

BOOK REVIEW

Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space: New Tools and Approaches

Edited by Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese, Oxon, UK and New York, USA
Routledge Post-Soviet Politics Series, 2019, 258 pp., £120.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-4724-5476-8; £29.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-367-28135-9, £26.99 (eBook) ISBN 9781315597386.

The collapse of state socialism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union have had critical impacts on the former state socialist countries. Alongside with the political and economic restructuring, post-socialism has brought dramatic changes in the context of culture, history, memory and identity (see for example, Naumov & Weidenfeld, 2019; Young & Light, 2001). Although there has been considerable academic interest on these changes over time, the number of theoretical and empirical contributions on nation-building and politics of identity construction in the post-Soviet world is still limited.

Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space: New Tools and Approaches is a well-organised, structured and comprehensive text that seeks to address this gap. Aimed at scholars, academics, students and the wider academic community, this edited volume brings an impressive number of empirical contributions and case studies on nation-building, identity, collective memory and religion among others. The book draws on substantial number of cases mainly from Eurasia and provides a very holistic overview in terms of how state and non-state actors use traditional and non-traditional instruments to construct nationalism and national identity.

As the editors point out in their introductory chapter, literature on nation-building and identity in the former Soviet world has been growing exponentially since the political changes in the early 1990s but the majority of previous studies have explored the process of identity construction from a purely political perspective (see for example, Budryte, 2005; Kolstø, 2000). Studies examining identity construction from a socio-cultural perspective, focused on nation-building and everyday life (e.g. Isaacs & Polese, 2015; Simons & Westerlund, 2015) have only recently begun to appear. In this context, the book is a very good response to the ever-changing social and political realities across the post-Soviet states.

As Isaacs and Polese explicitly point out in the introduction, nation-building is a state-sanctioned process that involves the construction of a series of identity markers (11). Each one of the twelve chapters of the volume demonstrates this process and focuses on the key actors involved and particularly, the role they play in the respected individual cases. The book is thematically divided into two sections: the first one (Chapters 1-6) dealing with what the 'traditional' tools of nation-building (such as official state policies and discourses) and the second one (Chapters 7-12) focused on the 'non-traditional' tools (such as projects, not initiated for nation-building purposes but eventually having this very influence).

In *Chapter 1*, Fabio De Leonardis explores collective memory and nation-building in Georgia. Drawing on the neo-liberal agenda of Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement, De Leonardis provides a very holistic and critical overview on the public discourse about (re)constructing national identity and in particular, how collective memory and history can be utilized as significant political tools to serve the need of the ruling political elite. The chapter provides a very thought-provoking and engaging analysis on the controversial and rather contested socialist (Soviet) monumentality.

In *Chapter 2*, Davenel and Kim explore the traditional policy tools used to integrate two minorities group into post-Soviet Kazakhstan. By examining the assimilation of the Korean and Tatar minorities, the authors also demonstrate the difficulties and controversies to forge a multi-ethnic and coherent nation-state. The Korean minority and their choice to fully recognise the Kazakhstani-led discourse, is an example of a strategy taken to ensure the maintenance of their identity within the state-led multi-ethnic nationalism. On the contrary, the Tatar minority has chosen the much more complex resistance movement as an attempt to forge a revival of their cultural and ethnic identities. The main emphasis (and contribution) of the chapter is that it highlights how a state-led policy can stimulate different integration strategies and responses in the context of minorities. A significant argument that has also been supported sufficiently is that assimilation processes in the context of nation-building and identity (re)construction is not necessarily a top-down approach but one in which different groups (e.g. minorities) can produce different nationalising discourses and practices.

In *Chapter 3*, Didem Buhari Gulmez explores the critical importance of religion as an important nation-building tool in the context of Crimea, and more specifically, among the Crimean Tatar population. In her work, Gulmez touches upon the rather problematic and

sometimes paradoxical influence of Islam and focuses primarily on how religion is often used as a tool to proclaim differentiation (in this case, from the Russian and Ukrainian communities in Crimea) and forge nationalist movements. By examining the formation of the Tatar nationalist movement, the author demonstrates how Islam has been used to mobilise the community and stimulate a bottom-up identity formation. However, it is the rise of nationalism and the use of religion that are contextually considered as a threat to state security and national unity, especially after the Russia occupation in 2014.

In *Chapter 4*, Teresa Wigglesworth-Baker examines the state language policy in Tatarstan and gives us a detailed picture of the resistance demonstrated by the Russian minorities in Tatarstan to accept the introduction of the Tatar language at local schools. Through an empirical investigation based on both qualitative and quantitative methods, Wigglesworth-Baker's chapter reveals two different issues in the context of nation-building. First, there are notable tensions between ethnic communities in Tatarstan and between the communities that inhabit this area. Second, the nation-building process, including the linguistic policies at schools, are only effective if practiced on daily basis.

In *Chapter 5*, Aimar Ventsel presents a very engaging contribution on the use of Sakha language. Exploring the use and non-use of Sakha, Ventsel first demonstrates how the use and active promotion of Sakha marginalises other indigenous communities in the area but later provided evidence how the demand for Sakha grew with the public sector demand for native speakers. Ventsel also refers to this as 'partial nationalising' process (115).

In *Chapter 6*, Karli Storm analyses the legal status of language as an analytical marker. Drawing on the context of Georgia, Storm traces the rather problematic case of the protection of Azerbaijani language and the nation-building process within the Azeri communities in Georgia. The chapter demonstrates that although the Azerbaijani language is legally protected (as a minority language), this legal protection has little impact in real life, and she demonstrates that with the marginalisation of the Azerbaijani language on the basis of separatism, division and suspicion.

The remaining chapters focus on the 'non-traditional tools' of nation-building within the post-Soviet space. In *Chapter 7*, Rico Isaacs examines how cinema has been utilized as a tool for nation-state formation in Kazakhstan. His work demonstrates the existence of ethnic,

religious and socio-economic narratives but most importantly, explains the emergence of multiple Kazakh identities. An important contribution is that the post-Soviet Kazakh identity formation is an ongoing and contested process and there are many alternatives to the state-sanctioned authorised discourse. In *Chapter 8*, Polese and Horák explore personality cults and nation-building. The case of Turkmenistan illustrates the ‘de-ethnicization’ processes that have been put in place in the post-Soviet era and particularly, the emergence of a politically correct interpretation of history. The personality cults for the first and second post-Soviet political leaders is a good example of a national identity construction not based on the idea of state and nation but on personality, in this case the president figure. In *Chapter 9*, Elizabeth Miltz explores the national representation of Azerbaijan as a part of the Eurovision Song Contest (Baku, 2012). Her work points out explicitly how visual promotional materials, including various media resources, sought to project Azerbaijan as a very, modern, vibrant and European nation. As she demonstrates in her analyses, this was a bit paradoxical given the rather semi-authoritarian political leadership and she also presents some very good insights in terms of how this more ‘Western’ image also differs from the public perceptions. In *Chapter 10*, Filippo Menga takes us to Tajikistan and explores how the Tajik government has used a construction project for nationalist and ideological purposes. Menga highlights how the state authorities tied the success of the project to the success of their political rule, as a triumph of the political discourse which was key to the politics of identity construction. In *Chapter 11*, Donnacha Ó Beacháin explores the rather neglected relationship between national elections and nation-building. Drawing on the unrecognised state of Abkhazia in Georgia, the author focuses on the representation of ethnic Abkhaz in the post-Soviet era and some demographic complexities as a result of the war in the early post-Soviet period. In *Chapter 12*, Saglar Bougdaeva provides a comparative analysis of the mortality rates among Muslims and non-Muslims in Russia. Given the imposed acculturation of Muslims in Tsarist and Soviet Russia, the author discusses the ‘survival paradox’ of the Muslim minorities and stresses the need to focus on ethno-religious identities.

Overall, the book is very well organised and structured to a high level. It will comprise a good learning resource for anyone interested in nationalism, politics of identity construction, geographies of religion, cultural studies, and political geography. The book demonstrates different approaches to nation-building in a region that is widely recognised as a contested arena for ethnic, religious and political conflicts. Further, the volume also demonstrates that

nation-building goes beyond the rhetoric, top-down and state-led politics of nationalism and identities are very often renegotiated and reinterpreted at sub-national level.

References

- Budryte, Dovile 2005. *Taming Nationalism? Political Community Building in the Post-Soviet Baltic States*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Young, Craig and Duncan Light 2001. "Place, National Identity and Post-socialist Transformations: an Introduction." *Political Geography*, 20(8): 941-955.
- Isaacs, Rico and Abel Polese. 2015. "Between 'Imagined' and 'Real' Nation-building and Film in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan." *Nationalities Papers* 43(3): 339-416.
- Kolstø, Pål. 2000. *Political Construction Sites: Nation-building in Russia and the Post-Soviet States*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Naumov, Nikola and Adi Weidenfeld. 2019. "From Socialist Icons to Post-Socialist Attractions: Iconicity of Socialist Heritage in Central and Eastern Europe." *Geographia Polonica* 92(4): 379-393.
- Simons, Greg and David Westerlund. 2015. *Religion, Politics and Nation-building in Post-communist Countries*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Nikola Naumov
University of Northampton, United Kingdom
nick.naumov@northampton.ac.uk