focus on the role of elites in mobilizing the population along ethnic lines for specific political goals, where ethnicity is primarily a label used for political advantage. Thus, ethnic conflict is not inherently different from other types of political activity and likewise should be amenable to political bargaining and incentives. The constructivist approach defines ethnicity in terms of ongoing processes of identity construction and deconstruction. The focus in this case is not primarily on elite interests and individual choices, but on ethnicity as a social identity and product of social interaction. Thus, it can be internalized by groups, for example as a collective response to discrimination on the basis of group identity (Lake and Rothchild, 1998: 5-6).

Most studies of ethnic conflicts, whether comparative or single-case studies, attempt to classify them and, if appropriate, the means of conflict-regulation employed in order to come to a finite set of strategies. The result is a range of taxonomies with ever expanding categories. The most elaborate taxonomies have identified from eight ‘end or mend’ strategies for the regulation of ethnonational differences (McGarry and O’Leary, 1993: 1-40)10, to as many as fifty (Heraclides, 1997: 495-8). A taxonomy or classification system does not explain, however, the causes of particular conflicts and why certain strategies are chosen in any given case at any given time. There is also a tendency to employ vague correlations such as: ‘the greater the discrimination - the more likely is organised action’ (post-Soviet states offer several counter examples to this claim, for example, the Russian/Russophone speaking minorities in Estonia, Latvia and Northern Kazakhstan) or ‘the more strongly a person identifies with a group the more likely is action’ (Gurr and Harff, 1994: 83-84). Both theory and evidence are still lagging behind political developments, for as Carment and James have stated: ‘Agreement exists that some combination of economic, political and psychological factors can explain ethnic conflict. Consensus, however, ends at that point’ (Carment and James, 1997: 2). Our study does not aspire to add to these exhausting lists of possible causes of conflict. Instead, by focussing on the role of institutions and elites we aim to distinguish better between causal factors and contributing background conditions. In relation to the institutional issues at the root of many of the post-Soviet conflicts, the most frequently cited structural and contingent factors can be ranked in a new light. Thus, we will demonstrate how supposedly
‘ethnic’ conflicts are often, in fact, the result of ethnicized political, socio-economic or territorial issues.

Studies by Horowitz, Rothschild, Nordlinger and others observe that elites are key actors in the playing of the ethnic card as part of their own power-accumulating or profit-maximizing agenda. They also stress the importance of cross-cutting cleavages within supposedly united ethnic groups for the management of politicized ethnicity (Horowitz, 1985; Rothschild, 1981; Nordlinger, 1972). This emphasis may be theoretically sound, but in practice cross-cutting cleavages are less likely to generate the modified behaviour sought if a line of cleavage related to the national, ethnic or regional divisions is the dominant one. Similarly, Esman differentiates between ethnic conflicts that are characterized by internal divisions within groups (such as class, occupation, ideology, kinship-lineage), those that are driven by stratification between ethnic groups (a dominant versus subordinate relationship), and those that involve conflicts between segmented ethnic groups (essentially parallel power and status systems) (Esman, 1994: 20). The emphasis on elite mobilization in these approaches concurs with a core element of the transition literature. This offers us a useful descriptive tool, but it does not explain why elite rather than mass mobilization or both occurs. The scale and intensity of ethnic mobilization seems to have no general rule. In some successor states, in particular in Central Asia, the weakness of mass mobilization on any politicized issue is striking, and may indeed be a key factor in the low level of ethnic and regional conflict there. What we can say is that mass ethnic mobilization may also act as a constraint on elites, radicalizing opinion and limiting their policy and decisional calculus.

It is clear that pragmatic elite interests or perceptions of limited access or discrimination among elites or a part of the population can trigger conflict along ethnic or regional lines. While the arguments used in a particular ethnic conflict are nearly always couched within a rhetoric of identity, victimization and discrimination, the list of motivations is often much longer. The situational context and historical memories can determine which of the ethnic markers become most politically salient, but the key to the conflicts and also to conflict regulation is the rational and instrumental aspect of ethnicity. As Horowitz put it: ‘Ethnic conflict arises from the common evaluative significance accorded by the groups to acknowledged group differences and then played out in public rituals of affirmation and contradiction’ (Horowitz, 1985: 227). Horowitz detects two imperatives in ethnic conflicts the tension between which can result in violent conflict: the spontaneous and sentiment-driven element vs. the institutionally constrained element (Horowitz, 1985: 228). Ethnic conflict, then, is a political problem requiring a political solution, and for this to happen institutions are required. Formal institutions are critical, observed Horowitz, because they ‘structure incentives for political behaviour’ (1985: 601). The point was reinforced by O’Leary who noted that ‘the political regime within which national minorities operate, rather than their material or cultural grievances, may best explain their predispositions to be secessionists, federalists, or consociationalists’ (O’Leary, 1997, 217). In post-Soviet states, where the content of identity is highly uncertain and under construction as part of the simultaneity dilemma of nation- and state-building and transition processes, then institutional designs for managing potential conflicts is even more necessary. Our approach to regionalism and ethnic conflict in the FSU is, thus, informed by this focus on the key role of institutions in ethnic and regional politics.
This approach begs the question: what kind of institutions are we concerned with? The predominant behaviouralist school in political science was challenged in the 1980s by a renewed emphasis on the role of institutions – broadly defined – and their central role for mediation and aggregation between structural factors on the one hand and individuals and interest groups on the other hand. Institutions raise issues of inclusion and exclusion, of representation, mediation, efficiency and transaction costs. The economic historian North, in an attempt to integrate institutional analysis, economic and economic history, defined institutions as ‘any form of constraint that human beings devise to shape human interaction’ (North, 1990: 4). Importantly, his general definition includes both ‘formal constraints – such as rules that human beings devise – and informal constraints – such as conventions and codes of behaviour’. Another useful definition of ‘institution’, focusing on the political process, has been suggested by O’Donnell: ‘Institutions are regularized patterns of interaction that are known, practiced, and regularly accepted (if not normatively approved) by social agents who expect to continue interacting under the rules and norms formally or informally embodied in those patterns. (...) Some political institutions are formal organizations belonging to the constitutional network of a polyarchy (...). Others, such as fair elections, have an intermittent organizational embodiment but are no less indispensable’. According to O’Donnell, institutions are key elements in the political process because they perform a range of vital functions: they incorporate and exclude, they shape the probability of distribution of outcomes, they aggregate the action and organization of agents, induce patterns of representation, stabilize agents/representatives and their expectations, and they lengthen the time-horizon of actors (O’Donnell, 1996: 96-98).

The above definitions capture important aspects of the broad usage of the terms ‘institution’ and ‘institutionalization’ in our comparative analysis: the formal and informal nature of institutions, the dynamics between the institutional framework and those operating within it, the question of institutional design (institutionalization), institutional hierarchies, the implications of institutional change, whether the de-institutionalization of Soviet legacies by ‘nationalizing’ and state-building successor states, their reassembly, or their revamping into a new form. The use of institutionalised autonomy is obviously one key device for the management of regional and ethnic challenges, and the political dynamics generated by the granting, denial or withdrawal of autonomy underpin many post-Soviet conflicts. According to the above definitions, autonomy can be both a formal or informal institution, i.e. fixed by constitutional or legal rules or an informal practice, thus incorporating both de jure and de facto notions of autonomy. The discussion of regional and ethnic challenges and their institutionalization should not be exclusively tied to emerging or consolidated democracies, or to formal autonomy structures, but must be as inclusive as possible by incorporating authoritarian and quasi-dynastic regimes in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In the latter cases, informal institutional devices are more evident in the management of multiethnicity through informal cooption and reward structures.

One solution to the dilemma of multi-ethnicity in a democratizing state is the de-ethnification of politics, i.e. the removal of ethnicity from politics. Gellner, as we noted previously, offered us two solutions from European history for this: assimilation and ethnic-cleansing. For Snyder, the promotion of institutionalized power-sharing undermines democracy (Snyder, 2000: 40). This seems to us to be a rather
impracticable prescription for polyethnic states undergoing a regime transition, especially considering that ethnic identity could well be the first and last refuge for political actors in a time of accelerating insecurity, weakening state institutions and elite turnover. It is not the significance of the correlation with democratization indicated by Snyder that matters, but rather as Horowitz explains: ‘times of transition are often times of ethnic tension. When it looks as though the shape of the polity is being settled once and for all, apprehensions are likely to grow’ (Horowitz, 1985: 190). It is also the case that times of transition are interludes of opportunity. A secessionist aspiration, for example, may be revived or invigorated by the preoccupation of the centre with the trials of transition, as the cases of Nagorno-Karabagh and Chechnya suggest.

Comparative experience indicates that policies of ethnic inclusion can be structured through consociational power sharing or other accommodative institutional mechanisms (Lijphart, 1977). Kymlicka’s propositions on multiculturalism offer a range of institutional responses for guaranteeing group-specific rights (Kymlicka, 1995). Incentives, whether distributive, structural or both, as a means of conflict-management, in particular the use of power-sharing consociational and multicultural institutional designs, have become a key issue for policy-makers and political scientists. Horowitz defined these elements as follows: ‘Distributive policies aim to change the ethnic balance of economic opportunities and rewards. Structural techniques aim to change the political framework in which ethnic conflict occurs…’ (Horowitz, 1985: 596). Accommodations may well be dependent on ‘deliberate strategies of interethnic generosity’ (Hislope, 1998: 140-141), but it is on the key nexus of decisional elites, mobilized mass (or not as the case may be), and institutions in the realization of this ‘generosity moment’ that we must focus.

**Regionalism and Post-Soviet Conflicts**

The debates on divided societies tend to focus on ethnic cleavages, although *per definitionem* the term ‘divided societies’ covers a whole range of different cleavages, which may vary in strength and political significance or cross-cut one another. A key question to ask is what are the main politically significant or salient cleavages, and to what degree do they cause fragmentation? Do the different cleavages cross-cut and, therefore, counterbalance each other, or do they coincide in a mutually reinforcing manner and intensify political mobilization? How strong is the countervailing effect of an overarching identity or loyalty to the state? Following Lijphart, cross-cutting cleavages and overlapping membership in different groups are now widely regarded as the key mechanism for moderating political attitudes and actions and minimalizing the ethnic factor in politics, which may be cemented through institutionalized political parties (Lijphart, 1977). As we observed above, the moderating effect of cross-cutting cleavages on ethnopolitical allegiances is subject to powerful qualifications, for example the extent to which they cut across rather than coincide with each other, the differential intensity of the cleavages and the overall socio-economic context (McGarry and O’Leary, ch. 8). Regionalized multi-ethnicity is an interesting variant of cross-cutting ethnic allegiances. Cross-cutting cleavages of an equal intensity can simply lead to the formation of antagonistic groups and a further segregation of society. While the moderating effect of an overarching identity existed under ‘Soviet’ identity, it is absent in most of the successor states since they are new, identity
formation is in the making and is, in fact, concerned with breaking with the previously hegemonic ‘Soviet’ identity. In regions where residues of the Soviet identity persist, however, it has tended to act as a stabilizing force in potential conflicts by limiting or moderating ethnopolitical mobilization, such as in the cases of Crimea, Gagauzia, Northern Kazakhstan, in particular, and, to a lesser extent, Transdniestria.

The most generally applied framework for explaining trends in regional politics is the Lipset and Rokkan model of how cleavage structures are translated into voter alignments and party systems. Derived from their study of West European history, they distinguished between four types of cleavages: centre-periphery (cultural issues), state-church (ideological), land-industry (economic), worker-owner (class). Their argument that West European democratization evolved from a process whereby these cleavages were ‘frozen’ in a party system at the outset of the democratization process is not clearly relevant to the post-Soviet states where party systems are weak or non-existent (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967: 1-64). Although the Lipset-Rokkan model assumes rational actors, their historical account does not explain how elites mobilized cleavages for their own purposes and who these actors are. Their study, and Rokkan’s other work on regions, is more concerned with elaborating structural variation rather than with explaining the political phenomenon of regionalism as such, say the nature of the resources at stake and the strategic choices being made by the political and economic actors involved.

The Comparative Politics literature on regions resembles in many ways the literature on ethnic conflict in that it is driven by attempts to classify different types of regions, such as political, economic, administrative and cultural regions. As pointed out by Rokkan and Urwin in their study on West European regionalism, peripheral politicization results from an incongruity between cultural, economic and political roles - an incongruity which has existed as long as there have been states. Despite the distinctions between different types of regions, scholars of regionalism such as Rokkan, Urwin and Keating tend to concentrate their analysis on regions in which the ethnic cleavage is the predominant one. Their cases of regionalism are dominated by cases of nationalism, such as Catalonia, the Basque Country and Scotland (Rokkan and Urwin, 1983; Keating, 1988; Keating, 1998). Thus, the literature on regionalism tends to confl ate regionalism with nationalism within existing states. This trend is reflected in the literature on post-Soviet conflicts, where regional mobilization, based on patterns of settlement and the economic policies of the Soviet era, have often mistakenly been labelled ‘ethnic conflict’. While ethnic and regional grievances are often closely intertwined in both rhetoric and actual practice, we must specify to what extent ethnicity really has been the primary cause and the driving force behind the range of post-Soviet conflicts.

The International Dimension in Post-Soviet Conflicts

As we observed at the outset, most of the violent and potential post-Soviet conflicts have involved secession. The most basic characteristic of secession is that it is a political act perpetrated against an existing state. In this sense, it is essentially an international act, as it depends critically on the international climate of prevailing interests and norms, and ultimately reshapes, however marginally, the existing international order. Secession may result in the international recognition or partial
recognition of a new state, or non-recognition but *de facto* independence. While none of the regions in conflict considered here fall within the former category, many are in the latter category (for example, Chechnya 1996-9, Ajaria, Javakheti, Abkhazia and Transdnistria). The study of the international relations dimension of ethnic and regional conflicts has now moved beyond the realist assumption of the state as the sole actor in the international arena, and the focus of attention has mainly switched to the role of supra-national organizations or inter-regional blocs and networks. Only very recently has this discipline begun to incorporate ethnic groups as one of the range of possible non-state actors (Carment and James, 1997). Concurrently, the study of ethnic conflict and conflict-regulation has begun to place more emphasis on the internationalization of conflict. States and international organizations outside the conflict zone are, however, still mainly seen normatively as ‘mediators’ and ‘arbiters’ promoting or imposing a settlement, rather than pursuing self-interest. In this respect, it is a serious flaw in transitology that it has systematically neglected the role of the international dimension. The studies by Whitehead and Schmitter of the international dimension of democratization have given us some basic analytical tools, such as ‘control’, ‘contagion’, ‘consent’ and ‘conditionality’ (Whitehead, 1996: 3-25; Schmitter, 1996). We can re-appropriate these tools for the post-Soviet context and evaluate them in terms of templates for centralizing or regionalizing tendencies, demonstration effects, and incentives for conflict-management. Often they are tied to bilateral inter-state dependencies or membership in international organizations, such as the Council of Europe and the EU. Whitehead’s and Schmitter’s studies, however, offer us a narrow conception of the ‘international dimension’ by limiting it to the impact of Western democracies on transition countries.

We extend the concept of international dimension to include the interdependencies between transition countries and the impact they have on each other. In the FSU the issue of interdependence reverberates in both the links between regional and ethnic conflicts across the FSU and the way in which violent conflicts, in particular those of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and Chechnya, and attempts at conflict-management, as in Tatarstan, have shaped the perceptions of the elites and masses throughout the post-Soviet states. The involvement of the OSCE in all of the violent and some of the potential conflicts in the FSU provided an additional linkage between individual cases and decision-makers in conflict regions throughout the post-Soviet space. In fact, the OSCE initiatives also assume the comparability of post-Soviet conflict dynamics and promote a common bundle of resolution strategies. OSCE involvement has raised elite and public awareness of the causes of conflicts, the role of external agents and the feasibility of the institutional solutions recommended by the OSCE. Horowitz’s study of post-colonial Africa described how the international dimension of secessionist movements can lead to ‘reciprocal secessionism’. Sequences of separatism in one state can have demonstration effects that propel separatism into action elsewhere where it didn’t previously exist (Horowitz, 1985: 279-281). This could be a model for explaining the demonstration and contagion effects of post-Soviet conflicts within the former Soviet space (Carment and James, 2000). Carment and James define the central issue as ‘the conduct of states external to a conflict and the implications of internal changes (most notably democratization) for outside intervention’ (Carment and James, 1997: 3). This is a useful initial template for understanding the foreign policies of Russia and the West, in particular the USA, in post-Soviet conflicts, though it naively sidelines the vital economic interests that are often at stake. The role of transnational linkages between ethnic groups and their diasporas can
sometimes be as salient a factor as the impact of international factors on ethnic and regional conflict in general (Carment and James, 1997: 254). What is still missing from these approaches, however, is the impact that transition countries have on each other. In fact, we argue that the interdependent nature of post-communist transitions and post-Soviet conflicts is a sufficiently distinguishing feature to make them a specific type of conflict category.

A Two-Pillared Framework
We accept that post-Soviet conflicts are shaped by many factors. Among the most oft-cited are: historical legacies and memories of ethnic strife, international conditions, demography and settlement patterns, the degree of societal heterogeneity and the nature of cleavage structures, geography, political economy of transition, institutional engineering, the role of the military/security forces, elite and popular perceptions, and cultural proximity vs. difference. Our framework for comparative analysis is constructed around two pillars which we consider to be fundamental to all post-Soviet conflicts. The first is the context of post-imperialism, a term which refers to the breakdown of a complex ‘control regime’ (Lustick, 1979). The second is the way in which nation- and state-building in the successor states has attempted to come to terms with the legacies of the old system by discarding the whole or part, or recycling it.

Post-Imperialism and Failed States
There is a strong empirical link between the breakdown of empires, ethno-territorial conflicts and the failure of successor states. Empires as an instrument of hegemonic control, tend to act as a limiting constraint on ethno-territorial conflicts, and one of the characteristic features of the decline of empires is the rise of such conflicts. This is not to say simply that imperial breakdown opens a lid and releases ancient hatreds. Instead post-imperial conflicts thrive on the multi-dimensional nature of the imperial legacy: demographic, territorial, cultural, functional and institutional remnants of the Soviet empire, enhanced by social processes unleashed by the collapse of the old system and subsequent transition, all shape the potential for conflict. As Snyder pointed out: ‘This detritus of empire constitutes the building blocks of the new political arrangements that are constructed out of the rubble’(Snyder, 1998: 1).

If the end of empire is sudden the subsequent political vacuum and weak institutional capacity can render the conflicts with an explosive quality. Europe has been one of the most significant zones of such conflicts given the confluence of several major empires: the Ottoman, Habsburg, German, British, and Russian-Soviet empires. The end of the Ottoman empire, for example, was closely linked with Turkey’s genocide against the Armenians and forced population transfers with Greece and other Balkan states. The consequences of end of empire may take several decades to work their way through the system as the contemporary Turkish control regime against the Kurds demonstrates. The disintegration of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires resonates in the modern Balkan wars. The end of the Third Reich resulted in forced transfers of Germans from across Central and Eastern Europe. The gradual retreat of the British Empire left a lasting legacy of post-colonial conflicts which is most evident in
Northern Ireland, Africa and South Asia. The end of the Dutch empire reverberates in contemporary events in Indonesia. As Lieven, Snyder and Rubin et al. have argued, the ethnic conflicts that have arisen after the end of the Soviet empire, consequently, fit within a broader historical pattern (Rubin and Snyder, 1998; Lieven, 2000). The lesson of history is that such conflicts may persist or recur over the longue duree.

As discussed earlier, the twentieth century saw three periods, 1918-20, 1945, 1989-92, when the great powers dominating the international system sanctioned large-scale secessions from existing states, but they did so according to their own perceptions of national interests. These three periods have many similarities. The collapse of the Soviet Empire in the late 1980s and early 1990s resembles earlier periods characterized by the disintegration of great European empires, after World War I (the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Tsarist), and after World War II (the German Empire in Europe, the British and French empires outside Europe). Each of these periods saw international involvement in a highly selective policy of nation state-building in the emergent successor states. In essence, World War I marked a shift to nationalism as the major mobilizing political force in the international political system. In an unprecedented way the great powers acted collectively to manage nationalism over a huge territorial expanse in Central and Eastern Europe through the vaguely defined and selectively enforced Wilsonian principles of self-determination. In the process new nation-states were manufactured where none had previously existed, as in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Great Power intervention, arbitration and ‘hegemonic control’ also followed the defeat of Germany in 1945, when Europe was carved up into spheres of influence at Yalta. In a crude attempt at homogenization the Great Powers presided over the forced mass transfers of ethnic populations, mainly Germans, while in the Soviet Union there were mass deportations of Chechens, Crimean Tatars and other ‘suspect’ ethnic groups.

What is arguably different about the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, however, is that Russia’s inheritance of the Soviet nuclear arsenal has severely weakened the capacity of outside powers to reshape the post-Soviet order. NATO and EU enlargement are types of third-party intervention aiming to reshape the political order in Central and Eastern Europe, but the reach of these blocs is limited. One of the fundamental criteria of membership is the acceptance of existing territorial boundaries and internal guarantees for ethnic minorities. This kind of Western conditionality, however, has not been extended to the FSU with the exception of the Baltic states. In the FSU Russia retains its influence as an unrivalled regional power, and the West has been hesitant or incapable of intervention, as recently demonstrated by the renewal of war in Chechnya. Russia has been deeply involved in all of the violent and some potential post-Soviet conflicts, whether providing military, economic or political support, managing negotiations or organising peacekeeping forces with (as in Abkhazia and Tajikistan) or without (as in Transdnistria) UN mandates.

Potential for conflict is made more acute by the fact that the end of the Soviet empire was a different phenomenon compared to preceding empires. Most empires have collapsed as a consequence of military defeat. Exhaustion by war, as opposed to defeat, accounted for the collapse of the two largest European empires, the British and Soviet (Lieven, 2000). Arguably, the Cold War depleted the capacity of the Soviet Union and the will of its elites to compete with the West. The nature of the Soviet collapse, however, was extraordinarily fast by comparison with other empires,
including the British, taking little more than two years in 1990-1. This rapid deflation allowed virtually no time for conflict potential to be planned for, addressed, channelled or managed. In any event, empires are rarely deconstructed according to a plan and disengagement tends to be most problematic the closer empire is to the imperial core, as the anti-colonial struggles in Ireland and Algeria demonstrate. The fact that Russia’s empire was contiguous with its core inevitably made for a much more complex and destabilising disengagement. Secondly, the sheer scale of the disintegration, the Soviet Union being one of history’s greatest land empires, created a surge of demonstration and contagion effects among the new states. Thirdly, the Soviet empire was organized in an ethno-federal structure, many of the units of which were highly multi-ethnic within their administrative boundaries. Thus, the Soviet collapse released pre-institutionalized ‘nation-states in embryo’ most of which had no historical provenance as independent entities, and where they had a history it did not conform to their Soviet boundaries. The task of building or consolidating nations and states was a formidable one in such circumstances, and was complicated even more by the selective policy of Western recognition. Fourthly, and most importantly, the configuration of the collapse was exceptional as the imperial core, Russia, played a central part in the dismantling of its contiguous empire. This very element of contiguity explains why Russia has retained a considerable influence over developments in many successor states since proximity is not merely an excuse for interference but creates a security and national interest logic for it. Territorial proximity was a ready-made rationale for continued Russian interest and, when deemed necessary, interference in the affairs of successor states in the ‘near abroad’. The term ‘near abroad’ (blizhnee zarubezh’e) itself has imperialist overtones, being more meaningfully understood as ‘our own nearest abroad’.

Federalism as a state organising principle fits more readily with the logic of empire, whereas unitary systems accord with the logic of nationalism. By definition empires are often quasi-federal in that they are multinational and local governance is devolved to authorities within specific colonies, whilst matters of more general importance (foreign policy, defence, trade, taxation) remain centralized under the control of the imperial government. The post-colonial experience in Africa and Asia with federalism demonstrates that there can be a significant disincentive for successor states to adopt it after independence, particularly if the pressure for this originates from external sources such as the former imperial power, or international organizations, and thus suggesting a continued paternalistic threat to sovereignty. At the same time, it is often the only stabilizing institutional mechanism for ethnically divided states, though not without significant problems as largest post-colonial federations, India and Nigeria, demonstrate.

Consequently, we may view post-Soviet state-building as being conditioned by an intricate interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors. On the one hand, an endogenous factor is evident in the way that state-building proceeds in multi-national territorial constructs inherited from an imperial era, amidst unleashed conflicts over competing nationalistic, ethnic or separatist challenges. In this respect, how the institutional legacies have been disassembled and reassembled is of particular importance. The exogenous factor is embodied in the fact that state-building has occurred not only in a post-imperial but also in a truly international and global context where international intervention to regulate conflicts has acquired a new legitimacy, although not necessarily more effective capacity for enforcement. We should also take
note of the role of international competition, in particular between Russia and the USA/NATO/EU, in determining how and when conflicts will be settled.

**Institutionalization and De-Institutionalization**

The concurrence of post-imperialism and the legacy of communist federalism is a fertile ground for ethnic and regional conflict. While Soviet federalism was little more than a sham, the ethno-territorial institutional edifice provided the basis for political mobilization once the Communist Party’s monopoly of power and will for coercion disintegrated. Bunce, following Brubaker’s earlier account, has argued from a neo-institutionalist perspective that the collapse of communist federations into ethnic conflicts is indicative of the ‘subversive’ nature of their institutionalization of territorialized identities (Bunce, 1999). These studies emphasize how ethnic identities are constructed and territorialized in communist federations, how potential conflicts were controlled and mediated by communist parties, state and other institutions and how the discourses of nationalism were directed and controlled. Accordingly, there are four main underlying elements in the rise of conflict:

1. the arbitrary drawing of boundaries and redistribution of territory and resources over time.
2. patterns of communist-era population settlement and ‘settler colonialism’ by the hegemonic population (Russian-speaking settlers, mainly Slavs).
3. problems arising from the territorial rehabilitation of displaced peoples and back-migration.
4. institutionalized multinationality (the ‘subversive’ institutions thesis).

We follow Brubaker and Bunce in arguing that the ‘institutionalized multinationality’ embodied in Soviet federalism created a specific ‘breeding ground’ for ethnopolitical mobilization during and after the collapse. When the overarching supranational political entity – the Soviet Union – disintegrated, the default mechanism and starting-point for reconstructing elites and political identity was the inherent, if hollowed out, institutional autonomization. The disempowered formal structures of the communist system were empowered by a sudden transfer of elites and political capital from the collapsing communist party. Brubaker, Bunce et al., therefore, rightly in our view, focus on the role of ethno-territorial institutions during the breakdown phase of communism.

Their approach is insufficient however. Our framework takes this approach one step further by applying it not only to the old system that disintegrated, but to the reassembly and construction of the new post-communist systems. Our hypotheses are twofold. Firstly, we argue that the institutional legacy of the Soviet era, in particular institutionalized multinationality, may not only explain the patterns of the breakdown of the communist system, but also the patterns of state-building during post-communist transition. Moreover, Soviet-era interdependencies reverberate in the demonstration and contagion effects of conflict and conflict-management. These hypotheses lend support to Bunce’s critique of transitology in the extensive Slavic Review debate (1994-95) with Schmitter, Karl and others. In this debate Bunce disagreed with the generalized comparative approach applied to post-communist transitions by Schmitter and Karl, arguing instead that there were good grounds for
regarding post-Soviet cases as a separate ‘regional’ category – states that shared a common legacy and the impact of specific domestic and international ‘regional’ factors. Similarly, we argue that post-Soviet conflicts are best understood and explained in this post-Soviet context, thus highlighting at once their specific features and comparability.  

Our second hypothesis is that the role of regions is fundamental to post-communist transition. We suggest that many of the violent and non-violent post-Soviet conflicts are primarily regional rather than clear-cut ethnic conflicts (Transdnistria, Crimea, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Ajaria), or are impelled by regionalist factors in addition to the ethnic dimension (Nagorno-Karabagh, Abkhazia, and Northern Kazakstan, South Ossetia). Ethnic and regional challenges have tended to obstruct down the overall reform process in the successor states, but where they have been resolved they have helped to cement a more civic definition of the successor state, provided that national and regional elites are willing to engage in compromise and seize the ‘generosity moment’. Examples of this are Crimea’s role in Ukraine, Gagauzia in Moldova, and the possibility for ‘civic’ accommodations with Tatarstan and Bashkortostan and other ethnic republics in the Russian Federation. Confederal, federal, and common state solutions are widely recognized to be the best basis for future settlements and accommodations of other conflict cases, in particular in Chechnya, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

In conclusion, the analysis presented here holds that post-Soviet state-building in a context of territorised multiethnicity involved a de-institutionalization of the legacies of the old system. In this sense the post-Soviet successor states are disassembled states. While conflicts tend to be radicalizing events, the effect of which may make an institutional ‘fix’ ineffective or inapplicable, the extent to which these states are successful in stabilizing their conflict potential to a large extent rests on their state capacity for creating a new institutional architecture. There are two main variants for this: either the establishment of a new ‘control’ regime, or the re-assembly and re-institutionalization of provisions for multiethnicity in ways which may or may not draw on elements of the discarded old regime. Both variants may be effective at managing multiethnicity, but only the latter comes with an international seal of approval.
Bibliography


Schmitter, Philippe and Terry Lynn Karl, ‘The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How far to the East should they go?’, Slavic Review, 53, 2, 173-185 and


Endnotes

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1 A recent article on conflicts in the Caucasus in *The Economist* illustrates this stereotyping very well. A hotchpotch of misreporting of facts and the roles of external actors, such as Russia, USA or Europe, in stabilising the region, it presents a crude table of the stereotypical characteristics of the parties to the various conflicts. See ‘The Caucasus: Where Worlds Collide’, *The Economist*, 19 August 2000, pp. 19-23.

2 David Laitin’s study of the Russian diaspora reveals that Russian and Soviet settlers are often content to assimilate to the post-Soviet nationalising state (Laitin, 1998).

3 Wilson’s own Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, insisted that the principle should be applied to ‘certain races’ only. In creating new states, the Great Powers at Versailles neither respected ethnic self-determination considerations in Europe (as the cases of Germany and Hungary all too clearly demonstrated) or in Germany’s colonies, nor indeed in their own domains (Halperin et al, pp. 16-19).

4 Conflicts leading to indeterminate status for territories include those between Israel and Palestine and neighbouring Arab states, India and Pakistan over Kashmir, Greece and Turkey over Northern Cyprus, Taiwan, and Northern Ireland.

5 Most infamously in the ‘Chicken Kiev’ speech of US President George Bush.

6 It remains to be seen how the latest test case for this policy of recognition, Kosovo, will be resolved, but as of April 2001 the territory is militarily occupied by a NATO and Russian force and has an indeterminate status.

7 This appears to be common in state break-ups: the centre argues that peripheries within the secessionist unit should also have the right of secession. Examples include the promotion by UK elites of the ‘Ulster Question’ leading to the partition of Ireland in 1921, and the Canadian federalists’s encouragement of Inuit claims in Quebec.

8 Snyder describes the link between democratization and conflict as follows: ‘As more people begin to play a larger role in politics, ethnic conflict within a country becomes more likely, as does international aggression justified by national ideas.’ (p. 27) He also includes the prospects of incomplete democratization: ‘Democratization gives rise to nationalism because it serves the interests of powerful groups within the nation who seek to harness popular energies to the tasks of war and economic development without surrendering real political authority to the average citizen.’ (p. 36)

9 Belatedly, in recent work Stepan has recognised the importance of federalism as a stabilizing device in multietnic states undergoing democratization.

10 They distinguish between eight different forms of macro-political conflict-regulation in two categories: *Methods for eliminating differences* (genocide, forced mass-population transfers, partition and/or secession (self-determination), integration and/or assimilation), and; *Methods for managing differences* (hegemonic control, arbitration (third-party intervention), cantonisation and/or federalisation, consociationalism or power-sharing.

11 This instrumental interpretation of ethnicity is informed by rational choice theories. There is an expanding literature on ethnicity and rational choice, but for the purposes of this volume the mere acknowledgement that pragmatic choices can underpin ethnopolitical mobilization will suffice.

12 These are: 1. self-government rights (devolution of power, federalisation, difficult balance between centralization and decentralization); 2. polyethnic rights (e.g. the permission to express cultural particularities without fear of discrimination or prejudice); 3. special representation rights (e.g. a certain number of seats in the legislature reserved for a specific group).

13 Steven M. Fish has recently reminded political scientists of Durkheim’s dictum that comparisons are most fruitful among societies that are ‘varieties of the same species’ (cited in Fish, 823), as seen in the post-communist world.