

*Konstantin Zamyatin*  
*University of Helsinki*

The Impact of Ethnic Politics on State Building in Ethnic Republics of Post-Soviet Russia:  
An Institutional Perspective

The paper explores the formation of regional political systems in ethnic republics of post-Soviet Russia in order to understand the impact of ethnic politics on this process. First, the paper will map the federal approaches to diversity management employed in Russia. After that, the paper will examine the formation of the institutional framework for regional ethnic politics and track the institutional channels and informal practices that contributed to ethnic political participation.

In the late 1980s, popular ethnic mobilization based on the national revival ideology and the strife of regional elites to increase regional self-governance were the drivers of the sovereignization of the republics. The collapse of institutions at the center was a precondition for an upgrade of the political status of the republics. Initially regional power sharing has been a default setting. At the same time, sovereignization typically provided important discursive resources to titular elites and often ensured their favorite position among regional elites. Greater self-governance had not guaranteed political participation of minorities, including the titular elites in those republics, where the titular groups formed only a small portion in the total population. Yet, titular elites usually participated as minor partners in power-sharing deals also in these republics, because their participation added legitimation to self-governance demands. Thus, the impact of ethnic mobilization in the latter category of republics was not as extensive in the ability of the national movement to produce ethnic voting, as in its empowering effect to claims of titular elites for political participation.

When the Russian constitution approved significant levels of regional political and economic autonomy, it became a matter of political bargaining of political elites in the republics to find equilibrium in inter-ethnic relations. In struggle for political institutions in republican state-building, interests of different segments of regional elites diverged and ethnicity was often among the divisive factors. Competition ended many power-sharing deals and typically led to the establishment of titular domination over the republican authorities.

Newly established political institutions in the republics' constitutions had not envisaged any mechanism that would guarantee ethnic political participation. By the time of the USSR collapse, the titular groups were in the numerical minority in more than half of the republics and autonomies. Competitive politics resulted in a partial redistribution of power that affected not only ethnic minorities in the narrow sense but also the titular elites in some republics with the titular minority, because their members were outvoted in the democratic voting procedure with the majority rule. Power redistribution led to the establishment of the domination of the regional Russian elites in some republics. Once equilibrium in republics was achieved with the stabilisation of political institutions, further developments have usually not principally changed the underlying modes of minority governance. Whatever strategy, the ruling group and all the major parties endeavored to avoid the ethnic issues in public discourse. Insulation of elites and a lack of 'social lifts' sustained equilibrium.