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The Politicization and Revival of the secessionist movements in late 1980s: understanding the ethno-territorial nature of self-determination in the post-Soviet space

In the case of the post-Soviet world, the majority/minority nationalist movements were not necessarily a new phenomenon, but their rise after Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika policies shows how suppressed and institutionalized the nations were during many decades. The Leninist and Stalinist policies towards nationalities have proved the strong impact of institutionalizing the ethnic and national groups in a vast empire. The forced demographic displacements and the stronghold of the concept of territoriality have created both painful national memories and a confusion of the understanding of territory in the Soviet Union. The end of the 1980s witnessed the rise of nationalist movements, when the ideology of nationalism was challenging communism. The last years of Soviet rule revealed the weakness of perestroika and glasnost, and highlighted the strength of nationalism in terms of ideas and movements. Some even claimed that it was the mobilization of the nationalists in the Soviet Socialist Republics that caused the dismantling of the Soviet Union. The nationalist uprisings in the Eastern European states and in many of the post-Soviet states, had a strong impact in the field of nationalism in the 1990s, when the emergence of ethnic violence in Georgia (South Ossetia, Ajaria, Abkhazia), Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Yugoslavia, and Moldova countered the arguments made by the modernization and globalization proponents, that ethnic or "tribal" identities would plummet as a consequence of state-building, modernization and to some extent democratization.

The nationalist movements of the 1980s Soviet Union were clearly countering the communist legacy of suppressed nationalities, even though in theory the nationality policies were based on the equality of nations, on the right of every republic to secede from the USSR, and the right of each republic and autonomous territory to practice some nationality policy oriented towards the development of their nations, as developed in the period of *Korenizatsiia* (or nativization) policy in the 1920s. These nationalist movements utilized a discourse oriented towards an ethno-territorial definition of nationalism – looking at the cases of Armenia and Azerbaijan, we can see that the nationalist movements that arose in these two republics were heavily drawn towards an ethno-territorial nationalism focused on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. As a de facto independent state, the Nagorno-Karabakh oblast demands its secession from Azerbaijan to be recognized internationally. Although the ethno-territorial definition of nationalism influenced the concept of self-determination and secession in the post-Soviet states, the claims brought forward by these nationalist or secessionist movements in the region and arguably in other regions in the world are not necessarily oriented towards independence from the titular state.

It is in light of these political developments in the post-Soviet context that I try to highlight the ethno-territorial nature of nationalist politics of the nationalist and secessionist movements that arose in the late 1980s Soviet Union, focusing on the cases of Armenia and Azerbaijan. This paper deals with the concepts of self-determination and nationalism in the post-Soviet context. It shows that the concept of self-determination remains attached to territorial politics, but that this territorialized national self-determination is not exclusively aimed at gaining independence for the secessionist movements. Therefore, this paper tries to categorize the various types of self-determination; I argue that a more nuanced and adaptable conceptualization of self-determination is needed in the international political and legal contexts. In the international context, it is therefore important to understand the nature of the claims made

by the secessionist movements and the nature of nationalism that drives these movements especially in the post-Soviet space, in the intention of reconceptualizing the term self-determination, to stay away from essentialist definitions in political discourse and action, as evident in the approach of the modernization and the transitory literature.

The ethno-territorial nature was also a legacy of the Soviet Nationalities Policy that not only provided a territory for each nation but also the right of self-determination, whereby territory became an important component of self-determination. The salience of such a definition is that it has brought back a discourse of re-territorialization of self-determination on the international level. Though this paper does not tackle the moral aspect of self-determination, nor its thorny legal context, it draws on the concept in an empirical approach, rather than a normative one, and its historical development. There are clear changes in the way the term has been defined, and the differences are obvious as in the case of the Wilsonian tradition of self-determination and the Bolshevik one.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section explains the influence of the Soviet Nationality Policies on the nature of nationalism – an ethno-territorial nationalism, focusing on how the territory or land is a vital part of the concept of self-determination, and self-determination is directly linked with nationalism. Thus the ethno-territorial nature of nationalism shapes the concept of self-determination in the region, and this has international legal consequences that the international community does not account in the process of conflict resolution and peace-building in the region. The second tackles the historical evolution of the concept of self-determination and its various theoretical approaches, showing the different contexts of the uses of the concept and the major political events that influenced it. In the third and final part, the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) oblast, its demands to secede from Azerbaijan and its desire to unite with Armenia, are examined through an empirical approach. This case illustrates the idea of territory as entrenched in the idea of nationalism in the post-Soviet space, whereby the principle of self-determination is tied with nationalism and territory, reinforcing an ethno-territorial understanding of nationalism. The rise of nationalist movements in both Armenia and Azerbaijan in the late 1980s is heavily shaped by the Karabakh cause, though in different ways. These two cases are therefore of great usefulness to explain the ethno-territorial nature of the nationalist discourse that is evident in the late 1980s and that has influenced post-Soviet nation-building, even though the extent of the influence of Karabakh on the political discourse of nation-building has diminished in the two cases.

I. Ethno-Territorial Nationalism: the Legacy of the Soviet Nationalities Policy

In the nation-building process in the Soviet Union, the authorities faced an important obstacle. The aim was to draw the national state boundaries according to ethnic divisions or lines, however, this was not possible because the Soviet state's population was ethnically mixed and the boundaries of ethnicity itself were undergoing constant changes due to the forced deportation, the voluntary emigration, and the border shifts implemented by the authorities. These changes and inconsistencies made it "impossible to determine distinctly even the very names of Soviet nationalities, worse still to outline their 'own' territories" (Tishkov, 1997, 31). It was mainly the ethnographers' job to delimit the boundaries and redraw the borders according to nationalities or ethnic groups. Ethnographers and other experts were asked to fix 'national' boundaries, thus they tried to territorialize ethnicity, which pushed for the emergence of ethnic cartography in Russian ethnography; this was not just in Russia, ethnographers in most national states understood ethnicity in strictly territorial ways. This conceptualization of ethnicity and

nationalism was one of the causes of the eruption of conflicts in various parts of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s; this led to claims of secession or separatism and irredentism.

The degree of territoriality and territorial attachment of the various ethnic groups is not a simple matter, because it makes the understanding of nationalism more complex and loaded. “Territoriality is not a given;” Pål Kolstø states, “it is determined not only by geography, demography, and history but also by such intangibles as perceptions and ideas” (2000, 229). This is in fact the divisive factor in the minority/majority claims for territory – and a good to explain the dichotomy self-determination and *uti possidetis juris* (territorial integrity as established in international law). The clash that occurs in the national society is the claims made by the minority groups that they are rooted in the lands they live in, bordered by historical, cultural or legal perceptions, and this counters the majority group denial of such an attachment of the minority group. For instance, South Ossetians considers themselves as natives of the region where they live in northern Georgia, and they support their claim by stating that they have lived there for over two centuries; this claim is not accepted by ethnic Georgians, who are convinced that the home territory of the Ossetians is in the northern Ossetian Oblast currently in Russia. In fact, it was the Bolsheviks who gave Ossetians the two autonomous territories, one in the north and the other in the south, separated by the Caucasus Mountains. This clash led to the eruption of a civil war in 1992 after the collapse of the USSR.

The link between territory and ethnicity has been engraved and institutionalized in the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet people have constantly migrated from one republic or oblast to another for jobs, education or family reunifications, the Bolshevik ethnographers have managed to allocate each group a specific delimited territorial unit, which later, and in most of cases, became the internationally recognized borders of the independent republics after 1991. Joseph Stalin, people’s commissar for nationalities in the Soviet Union, wrote in his treatise entitled *Marxism and the National Question*, the importance of territory as an essential element of nationhood. Stalin thought that the Americans and the English did not form one common nation, even though they speak the same language: “Nations are formed only on the basis of protracted and regular contacts as a result of a community of life over generations. And a protracted community of life is impossible without a common territory” (Stalin, 1954, 303). The Soviet idea and understanding of self-determination is vital for the modern understanding of self-determination. But this claim is in deep contrast to the international laws and state policies which try to distance any territorial claims from the idea of self-determination.

The strong mobilization and organization of people in the late 1980s in various republics and oblasts (mostly in Armenia and the Baltic republics led to the independence of these territories from the Soviet Union. The unresolved conflicts transformed from protests to violent and armed conflicts. Svante Cornell argues that the Soviet legacy of allocation of autonomous status to certain minorities is one of the main reasons for the eruption of violent conflicts in the post-Soviet times. Given the negative historical experience of some of these enclaves with their sovereign states, these minorities are relatively different from other ethnic conflicts in other regions, because of their distrust of the states where they coexist, and their suspicion of the concept of ‘autonomy’.¹ Most of the minorities with autonomous status are in the Caucasus region, as opposed to Central Asia or Eastern Europe; in parallel, the secessionist movements today are densely located in the post-Soviet region, and particularly in the Caucasus given the number of secessionist (and irredentist) claims made.

¹ These cases of extreme suspicion of the ethnic minorities towards the sovereign states where they coexist are mostly obvious in the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, Abkhazia in Georgia and Chechnya in Russia (though this was only in the beginning of the 1990s – there is no such independence claim from Chechens today).

For clarification, one may compare the Caucasus to Central Asia; in the latter, there are many minority groups, yet the conflicts have been less recurrent and less violent, most likely because very few had an autonomous status. As Cornell argues, “In a sense, then, the autonomous status seems to have fuelled rather than diminished minorities’ demands” (Cornell, 2001, 4). One of the most violent conflicts is known to be the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), a former autonomous oblast² within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians. It is mainly a conflict between the principles of territorial integrity for Azerbaijan and self-determination for the Armenians in Karabakh. This also rightly applies to the other Caucasian ethnic conflicts, for example the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts with Georgia.

In light of these events and policies in the Soviet Union, nationalism, as an ideological movement, defines the boundaries of the nation in two ways: first, they define the territorial boundaries which the nation has a right to control; second, they define the cultural boundaries which the members of the nation share with each other – language, traditions, myths and values. As Lowell Barrington emphasizes, “What makes nations different from other groups is that they are collectives united by shared cultural features (such as language, myths, and values) and the belief in the right to territorial self-determination,” (2006, 7). In the post-Soviet space then, the territorial contestations were complex because of the existence of various territorial divisions in the Soviet nationalities policy: the Soviet socialist republics, the autonomous regions and oblasts. The complexity lays in the claims of the nationalist movements for their territorial rights – in this case, not only claims for secession from the Soviet Union, but also irredentist claims by the titular nations to incorporate the self-determining autonomous oblasts into the independent republics. Such is the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast and the Armenian independent republic.

II. Types of Self-determination movements and the rise of ethno-territorial nationalism in the post-Soviet space

The notion of self-determination has various theoretical origins that have played a role in shaping the concept’s definitions (in terms of what should be included or excluded). In Western Europe and the United States, the notion of self-determination was derived from the Enlightenment tradition of popular sovereignty and representative government (Musgrave, 1997, 2). Musgrave contrasts the Western European definition with the Eastern European one; in the latter region, the notion of self-determination was mainly based on the nineteenth century conception of nationalism, mainly the romantic nationalism of the time. Various other authors have focused on this difference in theoretical traditions from another angle: the western and eastern conceptions of nationalism are tackled as civic versus ethnic types of nationalism, stressing on similar theoretical origins of the two.

On the political scene, the concept of self-determination has a long history which can be traced back to the time of WWI. At the 1919 Peace Conference in Versailles, Woodrow Wilson’s famous Fourteen Points were crucial in determining the new wave of self-determination in international relations. It was precisely the fifth point which stated that sovereignty should take into consideration the interests of the people concerned. In his speech, Wilson said that the USA’s main objective was to ensure a “fair and just peace” through the application of the

² An autonomous oblast, also referred to as a province, was given significant autonomy in its cultural and administrative affairs; in addition, it is also distinguished by it.

principle of national self-determination. Although he did not precisely define the concept of self-determination, Wilson claimed that self-determination is a principle of action, and that “national aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent” (Wilson, 1927). Some of the examples he focused on were the Armenian and Kurdish desires for independence after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It is interesting to note that Wilson’s version of the Armenian map included the territories in Eastern Turkey today, which was Armenia at the time, stretching far west to include the historical Armenian empire. His version is still used by various Armenian political parties and organizations to claim the territorial rights of Armenians against Turkey. Linda Bishai (2004) argues that the 1919 Peace Conference allocated serious effort and time in the drawing of the boundaries of the newly established states from the ruins of former empires; territory was therefore deemed sacred and the principle of territorial integrity to be most respected. In fact, Bishai argues that the idealist approach to international relationship which was dominant in the field at the time, focused on insisting upon the “maintenance of law and order in the international realm, and dealt with problems such as separatist movements by “negotiation simply because this was the way which made the most rational sense” (2004, 23).

On the other side of the world covered by imperial rule, the issue of self-determination became salient at the beginning of WWI, as many small groups in Central and Eastern Europe began to press for self-determination with the breakdown of the Habsburg Empire. The same uprising demands were put forward by various nations in the Ottoman Empire. The concept of self-determination was enhanced by the influence of Woodrow Wilson, as his ideas on self-determination took prominence with the entry of the United States into the War in 1917. Wilson’s understanding of the notion was mainly influenced by the Western conceptualization of self-determination. He understood self-determination as the “ideal what those within a certain state should have the right to determine their own government: ‘self-government’ had long been a favourite concept of his” (Musgrave, 1997, 22). Wilson therefore understood the notion as the right of a people to choose their own form of government, and this meant that the government was democratic in form as there is reference to rights. He believed in the democratic understanding of governing which was based on his belief in the rights of people for self-government, in the rights of people to hold the government accountable and to ensure that the government does not violate the rights of people (Kedourie, 1960, 131).

Approximately at the same time as the early years of Bolshevik rule, movements for autonomy rose in the major regions of the Russian Empire. Independence was proclaimed in the Ukraine, the Transcaucasus republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Even Stalin, the Soviet architect for nationalities policy in the USSR, also recognized the principle of self-determination of the various nations living in the various territorial divisions allocated to them by the state. As early as 1913, even before the Russian revolution, Stalin stated in his work ‘Marxism and the Question of Nationalities’ that nations are “a historically developed and stable community of people that has emerged on the basis of commonality of their language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up as manifest in the community of culture....Absence of at least one of these traits is enough for a nation not to be a nation” (Stalin, 1951-52, 296-7, quoted in Tishkov, 1997, 29).

The Bolsheviks were supporters of political movements among the non-Russian peoples, because they considered them as allies against the Tsarist regime (Zaslavsky, 1993). In fact, the Bolsheviks understood that the establishment of the Soviet regime would not be possible without the nationalist support from each republic. Thus the idea of self-determination was constructed to

provide a guarantee of freedom when a republic would want to secede from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). As Lenin states:

... if we want to grasp the meaning of self-determination of nations ... by examining the historico-economic conditions of the national movements, we must inevitably reach the conclusion that the self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state. ...[It] would be wrong to interpret the right to self-determination as meaning anything but the right to existence as a separate state. (Lenin, 1950, 395-6)

Therefore, Vladimir Lenin supported the concept of the right of a culturally distinct grouping to self-determination, albeit within the framework of proletarian internationalism –the proletariat would only be able to form on the international level through the mobilization on a national level. The policy of *korenizatsiia* seemed to indicate Lenin's sincere belief in national self-determination, as he considered that the aspirations of the national movements are to form nation-states within the requirements of capitalism: “[T]he tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of national states, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied. ... [T]he national state is typical and normal for the capitalist period” (Lenin, 1950, 395).

The ideas presented by Lenin were not completely accepted in the Communist circle. There seems to have been two extremes during the beginning of the formation of the Soviet Union regarding the formulation of the nationalities policy. On the one hand, there were staunch opponents to the principle of self-determination, such as Rosa Luxemburg; in her work *The National Question*, she rejects the idea of self-determination and national independence, arguing that they are bourgeois concerns, beyond the proletariat concerns. These opponents took the position of a more internationalist socialist Soviet Union, united by its people. On the other hand, Lenin and his circle acknowledged the intensity of the nationalist movements in the peripheries; therefore, Lenin believed that the best way of achieving a proletariat universalist socialist Soviet Union was to start with the nationalities as the primary division of the Soviet Union. Once nationalities are acknowledged, specifically the right of self-determination, the Soviet Union would gain the allegiance of the peripheries, so the saying “nationalist in form, socialist in content”. Thus, the idea of the nation-state or the nationalist movements was only a transitory stage towards higher international socialism, an idea of unification and fraternity among the proletariat, according to Lenin.

Nevertheless, regardless of the determination of the Soviet authorities to grant rights of self-determination or secession to the peoples, the Constitution remained one thing, and practice became another issue. Already at the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets which took place on October 25, 1917, the meeting declared that the Soviet power “shall provide all the nations that inhabit Russia with the genuine right to self-determination” (Lenin, 1962, vol. 35, 11; quoted in Tishkov, 1997). Along the same ideas, the Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia proclaimed on November 2, 1917, addressed the following points vis-à-vis self-determination: “Equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia; the right of the peoples of Russian to free self-determination up to separation and the formation of independent states; Abolition of every and an national and national-religious privilege or restriction; Free development of national minorities and ethnographical groups inhabiting the territory of Russia” (Tishkov, 1997, 29).

This principle of self-determination was important in Soviet history and the impact it had and still has on the construction of the post-Soviet borders and regions. In fact, it was only ‘applied’ in theory to certain territorial divisions such as the Soviet socialist republics, but it excluded the autonomous regions and oblasts. Although this principle was indeed recognized by

the state, this conception was somewhat different in the Soviet context where the Soviet identity – mostly considered as the Russification of the nationalities and the imposition of the Russian language – was imposed on people. Territories were shifted and peoples were displaced according to government will. Therefore, the 1918 Russian Socialistic Federal republic acknowledged this right for its constituent republics (although not for autonomous regions), but it was not applied in practice until perestroika, one might argue that it caused the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The main powers were very reluctant to incorporate the concept of self-determination in the Covenant of the League of Nations. Although the Allies intended to make the principle of self-determination as the guiding notion of the Peace Conference in 1919, they were rather hesitant in applying this principle in their home countries. The Allies rejected this draft: they were worried, as Lansing was, that once it is included in the Covenant, it would raise hopes and expectations, and it will legalize separatist and irredentist claims, which were already being expressed at the time, especially by Hungary in Eastern Europe. The concept of self-determination had thus no normative power at the time. It remained a political concept used to specific cases and situations, but not institutionalized in the wording of the Covenant of the League of Nations.

On the other end of Europe, the ideas of nationalism were developing in a rather multiethnic pot in Eastern Europe. The nationalist movements of the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth century were analyzed by many authors such as Eric J. Hobsbawm, Hans Kohn and Carleton Hayes, and more contemporary studies appeared by Ernest Gellner and Miroslav Hroch, who spoke about Europe as a home for the early nationalist movements. Nationalism in the pre-1880 period of history was perceived as liberal nationalism focusing more on the economic viability of nation-states, thus nationalism was understood as progress and expansion. Nationalism was associated with “liberty, equality and fraternity.” However, things differed greatly in the post-1880 period, when nationalism moved away from its economic aspect to stress more on the ethnic component. This shift is identified with the rise of ethnic groups and ethnic identifications: the “threshold principle” (Hobsbawm, 1990).

In contrast to the national assimilation principles of nation-building in Western Europe, whereby the states were ‘homogenized’ in their national component, the Eastern European empires and nations were anything but homogeneous. For example, the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires were comprised of various and diverse ethnic groups found in a single state. The Ottoman Empire on the South-Eastern end of Europe was also extremely multi-national. This multi-ethnic or multi-national composition reinforced ethnicity and nationalism, sometimes based on an imagined territory or homeland, and this identity became of primary importance to the people. Drawing from the two major historical evolutions mentioned above, meaning the Western and the Bolshevik understanding of self-determination, I conclude by stating that there is clearly a difference in the way the two traditions have conceptualized the notion, and this has affected the struggle for recognition of the newly independent nations in the post-Soviet space. The notion of self-determination as referred to by Stalin and Lenin is directly linked with the idea of nationalism, territory and the right of people to secede.

This remained so until the Second World War, when the principle of self-determination acquired a more normative sense (Franck, 1995, 150). The post-World War II environment presented various challenges to the international community. The nationalist struggles against the colonial powers brought a need to review the Wilsonian principle of 1919. And so the principle was incorporated into the UN Charter, as a tool for decolonization. Article 1.2 states that one of the purposes of the United Nations is “to develop friendly relations among the nations, based on

the respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.” The UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 entitled “Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples” reiterates the notion of self-determination; the notion is also mentioned in the International Covenant on Human Rights (1966) and in the Declaration on the Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation Among States, in Accordance with the Charter of the United Nations (1970), and so on, (Franck, 1995, 151).

The UN’s conceptualization of self-determination was contrasted with the notion of territorial integrity or *uti possidetis*. Therefore, as Franck claims, the UN tried to find a middle ground between these two entitlements – *uti possidetis* from Latin American tradition and the self-determination from Europe (151). The notion of territorial integrity, however, seems to have outweighed the principle of self-determination. And this is highly evident today, in the practice of the International community, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In fact, what seems to have taken precedence over all written agreements and international conventions is the power relations in the geopolitical interests benefiting the imperial powers. Kosovo declared its independence on February 2008 to bring the issue of its separatist claims back to the UN discussion tables (Bilefsky, 2008). Kosovo is a living example of this geopolitical affair – it is indeed in the advantageous bit of international power relations, whereas other nations such as the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and Ossetians in South Ossetia are struggling to transmit their message to the international community.

Besides the problems evident in the inconsistencies in the political practice of states vis-à-vis granting secession rights to nations claiming these rights, the problem of the definition of self-determination in the post-colonial context became increasingly evident. What is self-determination today? The term self-determination has been at the center of debates by international lawyers, political practitioners and even state politicians, attempting to find a working definition to be used at the international level. However, such a definition is indeed almost impossible. How can the international community be able to define self-determination as applied globally in a single definition? A single definition, once institutionalized at the level of global organizations such as the UN, will raise the same issues as in the post-WWII period, whereby self-determination applied solely to colonized nations. Coppieters and Huyseune (2002) argue that secession is not a universally defined term, or at least it is not as simple as a single definition; various secessionist movements self-identify their struggle in different terminologies, depending on the local construction of the discourse of secession. In some cases, as they argue, secession is termed as ‘sovereignty’ as in Quebec; in Ukraine, secession preferably not a topic of discussion as people do not tolerate it and the same applies in Belgium (2002, 18-19). Thus, if we, as social scientists, were to make generalizations either on the concept of self-determination or on the claims addressed by the secessionist movements under the rubric of self-determination, we ought to consider the relativity of the situations depending on their cultural context and background. There are differences in the way peoples define the term ‘secession’ and thus there are definitely variations in the demands put forth by these movements to the international community and their titular states.

In order to avoid the problem of essentialist definitions that have become one of the main obstacles in the attempted dialogue and negotiation between the international community and the de facto states, or between the former and the titular states, it is extremely vital at this point to adopt a more nuanced and less rigid definition of self-determination, whereby the international community and the mediating third parties should proceed on a case-by-case basis in the process of resolving the conflicts. Looking at the recent events in the post-Soviet space, one can

conclude that the territorial aspect of nationalism has led to a staunch definition of territorial self-determination. On the other hand, the examination of the cases of self-determination in the post-colonial period also leads us to believe that there are several definitions of the concept of self-determination, and that the assumption that self-determination claims by the nationalist groups always aim at establishing an independent state, needs to be reconsidered. If self-determination does not necessarily entail demands for independent statehood, then, what are other policies put forward by the secessionist movements? There are chiefly three categories of self-determination movement claims:

- 1) *full statehood secessionism*: the secessionist movements deploy an aspiration towards full statehood. In this case, the Soviet republics could be considered as vivid examples of such a claim to full independence. One of the most recent and controversial examples is the case of the de facto state of Kosovo.
- 2) *Partial statehood secessionism*: the secessionist movements demand greater autonomy or self-government within a federal state – demanding cultural, economic, and/or political autonomy and the right of self-rule within a clearly demarcated territory in the federal state. The examples of Tatarstan, Chechnya (only in 1990s), in the post-Soviet region fall under this category; in addition, the cases of Quebec, Catalonia, the Basques in the Western world can also be classified here.
- 3) *Irredentist secessionism*: Secession can also be defined in terms of future desires of the secessionist entity to reunite with the kin state after gaining independence; that independence is not an important phase, but is considered a transitory phase towards the irredentist aims of these movements. The cases of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia and the case of Nagorno-Karabakh do not have desires for full independence and statehood, but the claims for secession or irredentism are a tool for being recognized by the international community.

Though we have divided the types of secessionist movements' claims into three categories, these are not exclusive categories nonetheless. In fact, the demands made by the secessionist movements may take different forms at different periods, depending on the international 'mood' and geopolitics. For example, the Abkhazian secessionist initially strived towards an independent statehood from the Georgian titular state, however, Abkhazia reoriented its foreign policy towards the Russian state, calculating that it was in its advantage to address its demands as possible unifications with Russia in the post-independence period. Thus, there is concurrency in the development of the categories – in this case it was category 1 followed by 3. In other cases as Tatarstan, the struggle for independence is now only a distant dream, according to Alexei Zverev (2002), and thus all claims for full statehood are no longer on the political table; instead, it has gained the status of an autonomous self-ruling political unit within the Russian Federal state – category 1 was replaced by 2. Therefore, to understand the secessionist movements, it is highly imperative to note that they do not necessarily fall in the extremities of the secessionist spectrum – full independence at the one end, and autonomous status at the other. Instead, we need to examine these movements in a more nuanced terminology and categorization, so as to capture the historic-political and socio-economic features of the secessionist claims.

Taking into great consideration the 'ambiance' of the post-Soviet world, understanding nationalism is to abide by the claim that nationalism is quite synonymous to ethnic nationalism, just as it was in the 19th century Europe (Ottaway, 1994, 6), and to a territorial nationalism based on the territorial divisions delineated or imposed by the Soviet state; one can understand the undisputable presence of the ethno-territorial dimension of nationalism because the national

uprisings were a result of people, who had the same language, national characteristics, cultural practices, thus belonging to the same community, becoming aware and conscious of their right to independence and freedom of forming a state. The case-study of the paper, Nagorno-Karabakh falls under the third category 'irrendentist secessionism', because the final aim of Karabakh is not to acquire full independence, but to join its kin state Armenia after gaining international recognition; Pål Kolstø (2008) argues that this final aim is noticeable given the similarity of the flag of NK with that of Armenia, the language is Armenian in both, in addition, people identify themselves as ethnically Armenian and the people of Karabakh hold Armenian passport (though this specifies Karabakh-born residents). The case of Nagorno-Karabakh below shows how the ideas of ethnicity, identity and territory are intertwined and that any discussion of self-determination, especially in the post-Soviet cases, is necessarily territorial. Therefore, I argue that self-determination in the context of the post-Soviet space is heavily territorialized and one of the most important aspects of this is nationalism and ethnicity in relation to the territory. The next section deals with the aspect of 'territory' in the post-Soviet space.

III. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Karabakhization of politics in the late 1980s

Nagorno Karabakh is situated in the southern part of the Caucasus. It is an enclave with a majority of Armenians, and since 1921 has been part of the Azerbaijani territories.³ There are two major reasons scholars state to explain why NK was ceded to Azerbaijan, as opposed to Armenia: the interplay between Stalin and Mustafa Kemal and the 'divide and rule' strategy adopted by the Soviet Union to 'solve' the problem of the multiethnic composition of the empire. After Stalin became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1922, he conceded the Karabakh enclave to Azerbaijan (Kazemzadeh, 1951, 11-19), for the purpose of signing a peace agreement with Mustafa Kemal, then the leader of the Turkish Nationalist Party. The second reason to explain why NK was given to Azerbaijan is the 'divide-and-rule' strategy that the Bolsheviks adopted in order to control the region more thoroughly, specifically because the region was multiethnic and multireligious. Divide and rule was one way the Soviet leadership sought to control the region: the division would deteriorate and thus instigate ethnic strife and the Soviet authority would be able to resort to force and further impose its control over the republics. As Tchilingirian (1999, 441) states, "It was a way of implanting troublesome and dissident populations within minority republics and pitting ethnic groups against each other, thereby undermining the possibility of minority nationalities working together against the central government".

The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic today is not recognized by any state; however, it is difficult to consider it as part of Azerbaijan as some of the literature does, because Nagorno-Karabakh has a working and functioning government⁴, independent of Azerbaijan since it proclaimed its independence on September 2, 1991. In fact, there is no communication between

³ The Nagorno-Karabakh enclave was part of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic starting 1921, and later, remained part of the Azerbaijani state after its independence in 1991. Even under the Soviet Union, Armenians were not content with the situation, as they argued that the enclave belonged to the historic Armenian territories.

⁴ For more references on the foundation and working of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, check the websites: www.nkr.am, www.president.nkr.am. The establishment of the various state institutions such as the National Assembly, the Court system, the Ministries and the ensuing administrations, the Electoral Codes, among others, have been part of the state-building process in Nagorno Karabakh, where a presidential system is also evident, like in Armenia; although the economy is highly dependent on Armenia, the working on the local politics are somewhat independent. The militarization of politics is also evident in Karabakh, where almost half the government budget is allocated for military expenditures.

the two governments on any level, except at rare times in negotiations. The current president of Armenia, Serzh Sarkissian, announced that the existence of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) an "irreversible fact." He also stated in 2008 after winning the presidential elections, that "The people of Nagorno-Karabakh have gained their right to a free and independent life. And with our efforts this right must be recognized by the international community".

The purpose of this section is to highlight in a historical perspective the nationalist movements of the 1980s in the Soviet Union, showing that the strong mobilization of people was based on an ethno-territorial type of nationalism as the previous sections explained. I argue that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the main instigator of this rise of nationalism. Therefore, Karabakh became the ethno-territorial symbol of nationalist revival in the case of Armenia, and the emergence in the case of Azerbaijan. The conflict between the two states built-up gradually, from protests and letters from the Armenian side, environmental and intellectual movements in Armenia, to responses from the Azerbaijani side, until the eruption of open warfare. The paper posits that it is in fact the Soviet Nationality policies that have shaped this type of ethno-territorial nationalism, which has in turn influenced the discourse of secessionism in the post-Soviet space.

Gradual Politicization of the mobilized masses: from ecology to identity

This part demonstrates that the Karabakh cause was vital in organizing and mobilizing people to form the various nationalist movements and it was important in politicizing people; furthermore, the argument of the section is strengthened by the fact that the Karabakh issue is an important factor in determining even the rise to power of elites in Armenia: Ter-Petrosian became president because he was part of the ANM, and he resigned because of his failure in keeping the Karabakh issue at the top of his agenda; Kocharian became president because of his nationalist beliefs regarding Karabakh, and partially because he was from Karabakh. The Azerbaijani national movements, which also formed in the late 1980s, were mainly instigated and mobilized as a response to the Karabakh Armenian claims and secessionist demands in Karabakh; unlike in Karabakh and Armenia, the Azerbaijani groups began their activities only by the very end of 1988. The Karabakh factor in Azerbaijan was soon replaced by the oil politics in the political discourse of the country after the ceasefire in 1994.

From the early 1960s until 1987, the Armenians continued to send petitions, as they had done so before, and to write letters and request the Soviet leadership to reconsider the decision made by Stalin in 1921 (Ayvazian, 1987).⁵ They also took the demands to another level by organizing public protests. These protests organized by the Armenians for the NK Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) increased significantly by 1987. The nature of these protests transformed from purely ecological (which was widely spreading at the time in many parts of the USSR) to political and social ones. These protests were about two clear and important issues regarding the Armenians: the ecological issues concerning the effects of the Zaghgatsor power plant, and the NKAO issue. But these protests had a much deeper impact on the Armenian people, because they helped organize and mobilize people, as they were already gathered in masses: "Several of the mass demonstrations in Yerevan calling for the unification of the NKAO with Armenia

⁵ One such letter for requesting the unification of Karabakh and Nakhichevan was written by Suren Ayvazian, a geologist and Party member, on March 5, 1987, addressing Gorbachev. He mainly stressed the anti-Armenian position taken by Haidar Aliyev, who was then the Communist Party Representative in the Azerbaijani SSR.

followed immediately on the heels of demonstrations protesting the environmental pollution” (Fraser *et al.*, 1990, 670).

The above-mentioned Armenian protests paved the way for the emergence of the first organized movements (the Karabakh Committee, the Council of Elders and the Krunk Committee), and thus led to the mobilization of people. Prior to the environmental protests and rallies, Armenian civic revival was slow because it was restrained to a few Armenian intellectuals, who were able to express their nationalist demands and ideas after glasnost (Geukjian, 2003, 334). After the environmental protests, the Armenians organized into movements: the Armenian environmental movement was actually the umbrella organization for the Karabakh movement, which formed the Karabakh Committee.

As tensions increased after 1987, the events snowballed as demonstrations were spread from Karabakh to Armenia, and later to Azerbaijan. Moutafian describes the year 1988 as an historic year. Before the tragedy of the Spitak earthquake in Armenia on 7 December 1988, things seemed to be moving on the Armenian side. February 20th is a memorable day in the Karabakh Armenian history, as Armenians were gathered in Stepanakert waiting for the decision on the future of Karabakh;⁶ the NK Soviet Autonomous region passed a resolution in which it called the Armenian SSR, the Azerbaijani SSR, and Soviet Union for the NK demand for unification with Armenia.

A few days prior to this important and historical day, 20th of February, a new nationalist movement, called the Krunk Committee, was formed in NK to take the leadership of the nationalist uprising in NK proper. The members of this Krunk Committee were: seven members of the Communist Party of the NKAO and municipal levels, four Oblast and city Soviet deputies, twenty-two enterprise and association leaders, and three secretaries of industrial Party Committees (Geukjian, 2003, 334); actually Robert Kocharian was also a member of this Committee. Their agenda comprised of a single most vital issue for them, Karabakh’s unification or annexation to Armenia. The Krunk committee also worked alongside the Karabakh Committee and they both remained in constant contact, and adopted similar hierarchical and organizational structures to mobilize and organize the movements. The Krunk Committee played an important role in supporting the resolution of February 20, 1988, stated and described above (Malkasian, 1996, 29).

Nevertheless, this day was not the end of the struggle, as these resolutions were not accepted by Moscow. The protests, which had started in the form of rallies in the Lenin Square by February 13th of the same year, also spread to the Armenian capital, symbolizing Armenian support towards the Karabakh Armenians. These demonstrations⁷ were considered as “the first such movement by a people in what was then the Soviet bloc,” (Libaridian, 1999, 6).

As a result of the rising tensions in the two countries Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Supreme Soviet decided to establish its authority in NK on January 29, 1989, with the aim of imposing

⁶ During this protest, there were 40,000 Karabakh Armenians gathered in front of the Soviet of people’s deputies in Stepanakert, the capital of the Nagorno-Karabakh oblast. People had assembled to see the government of the oblast vote on the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with the Republic of Soviet Armenia. Although the First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, Kamran Bagirov, was present at the referendum, he could not stop the voting. It turned out in favor of the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia: the votes were 100 for and 17 against.

⁷ Unlike in Stepanakert, Yerevan was less crowded as the decisions of February the 20th reached people. The demonstrations in Armenia were also different in scope at the time. 3000 people turned out at the circular plaza outside of Yerevan’s opera house. Most of the people were veterans, young scientist that were part of environmental movements, schoolteachers, professors, artists, journalists, and students from Yerevan State University. For more references and information on these demonstrations in Yerevan, see Mark Malkasian in “*Gha-ra-pagh!*”, 33-35.

direct governance on the enclave (Potier, 2001, 7).⁸ Thus, the “Volsky Commission,” a special authority headed by Arkady Volsky who was a high-ranking official of the Soviet Communist Party representing the Soviet authorities in NK, was established with Volsky’s request, as he thought this was the only solution to halt the conflict between the two parties.⁹ The Volsky commission was actually the first time since 1921 that the NK territory would be curtailed from Soviet Azerbaijan’s control. The situation clearly disturbed the Azerbaijani authorities since this was a sign of their loss of power in NK. The Azerbaijani government’s discontent with the situation was expressed through its suppression of NK’s quasi-autonomy. Thus in November 1989, the commission was cancelled by the Soviet Azerbaijani government and the pro-Azerbaijani forces in Moscow, and replaced in January 1990 by Soviet Azerbaijan’s “Republic Organizational Committee” (or *Orgkom*.) In addition to implementing forced demographic changes, the *Orgkom* also enforced itself militarily in Karabakh by placing more than half of NK’s territory under military occupation. The Soviet army involvement created more tensions, as the troops were ill-prepared to interfere in such circumstances. More people fled Karabakh on both sides.¹⁰ This marked Moscow’s failure to react and impose a halt to the conflict.

After the Soviet failure in Karabakh, Armenians in Karabakh took responsibility in determining the future of their country through military response. They began forming paramilitary groups, and the Karabakh self-defense army gradually formed into a united and fighting force in 1990. In addition to forming their own armed forces, the Armenians in Karabakh also took the initiative to form the State Defense Committee in 1992, in order to centralize all the political and military power in this single committee. This committee was headed by Robert Kocharian, elected prime minister at the time. He sought for a military defense in Karabakh, and he believed that forming a united army would be the best solution to fight against Azerbaijani forces attacking the enclave. He thus regrouped all the self-defense groups, even those who were volunteering from Armenia and the diaspora (especially from the Armenian Revolutionary Federation).

The Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) was one of the most renowned of the opposition movements, whose members included nationalists, Islamists and many anti-communist groups; it was officially registered in Azerbaijan in 1989 (Zinin & Maleshenko, 1994, 106). Although the Azerbaijani national movements were calm through most of 1988, they organized strikes and demonstrations by the end of the year in November. Similar to the Armenian movements, and to other movements throughout the Soviet Union, the rallies and demonstrations began as an expression of environmental concern such as pollution, of corruption among the Communist Party officials, and of other cultural concerns such as the refurbishment of the national monuments. These issues were the cover for the more important and vital political issues raised

⁸ Furthermore, according to Poitier, the intentions of this committee run by the Azerbaijani Communist Party leader Viktor Polianichko was to weaken NK’s autonomy. He mainly played around with the demographic structure and composition of the enclave so as to increase the number of the Azerbaijanis living in Karabakh. In order to reach his objective, “a great number of residences were built in NK for the Azerbaijani refugees who had fled Armenia between 1988 and 1990.”

⁹ The year 1989 did not only witness the upsurge of rallies in NK, Armenia and Azerbaijan, yet the protests were spread throughout the Soviet Union, and disputes broke out in: Georgia, The Baltic republics and Central Asia.

¹⁰ Since 1991, both sides have claimed more than 20,000 lives. In addition, the war caused more than 450,000 refugees in Armenia and 800,000 in Azerbaijan. The infrastructure is destroyed, many villages are completely ruined. Although today the war is not officially over with a peace treaty, there is a ceasefire agreement signed in 1994, among the ministries of Defense of Armenia and Azerbaijan and Karabakh. Negotiations have started since 1992, involving many international, European, Eurasian and American, organizations.

at the time: the secessionist claims of Karabakh Armenians. Thus, the Azerbaijani protests addressed their nationalist support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

The Soviet authorities' reaction to these protests was to repress them. Many activists, who at the time were not organized into recognized opposition movements, were imprisoned. When they were released a year later, they formed the Azerbaijani Popular Front, headed by Abulfaz Elchibey. Its founding members were Abulfaz Elchibey, Etibar Mammadov, Isa Gambar and Nemat Pahanli. They were against any concessions to Armenians regarding NK. The Popular Front took in a large number of Azerbaijani activists. Its main aim was to challenge the communist authorities in Azerbaijan for following Moscow on the NK issue, and they later advocated for the independence of Azerbaijan from the USSR.

As a conclusion then, we can state that as the Armenian claims and protests reached a high resonance in the Soviet Union and even the international community, the Azerbaijanis also organized in response, at the Lenin Square (today the Freedom Square), to address environmental and economic issues, like in the Armenian case. Starting with environmental concerns, as in other places in the USSR and as explained in the previous section, the demands later took a political nature and shifted to the NK issue and cause. When the Popular Front was formed in 1989, it became one of the most active in expressing the importance of the Karabakh issue, making it the most pressing cause not only for the APF, but also for the groups that formed thereafter. At first, the APF did not state its willingness to secede from the USSR, however, according to Audrey Altstadt (1997), the AFP program was based on points expressing the disintegration of the Soviet Empire. As the conflict was aggravating in Karabakh, the influence of the proponent movements for a more radical approach in the Karabakh conflict and towards Armenians increased significantly. The APF and the Communist authorities lost control of the later events in Azerbaijan proper: the eruption of ethnic violence against the Armenians in Baku on January 13, 1990 caused many innocent deaths and led to chaos in the country; these events were later called the events of "Black January". It seemed as if there was a high level of nonchalance from the Soviet authorities and the APF to halt the violence. Indeed, as a response of the events in January, Evgeni Primakov, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Council of the Union, was dispatched to Baku along with thousands of Soviet troops, but he arrived to Baku only after the violence had ended (Altstadt, 1997, 122).

Other than the civil society issues, there was the oil resource which President Elchibey saw as an important tool for political negotiation over Karabakh with the West, and as an outlet for economic development much needed at the time. Already since 1991, as soon as the Azerbaijani Republic was proclaimed, the oil potential brought the international attention to focus on the country and to orient their capital interest towards it (Spatharou, 2001, 23). Nevertheless, this interest could not become materialized at the advent of independence because of the prevailing instability and inter-ethnic turmoil in Azerbaijan, which affected the stability of the whole region.

IV- Conclusion

In the case of Armenia, the national identity is clearly articulated. Armenian nationalism was related to a cultural nationalism on the one hand, expressed through its culture, history, architecture, and language. The boundaries of the Armenian culture were also clearly delineated: those who were ethnically Armenian belonged to this nation, and as Panossian writes: "It was blood-based definition, incorporating within it, at least partially, linguistic and religious characteristics" (2006, 227). In addition to the cultural component of national identity, the territorial boundaries are also clear in the Armenian case: it took the form of land claims, such as

the Western Armenian lands which belonged to the Armenians who were forcefully deported from Eastern Turkey in 1915. These claims were clearly addressed in a demonstration organized by the Armenians in 1965 in Yerevan, when thousands of Armenian protestors marched the streets of Yerevan to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. But other than this claim, the stronger claims were addressed for the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. This was and remains the most immediate concern for Armenia – and one that is also directly related to its security. Other land issues for Armenia include the Nakhichevan region (in Azerbaijan) and the Javakheti region in Georgia, although these remain latent cases as the Armenians have not claimed them until today as they have claimed Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus for Armenians, NK was an important factor in reviving nationalism after a few decades of repression. The issue of Karabakh strengthened the Armenian national identity, when they were able to go down to the squares in Yerevan and stand in masses to ask for their ‘rights’ as Soviet citizens. The victory in the war in 1994, reinforced these feelings of togetherness for Armenians, especially between those in Armenia and Karabakh. The issue of Karabakh also played a very important role in bringing to power certain elites because of their affiliation with Karabakh.

On the other hand, in the case of Azerbaijan, the national identity is much less clearly delineated in terms of cultural and territorial boundaries. The Azerbaijani nation is not unified along cultural, religious and linguistic lines. In fact, one of the main divisions in the nation is along the southern and northern Azerbaijanis. Both parts, divided by the Arax River, had been under different rulers, the first one under the Persian regime and the other one, under the Russians. This highly affected the socio-political as well as economic construction of the Azerbaijanis in their socialization and political culture. Although they were in continuous contact, their differences surpassed their nationalist feelings and their ethnic origins. The Azerbaijani national identity was mostly formed after the establishment of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic in 1918, which survived briefly for a few years until its incorporation in the Soviet Union. Azerbaijani identity has not been stable: there was a strong influence from Russian cultural during the Soviet era. The post-independence period after 1991 was influenced by the pan-Turkic nationalism, though remnants of this are still found in Azerbaijani identity. Suha Bolukbasi claims that the Karabakh conflict influenced Azerbaijanis in the sense that they became more politicized and their passivity in politics (their apolitical attitude) was overcome by their willingness to partake in the demonstrations and protests: “the ‘national dispute’ led to popular participation in politics and the emergence of various opposition parties.” (2001, 51). Although Karabakh brought about the formation of a civil society ready to enter a political life, the defeat during the war was discouraging for Azerbaijanis. People also realized that the Elchibey government was not very determined (or maybe not at all) to unify the militias, which were mainly clan-based military units under different commands. This was rather risky for Azerbaijan, and it was one of the main reasons why the Azerbaijani ‘army’ lost the war.

We realize that one of the most litigious problems in the process of transition and social reformation, especially in the former Soviet periphery, is the right to self-determination of nationalities versus territorial integrity of newly independent states. This rise of self-determination was quite obvious in the post-Soviet Union, where many states gained independence but also faced the troubles of the multi-ethnic composition of their states and the Soviet legacies of geographical division in the region. This led to many newly formed states to confront minority uprising in their territories.

The Karabakhization of politics is evident in the nationalist movements in Armenia and Azerbaijan, this nationalism is a combination of ethnic features – meaning common language, imagined descent, culture – and territory, which loses its objective character and becomes

subjectively defines. How does this affect the notion of self-determination in these cases? The second section of this paper showed that the Bolshevik tradition understood the nation as including this ethnic and territorial component, which is reflected in the Soviet Nationality policies. These policies in turn shaped the concept of self-determination as including an ethno-territorial type of nationalism. But this does not mean that all claims of secession necessarily entail full statehood as the final aim. Many of these cases in the post-Soviet region or elsewhere point to the fact that there are various forms of claims that secessionist movements put forth, and that context matters because this affects the way people conceive of such terms as self-determination and secession. Thus, to be able to move forward in the international context, it is vital and essential for the international community to be able to recognize these factors, and thus adopt a more nuanced definition of self-determination, that can surpass the essentialist notions as they exist today in the international arena (institutionalized in bodies such as the UN, and adopted by organizations such as the EU); this is an important step to overcome the current stagnating situation in the international dialogues and negotiations. It seems that political practice is almost always able to overpower theoretically sound explanations in the international arena.

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