

Transition from the Imperial to the Soviet Model in Russian National Policy: Political and Legal Aspects

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Abstract: Considering the multiethnic composition of Russia and due to local and global changes in the modern ethno-political and ethno-social situation, the problem of regulation of interethnic relations is relevant and important both from scientific and practical point of view. National policy is a special sphere of state regulation which, on the one hand, requires the understanding of the nature and mechanisms of ethnic processes and on the other hand, possesses the integrative character, since its implementation is carried out in different areas of society-economic, political, social and cultural ones. The study analyzes the transitional period in the national policy that is related to the change of the national state system model from imperial unitary one, expressed in the formula “united and indivisible Russia” to the Soviet-based federalism. The analysis of these models shows that in the framework of the Russian Empire there existed mechanisms of realization of the interests of the peoples living in it while “Soviet federalism” was a fairly conventional design.

Key words: National policy, inter-ethnic relations, cultural autonomy, self-determination up to secession, national state polity, Soviet federalism

INTRODUCTION

In the multiethnic state like Russia, the solution of socio-economic and political problems is often connected with the problem of optimization of inter-ethnic relations. Therefore, a central role in scientific discussions is given to the problem of searching the effective mechanisms for resolving ethnic conflicts and the optimal forms of state polity in the conditions of multi-ethnicity. In this view, it is quite logical to appeal to the historical experience of nation building.

It is advisable to address the factors of inter-ethnic relations in the context of the development of the Russian (Soviet) historical system. To understand the problem not only the study of the principles and guidelines of national policy matters but also a comprehensive review of a number of factors which influenced the inter-ethnic interaction and the attempts to model a new international type of interaction. It should be taken into account that some factors appeared during the centuries of the genesis of the Russian state and society while the others emerged during the implementation of the Soviet national policy. It is their complex connection that determined the result of nation and state building, the changes in the sphere of inter-ethnic relations.

It should be noted that the experience of inter-ethnic cooperation in Russia, including the Soviet period, in many of its manifestations is an example of a positive ethnic and cultural dialogue. Although, of course, this does not imply the lack of problems requiring scientific

analysis and practical solutions, systematizing and identifying positive and negative aspects of the experience of regulation of inter-ethnic relations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological approaches and research categorical apparatus require some updates. On the one hand, the contradictions of formation approach with its simplistic understanding of nation and national policy has not been fully overcome in historical science yet. On the other hand, modern approaches to the study of ethnic and multiethnic communities are characterized by the diversity of interpretations.

Considering this problem in the evolutionary formation of historiography some periods can be singled out which are characterized by changes in the socio-political situation in the country and by the evolution of scientific and historical approaches to this issue connected with such situation. In the pre-revolutionary period the scientific understanding of the national question as well as the development of legal and political mechanisms of its solution were in its infancy and were marked by the variety of different views beginning with the official formula “united and indivisible Russia” to the slogan of “self-determination up to secession”.

As part of the Soviet period, the task of nation and state building were comprehended in terms of the formation approach. Since, its inception the development

of the problem has had two most significant features. Firstly, it was wholly and completely conditioned on Communist Party politics, its ideology and program documents on the national question and was based on the ideas formulated by Lenin (1969, 1973) and Stalin (1954). Secondly, the development of the issue had a definite practical and political context and was accompanied by the creation of complex political apparatus for the implementation of national policy.

In times of crisis and renewal of national historiography in the late 1980s and early 1990s new approaches to the study of national policy and inter-ethnic relations were developed: civilizational, cultural anthropological, the study of problems of regionalism and federalism, etc. Modern ideas on the development of a multinational state are characterized by the attempts to overcome the ideological bias of the subject and to expand methodological approaches.

The actual problem of modern social humanitarian knowledge is theoretical and methodological reconsideration of ethno-cultural processes in Russia, including a special model of regulating the inter-ethnic relations developed in the Soviet period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Main part: In the early 20th century, Russia was in a state of deepening systemic crisis affecting all the spheres of society. The sphere of national relations was no exception. Alongside with the key issues of power, land, workers status, the national question was one of the stumbling blocks of Russian reality and caused widespread controversy in social political circles.

The national question had its own peculiarities in Russia. Firstly, its statement was a relatively new phenomenon; its scientific development began in the 19th century while the state was considered as the main ethnos forming force. The transfer of such views to the political sphere meant that the determination of national policy became the prerogative of the state (Shevkulenko, 1999).

Secondly, the national liberation movement in Russia was politically formalized only in the early 20th century. However, such phenomena as the exacerbation of ethnic relations, the growth of national consciousness of some peoples in Russia, the forming of intelligentsia, generating the ideological foundations of nationalism were manifested in the mid-19th century and have gradually assumed significance ever since. On the one hand, this led to the lack of the precise mechanisms of solving the national question. On the other hand, the unresolved issue caused its aggravation and made Russian political

mechanism quite unstable. The reforms carried out in Russia in the early 20th century did not affect the sphere of inter-ethnic relations; therefore, a revolutionary way of solving the national question was formed.

At the same time, the discussion of this issue was quite broad. Since, the official division of the Russian Empire population was not so much ethnic but rather confessional, the State Duma of Russia discussed the necessity to abolish the restrictive laws concerning peoples "belonging to non-Christian religions". But the Duma could not considerably affect the internal policy in addition such discussions did not take into account the fact of the growth of consciousness of Russian peoples which was based on ethnic identity.

Russian political parties and movements offered their own solutions of the national question which finally took shape in 1917. The following alternatives could be distinguished: maintaining Russia united and indivisible, granting cultural autonomy, creating the federation based not on the principle of ethnic but administrative territorial division.

The most radical option was proposed by the Bolsheviks: the self-determination of peoples of the state up to secession. It has found a wide response among the representatives of national movements which allowed the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (of Bolsheviks) to expand the social base.

The events in February 1917 gave an opportunity to the realization of one of several alternatives to resolve this issue and the rise to power of the Bolsheviks in October 1917 determined the course of national policy based on the principles of internationalism and peoples self-determination.

However, it was way too hard to put these principles into practice which moreover, seemed quite impossible in the conditions of civil war and political. Therefore, the implementation of the Party program on the national question took a systematic character only in the 1920s. This period is marked by the search for optimal forms of national state formation of their integration into the Soviet system and of resolving the increasingly arising inter-ethnic conflicts in unstable conditions.

The necessary condition was not just "putting together" the territories of the former Russian empire under the jurisdiction of the Soviet power but the modeling of a new social type which implied the proletarian centralized state as a transitional form. However, many phenomena of Russian reality did not comply with the framework of the Marxism-Leninism pattern. The ruling party was inevitably faced with the need to address the national question which was settled

with the use of such method as nation state building in accordance with the statements of the Party program on self-determination of nations.

The accelerated forming of socialism in the lack of conditions for it was quite an undertaking. The Party was prepared to sustain certain losses in order to achieve the main goal. V.I. Lenin noted: "we are fighting on the grounds of our country, uniting the workers of all nations in the country; we cannot vouch for any particular path of national development, through all possible ways we are to go to our class goal".

The thesis on the dialectics of the national question in fact concealed its secondary, derivative meaning. Such approach gave the contradictory nature to the national policy.

However, enough attention has been paid to the theoretical development of the problem and then to its implementation. The Party national program was based on such principles as the right of nations to self-determination and internationalism which was determined by two historical tendencies in the national question: "first: the awakening of national life and national movements, the struggle against all national oppression, the creation of national states. Second: the development and acceleration of all kinds of relations between nations, the breakdown of national barriers, the creation of national unity of capital, of economic life in general, of politics, science, etc." At the same time, the tendencies to break down national barriers and to obliterate national distinctions are regarded as "one of the greatest driving forces transforming capitalism into socialism" (Lenin, 1969).

Based on the bifurcation of the national question for "oppressor nation" and "oppressed nation" particular tasks were defined which were eventually reduced to their unification into a socialist nation (devoid of ethnic content).

Thus, a dual task was set before the proletariat and the Party: "to uphold the most resolute and consistent democracy in all parts of the national question", to fight against national oppression for the sovereignty of nations but not for the national culture in general (as the strengthening the bourgeois nationalism). "The proletariat cannot support any consolidation of nationalism, on the contrary, it supports everything that helps to obliterate national distinctions and remove national barriers".

It is characteristic that while addressing the national question in general no categorial precision was developed, despite the apparent exact stage scheme (tribe, nationality and nation). On the one hand, the term "nation" in the social democratic view was defined in ethnic rather than civic sense. Stalin (1954) defined a

nation as "a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." It was emphasized that only when all these characteristics come together, it is possible to speak of a "nation".

On the other hand, "the ethnic was perceived and used as a "the social" in accordance with the Russian cultural tradition in which "the national" was perceived as a characteristic of the "people" (in a social sense of the term); and the class division on socio-economic grounds into "two nations in every modern nation" only strengthened this trend.

Therefore, to eliminate this contradiction it was necessary to achieve the social homogeneity. As Lenin wrote, the complete equality of nations and languages "highlights in each nation purely democratic elements (i.e., only the proletarians), combining them not by nationality but by the desire for a deep and serious improvements in the overall system of the state".

National policy, thus was a part of the socio-political agenda and the political, economic and social activities gained a "national" feature.

The national question was closely connected with the task of restoring the national economy, with its socialist development. In this sense it was mostly the peasant question for the national population of the outskirts consisted mainly of peasants. The Party was to develop methods to ensure backward peoples in the construction of socialism bypassing the stage of capitalism. Therefore, the course for "elimination of actual inequality" was at the base of the national policy which required first of all to create industry in all the areas national and to assist in the development and strengthening of the Soviet state, the training of national cadres (Volin and Zaitsev, 1985).

Conducting Leninism national policy was biased in two ways: great-power chauvinism and local nationalism. The most dangerous was chauvinism as it "threatened to break the unity of the peoples rallied under the banner of internationalism in the struggle for socialism" (Volin and Zaitsev, 1985).

Nation and state building became the institutional design solution of the national question and self determination of peoples. The rights of "oppressed nationalities" and national minorities were integrated with the task of centralization through the "democratic centralism" which did not exclude local government autonomy which had particular economic and social conditions. Yet the recognition of self-determination was as Lenin noted, "not equivalent to the acknowledgement of federation as a principle".

Explaining the content of the slogan of self-determination up to secession, Lenin noted that the question of the right of nations to self-determination must not be confused with the expediency of secession of a particular nation. The party must resolve this question "in each case completely independently from the viewpoint of the interests of social development and the interests of the proletariat class struggle for socialism".

The request of nations for the right to self-determination only implied the consistent expression of struggle against all national oppression. In the words of Lenin, "the closer the democratic state system is to complete freedom of secession, the more seldom and weaker the desire for separation is in fact, since the benefits of large states in terms of economic progress and in terms of the interests of most people are indisputable...".

A similar point of view which excluded the possibility of practical stating of the question of self-determination was supported by held Stalin: "The borderland's request for separation from Russia as a form of relations between the center and the borderlands should be excluded... of course, the borderlands of Russia... have an inalienable right to secede from Russia but we are not talking about the rights of nations which are undeniable but about the interests of the masses, both in the center and in the borderlands..." (Stalin, 1954).

In fact nation and state building in the form of multi-level Soviet federation was a tactical retreat from the principle of democratic centralism. The statement of question of self-determination up to secession helped draw national forces on the side of the proletarian revolution. However, the initial view of the founders of the theory of the Soviet state, despite tactical differences, was almost uniform and consisted in the striving for a centralized state which was seen as a transitional stage on the way to socialism.

A formal mismatch between the national program and the task of forming the centralized proletarian state, gave rise to a debate within the Party. F.E. Dzerzhinsky, G.L. Pyatakov opposed to self-determination while supporting the slogan "Down with borders!" N.I. Bukharin insisted on correcting the slogan of self-determination of nations, taking into account the class approach: "self-determination of the working classes of every nation" (Koposova, 2000). V.I. Lenin's authority allowed defending the federal basis of national policy.

Not being a principled supporters of federalism (or rather, its opposers), the Bolsheviks were forced to begin nation and state building on a federal basis. The search for the optimal variant of the multinational state model in new conditions eventually contributed to nation and state building on a federal basis.

At the beginning of the 1920s especially after the formation of the USSR the debate on the "Soviet federalism" began to unfold. Justification for this theory as a special form of nation and state building, based on the interests of the proletariat of all nations, became one of the scientific and practical problems. Postulates defined by Lenin and J.V. Stalin, could be found in all the works devoted to this issue.

Some researchers focused on state-legal nature of autonomous formations (V.N. Durdenevsky, M.A. Reisner) or supported the old idea of the administrative principle of a federation, for example, K.A. Arkhipov put forward the term "national province." The others were mostly interested in the political side of the issue. But in general the Soviet legal theorists of the first generation were firmly convinced that the "national" republics, regions, counties were the forms derived from the Soviet autonomy, the historical essence of which was to accomplish a series of political and economic tasks.

The work "Principles of autonomy and federalism in the Soviet system" by G.S. Gurvich is quite revealing. The official presentation of the national question was reflected in it. The researcher defined the political meaning of autonomy as "the creation of new cohabitation conditions providing every nation with great opportunities for free development and the protection of a strong unified state".

Such understanding of federalism is consolidated in theory and realized in practice. At the same time the thesis of resolving the national question in connection with the establishment of proletarian state and thereby the conversion of the proletariat into a nation is put forth: "There cannot exist any national question in the proletarian state, it is dissolved in a number of areas of public life, does not exist independently and is solved as a problem".

Since, a country is not the denial but the approval of a nation, the separation between state sovereignty and sovereignty of nations is unnatural: the right of a nation to self-determination is in fact its sovereignty while the constitutional right of unilateral secession from the Soviet Union is "necessary and sufficient proof of nations' sovereignty." The federation of republics was considered as a means of eradication the national question and the autonomy was seen as "one of the ways to encourage and facilitate the centripetal tendencies" and as "a legal form at the given stage of the Soviet state".

After the revolution creative state building consisted in an experiment: in a free organization of nations into communes and the united action of all the communes. Local councils and congresses were considered as a part of the foundation of the central government and the local government became "unnecessary term" as the centralization of power is proletariat's self-governing. One

of the key ideas was as follows: “the local Soviet power in the hands of national lower classes is a Soviet national autonomy”.

On the basis of recognition of uneven development of various peoples’ territories a certain hierarchy was lined up, according to which the autonomies were endowed with certain powers. The meaning of this hierarchy consisted in the degree of independence from the central government and the proportionality of support and assistance from the center. It was especially noted that the question of the number of rights and competences (which were not vital for the Great Russian provinces) were to be resolved by the Soviet government which possessed the possibilities for self-organization and self-governing which could be implemented in local areas.

Thus, the republics were not allied states but the “government formations” that increased their status in comparison with the local areas but limited the principle of self-determination. Accordingly, local authorities were lined up: in the republics Central Executive Committees and Republics People’s Commissariats in the local areas executive committees with different departments.

Consequently, the advantages of the Soviet federalism were seen in the proportionality of its support. The real weakness of the fellow members of the Soviet Union of nations was compensated by strong real support of the federal government and all the nations, not equal if taken separately, were equal in the union. The right to free national development implied mutual brotherly support of the nations. At the same time, the burden of a “base state” nation consisted in assistance which was only the “return of the debt”.

According to such approach, autonomy turned to be dependent on the center. Thus, the principle of centralization was put into action, although all the attributes of autonomy were legally enforced. One of such attributes was the Constitutions of the autonomous republics.

The official policy aimed at the integration of the border regions into general Soviet space was associated with the program statement on self-determination of nations which in practice was manifested in the establishment of the national state formations of different ranks within the framework of nation and state building (Safronova and Loba, 2014).

Legislation was the prerogative of the central government and the Party departments. But initially there was a tendency to interact with the local authorities which in turn also took the initiative, participated in the development of projects, made suggestions, taking into account the specific conditions of development, being

guided by the directives from the center. The basis was the Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (for the Federal Republic the USSR).

Inconsistency of national policy was determined by examination of the national question, the national interests of the derivatives subject to the agenda of the world revolution and the building of socialism (communism afterwards). This thesis could repeatedly be found in the works of V.I. Lenin and J.V. Stalin and therefore presented in all the works devoted to the scientific justification of Soviet federalism and the foundations of the Soviet national policy.

The theory was based on the corresponding categorical apparatus. The absence of such concepts as “ethnos”, “ethnic group” and others was compensated by the Marxism categories such as “nation”, “national entity”, “national minorities” which possessed ambivalent meaning: both ethnic and social. It allowed transferring the class principle into ethno-cultural plane, thus simplifying its real diversity and complexity, ignoring cultural value of different ethnic groups.

As a result, the program statement on “self-determination of nations up to secession” seemed abstract and was reduced to the establishment of a certain hierarchy of “national state formations” and a high level of development was supposed to be achieved by eliminating the actual inequality.

It should be noted that for the realization of the Party national program quite a functional unit was established. The central place in this unit was given to People’s Commissariat of Ethnic Affairs (Narkomnats) and later to the Department on Affairs of Nationalities at the Central Executive Committee. The main aim of local branches of Narkomnats and of executive power consisted in sovietization (including Party and government departments) of non-Russian peoples which was the essence of Soviet autonomy.

The program of nation and state building was implemented under difficult conditions of domination of traditional social and political norms on the background of the aggravation of social and ethnic conflicts, the abuse of local authorities and the spread of banditry which made the Party and the government bodies carry out a permanent corrections policy.

Objective processes that took place in the country as well as the conducted policy caused different tendencies both centripetal and centrifugal. Nevertheless, this did not lead to the disintegration of the state which indicates a certain potential of the Soviet national policy. In spite of its original contradictions in the future it became possible to form a supra-ethnic community, called “Soviet people”. The analysis of the nature and degree of cohesion of this

community is the subject of a separate research. However, it is undeniable that at a certain historical stage this formula was quite efficient.

SUMMARY

Thus, the transition from the imperial to the Soviet model in Russian national policy did not change the characteristics of the functioning of this sphere which was manifested in the striving for centralization and unification. However, new principles and mechanisms for the resolution of inter-ethnic relations appeared.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the pre-revolutionary and the Soviet models of regulations in the sphere of national relations demonstrates that the backbone force was the state in both cases. In the Russian Empire the traditional methods of regulation in the sphere of inter-ethnic cooperation were largely involved that were mainly determined by the peculiarities of state formation (preservation of the traditional way of life of borderlands).

The peculiarity of the Soviet period consists in the fact that the national policy became a separate sphere of government regulation. The government administrative mechanism was developed for achieving the national

policy objectives. Many peoples living in Russia received political status in the form of one of degrees of Soviet autonomy. The purposeful process of social, economic and cultural unification of development level of the various peoples was implemented. These trends were not so much the product of the Soviet national policy but rather an objective necessity in a changing Russian (and global) society in the 20th century.

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