

## SOVIET NATIONALITIES POLICY: THE IMPACT ON CENTRAL ASIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Soviet Union has developed diverse policies regarding nationality question till the collapse of the regime to find a way to unite all 172 nations consisting the Union. To accomplish that end, and to create a "Soviet person" who is free from all other identities and belongings but only devoted herself/himself to become a proper Soviet citizen; Soviet nationalities policy was put into effect and influenced the whole national perceptions of the countries living under Soviet administration. This study examines the Soviet nationalities policy and the related policies, developed by the Soviet leaders and argues that Soviet administration had to give up its ideological motivations in the short time to achieve the goal of creating a Soviet person in the long run. Taking into consideration this argument, Central Asian countries are analyzed to underline the specific responses and the implications of these policies on the region.*

**Keywords:** Soviet nationalities policy, Central Asia, national delimitation, post-Soviet, Soviet leaders, Soviet person

### ÖZET

#### SOVYET MİLLİYETLER POLİTİKASI: ORTA ASYA ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİSİ

*Sovyetler Birliği, Birliği oluşturan 172 ulusu birleştirmek amacıyla rejimin çöküşüne kadar milliyet (ulus) sorununa yönelik farklı politikalar geliştirmiştir. Bu ülküyü gerçekleştirmek ve diğer tüm kimlik ve aidiyetlerden bağımsız ve kendisini yalnızca rejime adanmış bir Sovyet vatandaşı olan bir "Sovyet insanı" yaratmak için Sovyet milliyetler politikası yürürlüğe girmiş ve Sovyet yönetimi altında yaşayan tüm milletlerin ulus algılarını etkilemiştir. Bu çalışma Sovyet milliyetler politikasını ve Sovyet liderler tarafından geliştirilmiş ilgili politikaları inceler ve Sovyet yönetiminin uzun vadede Sovyet insanı yaratma amacına ulaşmak için kısa vadede ideolojik motivasyonlarından vazgeçmek zorunda olduğunu savunur. Bu argümanı göz önüne alarak Orta Asya ülkeleri uygulanan politikaların bölgedeki belli etki ve tepkilerinin vurgulanması bağlamında analiz edilmiştir.*

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Sovyet milletler politikası, Orta Asya, ulusal sınırlandırma, Sovyet sonrası, Sovyet liderleri, Sovyet insanı

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## I. Introduction

Nation and nationalism are the concepts, which have been debatable among the scholars. While primordialist view suggests that nationality is a natural part of human beings, so it is a given to their social existence (Ozkirimli, 2010:49) and it is a timeless phenomenon; modernists argue that nationalism is the modern concept evolved with the rise of capitalism, industrialization, urbanization and laicism, or as the product of a such modern processes (Ozkirimli, 2010: 102). On one hand, ethno-symbolist scholars focus on the importance of ethnic past or culture on the development of the nation (Ozkirimli, 2010: 203-204). On the other hand, some scholars such as Benedict Anderson argues that “nation is an imagined community” (Anderson, 1991:6), however, some others like Ernest Renan defines it as “culmination of a long past of sacrifice and devotion” (Renan, 1990: 19). The main concern of this study, however, is the Marxist thought that underlines the nations and nationalism issue, suggesting that national, religious, tribal or other such identities would not mean so much in the socialist state because the aim of this state is the creation of a classless society; a society that everyone would be equal. Marxist thought mostly focuses on the economic and social conditions created by capitalism and the effects of these conditions on the existence of the nations. Lenin underlines that it is crucial to investigate the national movements and the economic-historical conditions behind them stating, “the best conditions for the development of capitalism are undoubtedly provided by the national state” (Lenin, 2001 [1914]: 223), reversing the claim of modernists’ view. As overarching the nations to the capitalism, Marxist thought focuses on the issue of existence of nations without giving any attention to the attachments of other definitions of nationalism.

Keeping this in mind, in the specific case of Soviet Union whose political system was ideologically motivated by Marxism, it is important to analyze the Soviet nationalities policies to understand the logic of all system and the ultimate goal of the Union as creating classless society. It is crucial to examine this subject to clarify whether the Soviet Union tried to eliminate national identities or it created new ones unintentionally and how she tried to accomplish it by her own way.

This study mainly argues that Soviet Union with 172 nationalities in 1927 (Ozgul, 2006:20) put many policies into effect to keep all different nationalities together under one administration. To accomplish such a difficult duty, Soviet state sometimes seemed to be compensating from its very first ideals. In other words, for the greater good in the long run, Soviet administration was willing to make sacrifices from its ideological motivations in the short run.

This paper analyzes the Soviet Nationalities Policy by taking internal and external factors of the time as well as taking different leaders' policies into consideration. After analyzing the basic motivations of the leaders, the article will be concluded to specify the effects and importance of these motivations for the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

## **II. Soviet Nationalities Policy**

Multiethnic characteristic of the Soviet Union made nationality question difficult to deal with from the beginning of the Soviet regime. At the 1936 and 1977 Constitutions of the Soviet Union, it is stated that Soviet Union is created on the basis of associations of equal Soviet socialist republics (Shtromas, 1978: 266). However, both Marx and Engels treated national or nationality question as the questions of peripheral and ethnic divisions and they both believed that in a socialist society, nationality would lose its importance for the working class (Smith, 1996: 5). They both believed that nationality was irrelevant, what matters was the union of working class. In that point, the main challenge of Soviet Union, with Marxist ideals, was to combine nationalism question with socialism's ideals. As Connor (1984) points out:

Nationalism is predicted upon the assumption that the most fundamental divisions of humankind are the many vertical cleavages that divide people into ethnonational groups. Marxism, by contrast, rests upon the conviction that the most fundamental human divisions are horizontal class distinctions that cut across national groupings (Connor, 1984: 5).

As stated by Zaslavsky (1993), the basic aims of Soviet nationality were "to secure its territorial integrity and internal stability by suppressing various nationalist and, especially, separatist movements" and to require "a mobile, literate, culturally standardized, interchangeable population" (Zaslavsky, 1993: 32). All Soviet leaders tried to keep together all the nations under the Soviet Union, while they put forward many different policies regarding nationalism. The following pages will examine the policies of Soviet leaders by focusing on how incompatible the characteristics of nationalism and socialism with the ultimate goal of Soviet state; namely creation of the Soviet person.

- a. View of Lenin towards Soviet Nationalities Policy.* At the 1903 Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, in the party program drafted by Lenin, policy on national question is defined as:

- The abolition of the system of social strata (*sosloviya*) and complete equal rights for all citizens irrespective of sex, religion, race, and nationality.
- The right of the population to receive an education in its own language, a right to be secured by the setting up of the necessary schools at the expense of the State and of the organs of local government; the right of every citizen to express himself at meetings in his own language; the introduction of the native language on equal terms with the State language in all local, public, and State institutions.
- The right of self-determination for all nations comprising the State (Conquest, 1967: 16).

Lenin's view was purely about political self-determination. As Ozgul (2006) points out, many Marxist writers focused on national question in terms of economic, cultural and psychological aspects while Lenin added the issue of political self-secession and independent nation state (Ozgul, 2006: 21). This approach can be seen as a tool to gain support from the national minorities. As Duncan argues; "Lenin, like Marx and Engels, favored the existence of a single unitary party for the workers of particular state, irrespective to nationality" (1990: 153).

Moreover, Lenin's views regarding periphery and nations should be understood as a way that he recognizes the people in periphery as if they are in prison and he wants to save them and give them the right to write their own faiths. So, nationalism can be used to promote self-determination for the people living at periphery in their struggle against imperial powers. According to Zaslavsky, slogan of self-determination of the Bolsheviks weakened the Tsarist authority and resulted in support from many national movements. However, after the revolution, Stalin redefined self-determination as a proletarian self-determination, not as a national one (Zaslavsky, 1993: 30-31). Bremmer and Taras state:

Before Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin generally discounted the significance of nationalism and supported a policy of regional autonomy, whereby state political-administrative divisions would not be based upon ethnic lines. After the revolution... it became increasingly apparent to Lenin that the formation of a stable union would require substantial concessions to national rights. . . Consequently, even though complete assimilation of all national groups was the desired goal, it was deemed necessary to erect a façade of equality and sovereignty (Bremmer and Taras, 1993: 9).

**b. Stalin Era (1928-1953).** Joseph Stalin, in his work “Marxism and the National Question”, which had become the cornerstone of the Soviet policy towards nationalities, defines 'nation' as “historically developed stable community with a common language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture” (2004: 303-314). In the line of this definition, during Stalin era, the slogan was the “Socialist in content, nationalist in form” (Frolova-Walker, 1998: 343). This approach clearly shows the regime’s faith arguing that national differences like language or culture should be promoted to accomplish socialist goals.

Korenizatsiya, put into effect in 1920s, allowed local national cadres to enjoy power in lower levels of administrative subdivision of the state (Mokrushyna, 2010: 3) and promoted the usage of native languages. For Central Asian countries, “encouragement was given to develop titular alphabets and linguistic structures” (Smith, 1996: 7). As D’Encausse states:

Giving equal cultural rights to each nation was also thought of as a means to break up some large groups united by special bonds. Such was the case for the Moslem peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia, who since the beginning of the century had been trying to unite on the basis of common language (Smith, 1995: 22).

So, with giving equal rights to all nations, Soviet regime emphasized that each nation is different from each other and tried to break their ties with each other; and in the long run, they hoped this policy to serve to create a Soviet person regardless national, religious, tribal identity uniting around the Soviet identity. But, this policy made people aware of their own ethnicities and this situation led them to see class differences less important than ethnic differences. Khazanov states:

By making an ethnic affiliation ascriptive, directly connecting ethnicity with language and territory, and linking ethnic status with the degree of ethno-territorial autonomy, it has not helped to break down barriers between ethnicity and nation (Khazanov, 1995: 244).

Another important development of Stalin era regarding the Soviet nationalities policy was the “National Delimitation Policies” (natsionalnoye stroitelstv) had taken place between 1924 and 1936. It was basically about creating territorial boundaries based on nationalities living there. Soviet administrative system was very hierarchic one; at the top, there were Soviet Socialist Republics. Within SSR, there were

Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics. Then, there was Autonomous Oblast, Okrugs and Raions. In a way Soviet Union acted as a federal system. National Delimitation Policies mainly were seen as temporary units on the way of creating Soviet identity (Akçalı, 2010). With this policy, Stalin emphasized the ethnicity of people living in the region, and this led them to be aware of their ethnic and national differences and identities. Edgar points out that in Central Asia, “where popular sentiment on the national question could be difficult to determine, ethnographic data and the desired of local communists were determining factors” (Edgar, 2006: 53).

In 1928 and 1929, many trials and purges took place with the charge of fuelling anti-Soviet nationalism and they affected many intellectuals, who were mainly beneficiaries of the Korenizatsiya. They were mostly accused of being enemies of the regime. For the specific case of Central Asia, the first generation of Jadids was eliminated by these purges. After Great Purges, new Soviet-raised generation has emerged and in these manner clan leaders in Central Asia became Communist Party representatives in the region. In 1930s, Russification, promotion of Russian identity over others, over the non-Russian republics began. As Smith points out, “by the late 1930s the Russian language was being vigorously promoted in the schools and the number of Russian schools in provinces was increased” (Smith, 1996: 8).

During the Second World War, Soviet Russia as an ‘elder brother’ gained new momentum and Stalin proposed a “toast to the health of our Soviet people, and in the first place the Russian people the most outstanding nation of all the nations of the Soviet Union” (Smith, 1996: 8). Also, in those years, collectivization took place. This was about confiscating privately owned lands from land lords and make them state lands; it resulted in moving nomads to urban areas and some areas lost their dominant population overall. So, Soviet Russian influence is accomplished much more easily than expected. As Bremmer and Taras (1993) point out:

the accession to power of Stalin led to deterioration of national rights in the Soviet Union. The national egalitarianism which had prevailed under Lenin became national regimentation and hierarchy. . . Russification took place to far a greater extent under Stalin, and ‘somewhat national in form, Russian in content’ became the rule (Bremmer and Taras, 1993: 11).

- c. ***Khrushchev Era (1953-1964)***. In 1956, at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Nikita Khrushchev rebuked Stalin’s practices and he exposed and denounced that “the forces mass resettlement of some of the nationalities – the Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Karachai, and Kalmyks – that had been

moved during the Second World War from their homeland for geostrategic reasons, and fully rehabilitated and restored their nationality rights” (Smith, 1996: 8).

What we see in general in Khrushchev era is the softening of many policies including nationalities policy in comparison to Stalin era. Rather than “brotherhood of the nations”, he talked about “merger of nations” with the final goal of constructing communist society (Tompson, 1997: 239).

As Titov points out that although development of national languages was promised, ‘Russian language as in practice becomes a common language of interethnic communication and cooperation of all peoples of USSR’ understanding was held. It was stated “the principle aim in nationalities policy was the all-round economic and cultural development of all nations in Soviet Union and eventual emergence of inter-national culture... that would be the universal culture of world communist society” (Titov, 2009: 14).

The problem at that moment was that people under Soviet regime, now, was giving importance to their nationalities and define themselves with these identities. I think, it was too late to create a “Soviet identity” both because of national awareness of the people and Stalin’s harsh practices over nationalities, which will have an impact on the dissolution of the Union. It can be suggested that many things would have been different if Khrushchev would have been in power before Stalin.

**d. Brezhnev Era (1964-1982).** Brezhnev stated at the Twenty-Fourth Party Congress in 1971 “the process of creating a unified Soviet people had been completed, and proposals were made to abolish the federative system and replace it with a single state” (Global Security, [n.d.],). However, in 1970, this assumption was shaken with the arising nationalist movements in the Union. Nations’ demands varied; Jews demanded to immigrate to Israel, Crimean Tatars wanted to go back to Crimea; Lithuanians demanded some rights for Catholic Church etc. By the end of 1970, these movements were mainly taken under control and “Proposals to dismantle the federative system were abandoned, and a policy of further drawing of nationalities together (sblizhenie) was pursued” (Global Security, [n.d.],).

The new slogans in Brezhnev era were the ‘blossoming’ (rastsvet) of the nations regarded as the cultures of separate nations were being encouraged to

blossom and their ‘rapprochement’ (sblizhenie) (Bacon and Sandle, 2002: 72). As Bacon and Sandle (2002: 75) indicate that Nationalities Policy under Brezhnev era was seen as Russification in some areas, indigenization in others and equalization wherever possible. They also state:

Members of titular nationality had either appropriate proportion of newspapers and books, or, in the case of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Georgia and all Central Asian Republics except Kazakhstan, they had more than strict proportionality would have entitled them to...more attention was paid to the national language in Transcaucasia and the Central Asian Republics (except Kazakhstan) (2002: 73).

In the Central Asia, the tendency was to appoint indigenous elite as First Secretary of the Party but putting Russian or Ukrainian in the important positions (Bacon and Sandle, 2002: 79). Russian language was promoted in education and as the language of media in this era.

- e. Gorbachev Era (1990-1991).* When Gorbachev took his position as a Soviet leader, he firstly eliminated the cadres of Brezhnev era. His coming to power was the turning point for Soviet Union. He had three main slogans; uskorenie (acceleration), glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). He wanted with uskorenie to speed up, change and process the policies of Soviet Union. He wanted to reform the system without changing Socialism. Glasnost meant open up discussion about the system; it brought freedom of discussion for different ideas. Perestroika was related to economic reform, Soviet economy was in recession, it was not dynamic economy. However, these reforms would not be successful and Gorbachev failed to keep his support level throughout his leadership (Akçali, 2010). He was a man with ideals for the survival of Soviet regime and socialism but he chose somehow different pattern from former leaders with emphasizing the openness and softening authoritarian understanding.

As Zemtsov and Farrar (2008) argue “Gorbachev and his associates pay lip service to Soviet ethnic diversity and to the rights of Soviet nationalities to their own cultural distinctiveness” (2008: 93). Gorbachev, also, followed traditional tendencies of Soviet nationalities policy such as appointing Russians or other Slavs to the local party leadership positions and emphasizing the superiority of Russian over other languages (Zemtsov and Farrar, 2008: 93).



In his book ‘Gorbachev: On My Country and the World’, Gorbachev states:

We are encountering increasing strain in relations among nationalities, greater conflicts. Some say, Let this “empire” fall apart; others say, What are Gorbachev and the other leaders thinking about? They should have restored order and put everyone backing their place long ago. Neither of these two approaches is consistent with serious politics. As a Russian, as a Soviet citizen, and as a political leader, I cannot accept such extreme ways of approaching these questions. . . . Let us reorganize our federation and think about renewing the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Everything that contributes to carrying out the idea of renewal corresponds to the interests of Russians and of all other nationalities in our country. That we must take as our starting point (Gorbachev, 2000: 102).

On June 12, 1990, the Supreme Soviet of Russia passed declaration of the sovereignty of the RFSFR and, “the parade of sovereignties” began (Gorbachev, 2000: 103). In his first speech as a president of USSR, Gorbachev clearly showed his thought about nationalities:

Emergency measures are needed to resolve the especially painful problems arising from quarrels or feuding among nationalities, above all, the problem of refugees. In this regard, measures must be taken by the governments of the appropriate Union republics and, when necessary, by Union government itself.

In general, we have the right today to propose the following: the Union republics, while strengthening their sovereignty, and acquiring broad autonomy, must also take full responsibility for ensuring civil rights for people of all nationalities on their territory-in accordance with both Soviet and international forms. This is a political, legal, and material responsibility. In recent times, the danger of the spread of the nationalist, chauvinist, and racist slogans has arisen. We must fight relentlessly against this, using the full force of the constitution and the laws of the land (Gorbachev, 2000: 107).

The policies followed by Gorbachev, as he also admitted, resulted in separation movements within Soviet Russia and cause the nationalities to clash. Zaslavsky (1993) also draws attention to the fact that Nationalities issue had taken place at the bottom of the agenda of Gorbachev and he did not think of reevaluate it until he was almost two years in office. He mainly aimed to reform Union’s economy and to preserve Union as political entity. However, his attempts to reconcile the transition to democracy and free market economy with the aim of preserving Union as a political entity were unsuccessful. So, it can be argued that in such a multiethnic country, separatist movements can be seen as an inevitable

reaction to systematic crisis, and Soviet Union was no exception (Zaslavsky, 1993: 40-41).

Gorbachev acted as a man who learnt his lesson from the past, but, as in the case of Khrushchev, he was also late for this renewal. He was late to show the humanitarian face of the regime to people under the Union who have suffered from authoritarian and cruel face of the regime for years.

### **III. The Ultimate Aim: Creating Soviet Person**

As mentioned above, the aim of Socialist State was mainly creating a classless society. Therefore, national, religious, tribal identities would not mean so much. The relevant identity for Soviet state would be the Soviet identity. All the policies regarding nationalities in the Union, at the end, can be taken under the umbrella of creating Soviet man (person). All the policies can be regarded as the tactical movements on the way to the ultimate goal. For example, if National Delimitation Policies were taken into consideration, the logic was that these were temporary units on the way of creating Soviet identity. With these policies, ethnical and national identities of the people were emphasized because this was seen better than emphasizing religious, religion, tribal identities which are seen as anachronistic ones. First aim was to create national identity, and then the final aim of creating Soviet person would be achieved (Akçalı, 2010).

According to Smirnov, there were three stages of creating socialist person: 1) industrializer and collectivizer of the period from the revolution until the mid-1930s; 2) the man of Cultural Revolution that lasted from mid-1930s until the mid-1950s; 3) the new Soviet man (builder of Communism) (Rockmore, 1981: 6). Siskin defines new Soviet man as:

Devotion to Communism, the socialist fatherland, and to the Socialist countries; conscientious work for the good of society; care for the preservation and increase in social wealth; high social consciousness with lack of tolerance for social crimes; collectivism and comradely mutual support; good human relations and mutual respect; honesty, uprightness, and moral purity both in public and in private; mutual respect in the family and devotion to the education of children; intolerance to crime, hooliganism, etc; fraternity and amity of all peoples of the U.S.S.R.; no compromise with the enemies of Communism, of peace, and of freedom; fraternal solidarity with all workers (Rockmore, 1981: 6).

All of these ideals could not be taken as the aims of nationalities policy of Soviet Union, but at the beginning they were the major goals regarding the Soviet man. In time, leaders of the Soviet Union tried to create Soviet identity and made concession from many ideals to keep the Union together. Therefore, while the ideals were seen as attainable in theory, Soviet regime failed to achieve its goals.

#### **IV. Soviet Nationalities Policy and the Implications on Central Asia**

In the specific case of Central Asia, what we see is the absence of any state or any administrative units until Tsarist Russia's intervention. There were mainly khanates and emirates without fixed boundaries and political hierarchy among them until then. With the arrival of Tsarist Russia, some administrative units like Governate General of Turkestan were established in three provinces; Ferghana, Syrdarya and Samarkand (Akçalı, 2010). The situation did not dramatically change during Soviet era but some additions were made to the system. Regarding the Soviet era, Schlesinger (1956) states:

The tasks of the departments for nationalities are to consolidate the principle of Soviet construction and to apply to measures of Soviet regime among the national minorities on the territory given province or district; to raise the political, economic and cultural level of the national minorities of a given locality; to punish periodical and non-periodical literature for the national minority (Schlesinger, 1956: 40).

However, in terms of the specific case of Central Asia, Edgar (2006) acknowledges:

Central Asia was the last major region of the Soviet Union to be divided along national lines. Communist officials viewed the national delimitation of Central Asia as a way of speeding up a natural process of nation formation in the Soviet periphery. This, in turn, was an essential precondition for the "modernization" that would allow Central Asians to enter the mainstream of Soviet life. Moscow also hoped that the creation of national republics would ameliorate the ethnic conflicts that plagued Central Asia and facilitate the emergence of class struggle (Edgar, 2006: 46).

Edgar, also emphasizes that Soviet Union saw Kazakhs in conflict with Turkmen, Uzbek oppressed Turkmen and Kyrgyz so there is need for a creation of national republic for each group (Edgar, 2006: 46). This seems to be an excuse for the Soviet regime to create national republics.

In the Stalin era, the region was divided into five separate Soviet Republics under national delimitation policy. The reason behind it was to eliminate potential threats to the new socialist state like Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism. To create a classless society, Soviet identity should have been promoted while other identities should be eliminated. Also, Soviet regime wanted to divide the region in case these countries started uprisings against the system.

From the point of Soviet regime, this was the logical thing to do; with equal Soviet membership, other identities would have been eliminated. Some scholars have positive, and others have negative views regarding this subject. Scholars with negative approach mainly argues that what Soviet Union did with national delimitation policy was the imperialist “divide and rule” policy; scholars with positive attitude, however, argue that federal units were given self-determination, Marxist ideology is a liberating one, not oppressive one and it provided equal nation for everyone (Akçalı, 2010).

In this respect, Soviet language policy in the region should be given attention to understand situation in more concrete way. Because, Marxist-Leninist views of language policy is an important part of nationalities policy. Lenin who criticized making Russian language an official language of Union states:

We know better than you do that the language of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dobrulyubov and Chernyshevsky is a great and mighty one.... And we, of course, are in favour of every inhabitant of Russia having the opportunity to learn the Great Russian language. What we do not want is the element of coercion... a compulsory official language involves coercion, the use of the cudgel (Desheriyeve and Mikhalchenko, 1976: 391).

According to Bennigsen and Quelquejay, Soviet nationalities policy depended on the “doctrine, which traces the evolution of the human group from the clan to the nation, which is the ultimate outcome of the group,” (Bennigsen and Quelquejay, 1961: 1). In the content of Nationalities Policy, each Central Asian country was given literacy language different from its neighbors, so linguistic unity of the area was broken and differences in their languages were emphasized. This situation helped the success of National Delimitation policy on the Soviet Union side (Dickens, 1988: 4). As Ozgul (2006) also pointed out slogan of Stalin “Socialist in content, nationalist in form” entails that national cultures and national languages would be supported under dictatorship to promote socialist ideology and goals of socialism; in this manner, in 1920s and 1930s, with korenizatsiya, national languages were promoted” (Ozgul, 2006: 22).

Soviet Union, in time, faced with many troubles and priority was given to achieve internal unity; language policy reflected the Nationalities policy of the Union, as Wheeler clearly points out:

In order to achieve this end in Central Asia, the Soviet language policy encompassed three broad aims: first, the "completion" and "enrichment" of existing languages, the widening of their scope and the transformation of tribal and community languages into developed national languages with a rich terminology and vocabulary; secondly, the removal of the large Arabic and Persian loan vocabulary inherited from the Muslim conquests; and thirdly, the establishment of Russian as 'a second native language' (Wheeler, 1964:195).

The important aspect here is to answer the question whether Soviet Union treated all nations equal or not. Slezkine (1994) argues:

Contrary to Stalin's statement, 'all nations are sovereign and equal,' all nations were not treated as equals in practice for several reasons. For instance, all nations were not equal in size: there were small nations and there were large nations. All nations were not equal in their development, either: there were 'backward' nations and there were 'civilized' nations. Thirdly, all nations were not equal in their economic status: some were 'oppressor nations' and some were 'oppressed' (Slezkine, 1994: 416).

It would not be a mistake if one assumes that Central Asia region consists of the large and backward nations in Soviet era. According to Gleason, the major aim of the Soviet Union was to create appropriate states for Central Asia (Gleason, 1993: 335). What I would like to do at this point is to mention individual Central Asian Republics in a few words.,

Kazakhstan as the second largest country in Soviet era was named initially as "Kyrgyz ASSR" in 1924. This was changed to "Kazakh ASSR" in 1925. In 1936, it was renamed as "Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic" under the national delimitation policy. With sedentarization and collectivization, 100% of the Kazakh population was settled in 1930s. In 1930s and 1940s, Kazakhstan became the country for deported ethnic groups. Nahaylo and Swoboda (1990) state:

Stalin started deportations of whole national groupings or considerable parts of nations before the Second World War, obviously regarded non-Russian troops as unreliable in the war, and very shortly after its outbreak deported all ethnic Germans. The same fate awaited seven more entire nationalities, which were accused of treason during the war (Nahaylo and Swoboda, 1990: 96).

In the region, Kazakhstan is the most Russified country; the official languages of the country are Russian and Kazakh and most of the people living in Kazakhstan are better in communication skills in Russian rather than the Kazakh language. Regarding Uzbekistan, two notable Uzbek scholars argued that “the criteria for redistricting included: consideration of the local ethnic make up; irrigation district management authority; economic specialization of the regions; the suitability of urban areas for the management of agricultural areas; and the distribution of ethnic groups” (Gleason, 1993: 336). The web-site of Embassy of Uzbekistan to the United States states:

In 1924 Uzbekistan was created as part of a "national delimitation" that redivided Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khiva into new national republics. This effectively blocked the Central Asian and Tatar nationalists, who sought to create a state uniting Turks and other Muslim peoples of the former Russian empire, Bukhara, and Khiva. Consequently, the common histories, languages, traditions, and populations of the area were parceled out to individual local nationalities (About Uzbekistan, 2004).

Edgar points out that it was easier for Turkmenistan to create borders because of its national composition was very homogenous; Turkmen republic became the official member of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1925. Before the Second World War, Korenizastia was slow in Turkmenistan. After the sedentarization and collectivization, by the late 1930s, majority of Turkmen population was sedentary. As Edgar pointed out; “pre-modern Turkmen identity was reshaped by Soviet territorial and linguistic ideas of nationhood” (Edgar, 2006: 69).

Kyrgyzstan, which was given ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) status in 1926 and was given SSR status in 1936, experienced indigenization until mid-1930s. Huskey argues “while maintaining the symbols of Kyrgyz national autonomy, Stalinism launched policies that deepened Slavic domination of the region” (Huskey, 2008: 401). The sayings and promises of Soviet Union was more welcomed in Kyrgyzstan, the words of Usubaliev, the Communist Party first secretary, stated on the eve of Gorbachev that; “sixty years is just a brief moment in the history of Kirgizstan ... but it was indeed during this period that its age-old dream of happiness became reality” (Huskey, 2008: 401).

Moreover, in terms of language, Huskey argues that in the postwar era, Russian started to become the language of politics and commerce in the republic rather than Kyrgyz (Huskey, 2008: 402). Rakowska- Harmostone points out that the implementation of nationalities policy was similar to any others in Central Asia. She

states that “Tadzhik national identity was recognized in the 1924 national delimitation by the creation of the Tadzhik autonomous republic” (Rakowska-Harmonstone, 1970: 71). According to her, Khrushchev’s reforms on economy and administration resulted in decentralization in the state structure and gave greater powers to the republics. In Central Asia, Uzbeks would be the ones who gained most benefits from this autonomy (Rakowska-Harmonstone, 1970: 91). So, Central Asian countries were not to be claimed to be equal in the region.

Central Asia, divided into five separate Soviet republics, was also seen as a dangerous territory with the potential rise of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism. So, from the Soviet viewpoint, rising national identities and unification of Muslims should have been prevented when the region was divided. If national identity was to be divided into two; first came the supranational identity of Turkic and Islamic characteristics in pre-Soviet era and secondly as subnational identity like clan identity, local identity and tribal identity, what Soviet Union wanted to do was the elimination of all these identities gradually. Firstly, elimination of subnational identities is to be achieved while emphasizing national identities and then elimination of supranational identities is to be done on the way of creation of Soviet identity which Soviet elites accepted their failure of creating it in 1970s. For Central Asian people, they were Turkic, Muslim, nomads; they did not call themselves as “Kazakh” or “Kyrgyz”; Soviet Union created these national identities because they were seen as superior to subnational identities (Akçalı, 2010).

Martin (2001) adds at this point that Russification policy of RSFSR was also an attempt to survive in a multinational Soviet state. This policy, while denying Russian identity as superior one, emphasized the creation of national soviets in which national expression would be guaranteed. But, Soviet elites saw that this policy was failed with the resentment of Russians and growing threat coming from nationalist movements (Martin, 2001: 32).

Moreover, as Legvold (2007) mentions, Stalin solved the loyalty problem by giving nations their cultural autonomy and establishing local soviets based on ethnicity. To fight with internal enemies and international capitalism, Stalin put korenizatsiya into effect to create loyalty (Legvold, 2007: 240). The effect of the korenizatsiya in Central Asia can be summarized by Strayer’s (1998) words;

In Central Asia, korenizatsiya created wholly new territorial-ethnic units-Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kirghizia-that provided alternatives both to traditional tribal or clan loyalties and to Islamic religious identity linking people to

the larger Muslim world. Enshrining nationality as a principle automatically created “minorities,” both in the Union as a whole and each of its constituent republics. . . . During Stalin years, korenizatsiya, while never repudiated in theory, was largely abandoned in practice. Believing that collectivization and rapid industrial growth required absolute centralized control, Stalin saw local nationalism as a potential threat and preferred to rely on Sovietized Russian elites for controlling the country (Strayer, 1998: 73).

### **Could Soviet Nationalities Policy have been put into effect in a different way? An example of Muslim National Communism.**

Muslim National Communism, consist of three words were not easily compatible with each other, was developed in early 1920s. The attempt was to syntheses of these three words. The leading character was Sultan Galiev. He, firstly, made a distinction between oppressor and oppressed nations and stated oppressed ones as colonized and poor ones and oppressor ones to be colonizer and rich ones. He stated that, Marxist notion of exploitation shifted from class to nation. He suggested that the class conflict was also important but oppressor and oppressed nations were more important and first thing to be done was to remote oppressed nations. Moreover, the Bolsheviks remained quite unresponsive to the problems of the region. He proposed the creation of separate branch of Communist Party-Muslim Communist Party. He tried to adopt Muslim population into Marxist ideology and give Socialism a national face. At the end, he was exiled. However, in the Second World War era, Soviet administration established SADUM (Muslim Spiritual Directorate in Central Asia) to gain support from local people. This was institutionalisation of Islam. Official Mullahs argued that there is no conflict between Islam and Socialism; worldly goals of Soviet regime were compatible with Islam. For example, both promote education for everyone, both Islam and Socialism put emphasis on collectivism, not on individualism (Akçalı, 2010). Therefore, Soviet regime was ready to make compromise from its ideological views for the survival of the Union. What if, what Galiev said would be given attention in 1920s, and done something regarding local conditions at those times; did it really change the situation regarding the nationalities policy? The answer of the question will never be truly answered. But, I assume that what Soviet Union tried to do with nationalities policy, korenizatsiya and Russification created nations and nation consciousness among the Central Asian populations; what if the religion, not the nations, were promoted or given respect or used as a tool to arrive a Socialist state by Union, how the consequences would have been would be an important thing to think about. On the other hand, considering the circumstances that Soviet Russia



had to deal with, would be the smart thing emphasizing national differences; if religion was used, Soviet Union would have been departed from its vision of future and its promises. I came up with this question while dealing with the issue and tried to imagine what else could have been done; we may not find the answer now but 'what if' questions should be kept in mind, not only for this issue, but also for many other policies Soviet Union adopted for better understanding of the system.

## **V. Conclusion**

In this paper, I just draw a small picture of the Soviet Nationalities Policy mostly emphasizing the main framework of the issue. The topic is so broad that only limited number of points and actors were examined. Soviet Union, in its lifetime of approximately 70 years, tried to create a system that has never been seen in the history; it tried to create a Socialist state. However, the Union had also faced many problems because of trying something new in a very huge territory with the people knowing nothing about socialism. In the example of Central Asia, where mostly nomadic people with strong ties to their culture lived, it was really difficult to create a system that keeps them under one umbrella. Soviet Nationalities Policy would be seen as an important tool for the regime for this point. From Lenin to Gorbachev, all Soviet leaders had really spent their times to keep nations under a centralized regime with the concern of stability against separatist movements. In theory, what this policy offers seem to be attainable, but in practice, unexpected problems have emerged.

As an attempt of assimilation all nations under the Soviet Union, Soviet Nationalities Policy tried to attain a paradoxical approach to make nations with the help of national delimitation policy which created five different nations of Central Asia. With the nationalities policy, it is expected that economic, cultural and political equality would vanish nationalist tendencies. Regional identity was transformed to the national identity. This finally led these people to be aware of their nationalities and they somehow caught on it to reflect their discontent to the regime. To assimilate all the nations, promoting their national identities could be seen as irrelevant but, Soviet regime had its logic to save these groups from their subnational identities. However, this logical move, from the perspective Soviet Union, pushed these people to see ethnic conflicts more important than class conflict and undermined the regime's main goal. Also, the regime failed to see differences of people living in Central Asia; of course the Union aimed to create a society without differences among people, but at the beginning, the leaders should not have seen them as identical. As a result, Central Asian people started to think their nationality as a

matter of survival and hold on to the idea that their past and culture are unique and they are what constitutes the nation; making their nationality understanding closer to the ethno-symbolist definition of the nation, and losing to see the relationship between capitalism and nationality as Soviet regime hoped.

In theory, a Soviet personality, who had all good qualities, may be seen as perfect man. The ideals of regime were, also, seen in that way, but regarding Central Asia, I think the main problem was that people were unaware of the regime; when Soviet Union did not become successful to help them to understand the goals of the regime, they did not internalize it. Almost a seven decades-long experience of Soviet Union, Central Asian countries have really had difficult time to express themselves. What characterizes them was suppressed and they were turned into another thing that they did not want to be.

To conclude, Soviet Union adopted different policies on its Nationalities Policy; the Union tried to balance carrot and stick policy. The regime came with great promises for the people but turned to very authoritarian one especially under Gorbachev era. At some point, people would have seen Soviet Union as “empire of fear”. When people fear something, they could not see the good parts of it. The regime with great ideals like providing everyone health services, education for everyone, has no tolerance for crime etc. was seen autocratic and failed to meet its promises; I think, this, affected all policies of the regime including the nationalities policy.

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