

Ideology, Interests, and Identity

Comparing Secession Crises in the USSR and Russia

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As is well known, the final collapse of the Soviet Union along the lines of its national republics in 1991 took Soviet specialists largely by surprise. Before Gorbachev's launching of *perestroika*, few scholars argued that unrest among Soviet nationalities might pose a serious threat to the regime—and even those who did tended to focus on issues such as the increasing population growth of Central Asians relative to Slavs, the potential threat of Islam to Marxism-Leninism, and the possibility of war on the territory of the USSR (d'Encausse, 1979; Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983; Amalrik, 1970). After 1987, when Gorbachev's active encouragement of *glasnost* had led to the formation of “national fronts” in a whole series of Soviet republics, the problem of nationalities naturally began to receive much more explicit scholarly attention in the West (Hajda and Beissinger, 1990). Yet right up until 1991, the majority of analysts of Soviet affairs—including the most theoretically sophisticated ones—remained quite skeptical of arguments that the “Soviet empire” would actually break up along national lines, instead emphasizing the economic and institutional barriers facing would-be proponents of full republican independence (Motyl, 1987; Hough, 1990; Laitin, 1991). Despite recent efforts by some post-Soviet states to introduce greater political and economic integration within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States—which might appear to support some of these neo-institutionalist arguments—the fact remains that the dynamics of

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secessionism in the late USSR were far more powerful, with far more consequential historical results, than anticipated by most theorists.

By the summer of 1993, analysts of post-Soviet politics began to discuss the possibility that the fate of the USSR might soon await Russia itself (Sheehy, 1993). Certainly, the trends appeared ominously familiar. Once again, an escalating series of declarations of “sovereignty”—this time, of regions and ethnic republics within the Russian Federation (RF)—appeared to presage the final breakdown of Moscow’s authority over the constituent units of the federal state.¹

Later, the disastrous Russian invasion of Chechnya in December 1994 called into question the center’s military capacity to maintain state control over discontented regions. By the summer of 1996, however, this second “parade of sovereignties” had subsided, leaving the Russian government in at least *de jure* control of the entire territory of the former RSFSR for the foreseeable future.²

How might we explain these divergent outcomes of crises in center-periphery relations in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods? To date, no systematic theoretical comparison of the two processes has been undertaken. Yet several underlying similarities make them remarkably well suited for comparative analysis. In both cases, would-be secessionists operated within the context of Stalinist federal structures that had tended paradoxically to promote regional cultural distinctiveness while reinforcing Moscow’s political control (Suny, 1994). In addition, advocates of secession found themselves opposed by central authorities who vacillated between accommodationist and coercive strategies for holding the state together, increasing the general uncertainty about the limits of Moscow’s tolerance of republican or regional autonomy. Finally, in both periods, the ongoing disintegration of both the national economy and of military authority made secession from the state appear to be both advantageous and feasible for some regions, while at the same time the

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¹ To be sure, such declarations of regional “sovereignty” generally stopped well short of demands for outright independence—but sovereignty declarations by most of the Soviet republics before August 1991 had been similarly ambiguous.

² Of course, the process of Russian post-communist state formation is far from over, and the possibility remains that the Russian Federation will ultimately collapse like the Soviet Union at some point in the future. However, if one dates the beginning of the Soviet secession crisis from 1988 and that of the Russian Federation from 1991—as seems reasonable—then the latter state had by 1998 already endured more than twice as long as the former. This in itself deserves explanation. Indeed, explaining the subsiding of the initial post-communist secession crisis in Russia may facilitate analysis of the conditions under which the Russian state might eventually nonetheless succumb to secessionist dynamics.

inherited interdependencies of the Stalinist economic system made full autonomy seem wholly unrealistic for others. Given these similarities, it should be possible to obtain a more precise understanding of the key factors leading to the collapse or non-collapse of Leninist federal states through a comparison of the two cases than would be possible through an examination of either case taken in isolation.

Indeed, in this essay I will argue that a careful comparison of the breakup of the USSR along the lines of its national republics with the heretofore more limited regional assertions of autonomy in the Russian Federation casts into doubt some very widespread assumptions about postcommunist national identity and state formation. I begin by examining the arguments of what is generally termed the “essentialist” school, which sees ethnic identities as “primordial” (Geertz, 1973). I demonstrate that its advocates’ explanations of the Soviet collapse are found to be wanting when applied to the non-collapse of the Russian Federation. I then turn to the “instrumentalist” school, which sees ethnic mobilization as largely or wholly the work of self-interested political elites (Rothschild, 1981). Scholars in this tradition, in contrast with the essentialists, appear to have an easier time explaining the non-collapse of post-communist Russia than they do the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Next I briefly introduce a possible alternative approach for distinguishing among regional attitudes toward secession in ethnic federal states, one in which elite perceptions both of identity distinctiveness from the center and of possible economic benefits from political independence are seen as independent variables. This generates four possible types of region, which I label catalysts, followers, fence-sitters, and integrationists. Institutional differences between the federal structures of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation—especially the greater resources and status of Soviet Republics as compared to the vast majority of Russian regions—clearly contributed to the relatively greater number of integrationist regions in the Russian case. However, even this more nuanced typology of attitudes toward the center fails to account for the rapidity with which the Soviet secession crisis produced a total collapse of the regime, especially considering the almost complete failure of secessionist movements in the Russian Federation.

Thus I argue that the most important difference between the two cases lies in a factor almost entirely ignored by analysts to date: the nature of the ideological environment within which they unfolded. Specifically, the peaceful breakup of the USSR can be understood as the distinctive product of Marxism-Leninism’s delegitimation within a liberal world order, whereas the absence of a coherent ideological basis for Yeltsin’s regime has ironically made full secession from the Russian Federation much more difficult to legitimate and mobilize, both domestically and internationally. The implications of this argument for the long-term future viability of the Russian state are explored in the conclusion.

Essentialists

The idea that the Soviet Union represented a new “prison house of nations” in the tradition of the former Russian empire, although a minority view among Sovietologists, had always had vocal advocates in the scholarly community (Pipes, 1974; Carrère D’Encausse, 1979). At first glance, it might appear that the dynamics of the Soviet break-up have provided a conclusive confirmation of this interpretation of the nature of the Soviet regime and of the reasons for its demise. The speed with which *perestroika* ignited committed separatist movements in every Soviet republic, and the ultimate inability of the center to contain them, has inspired analysts such as Carrère D’Encausse to see the USSR’s final collapse as a “triumph of the nations” (Carrère D’Encausse, 1993). Variants of this approach to explaining the end of the Soviet Union are now widespread in the scholarly and journalistic literature.

The argument that “repressed” nationalisms inevitably reemerged the moment that Gorbachev removed the coercive controls formerly imposed by the CPSU and KGB fits logically with a view of ethnicity as somehow fundamental to human social identity. In Geertz’s view, for example, congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbor, one’s fellow believer, *ipso facto*; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute attributed to the very tie itself (Geertz, quoted in Treisman, 1997, p. 216).

Similarly, Walker Connor defines a “nation” as:

a human grouping whose members share an intuitive sense of kindredness or sameness, predicated upon a myth of common descent. It therefore refers to such people as the Russians, Ukrainians, Armenians...It does not refer to any collection of people who are conscious of their multiethnic background (for example, the Czechoslovak people, the Soviet people, or the American people) (Connor, 1984, p. xiv).

Given this analytical starting point, the effects of Gorbachev’s policies in a multinational empire must seem wholly unsurprising: “real” nations with an “intuitive” sense of group solidarity acted in concert to seize control over “their” territories as rapidly as possible. “In retrospect,” concludes Bremmer, “it seems a foregone conclusion that national explosion would prove the undoing of the Soviet system” (Bremmer, 1997, p. 3). Indeed, the logical result of the essentialist position is that the entire post-Soviet space is likely to be confronted instead with a practically endless series of ethnic conflicts as smaller and smaller national groups vie for territory—a process Bremmer has termed “*matrioshka* nationalism” (ibid., pp. 11–12).

Why, then, from this perspective, has the Russian Federation been able so far to keep secessionist tendencies in check? The question raises serious problems for the essentialist approach. One possible essentialist response would be to argue that, unlike the peoples of the former Soviet republics, the various subgroups living in “Russian” territory today are not really “nations”—save perhaps for Chechnya—and therefore they have no real desire to escape Russian control. To my knowledge, no analyst of post-Soviet nationalism has made such an unpersuasive (and ultimately tautological) claim. Another possibility would be to point to the relatively lax administration of most non-Russian regions by the Yeltsin government—especially in contrast to Soviet totalitarianism—as a disincentive to secession. However, this would appear to shift the explanation away from primordial national identity toward a more instrumental calculation of the relative costs and benefits of loyalty and disloyalty to the center. By this reasoning, too, the former Soviet republics should all have consented to live in a reformed USSR rather than insisting on full independence after the August coup. To the extent that they have seriously examined the problem of the non-collapse of the Russian Federation, essentialist analyses have generally pointed to the most obvious difference between the Soviet and Russian regimes: namely, the much larger percentage of ethnic Russians in the latter (Sheehy, 1993). While by the late 1980s Russians made up just over half of the population of the USSR, they represent over 80 percent of the Russian Federation’s population. Moreover, the titular nationality represents a majority of the population in only five of twenty-one of the Federation’s ethnic republics; Russians even make up an absolute majority in nine. This general Russian numerical dominance is far and away the most common reason given in the literature for the absence of successful secessionism in post-Soviet Russia. Indeed, the relative dominance of Russians within Russia’s current international boundaries seems at first glance to be such a compelling reason for the Federation’s endurance that it is cited even by scholars who tend to *reject* the essentialist interpretation of ethnicity (e.g., Lapidus and Walker, 1995, p. 87; Kempton, 1996, pp. 587-588).

However, on closer examination, there are several logical problems with this explanation for the relative strength of the Russian Federation. To begin with, if one accepts the primordialist argument about the fundamental importance of ethnic identity to human beings, it would seem that groups threatened by a numerical majority of outsiders might be *more* rather than less interested in achieving national autonomy.³

³ Thus, in the late perestroika period, Paul Brass predicted that the Soviet Union would be more likely to collapse than India precisely because of the fact that Russians were a “dominant and privileged nation” scattered throughout the Soviet republics—thus posing a more immediate threat to non-Russian ethnic groups than any comparable group in India (Brass, 1992, p. 125).

Indeed, such concerns played a large role in the movements for independence from the USSR in countries such as Estonia and Latvia, where Russians made up almost half of the population. Since 1991, too, nationalists in Chechnya, Tatarstan, and other ethnic republics of the Russian Federation have made similar arguments about the danger of cultural extinction. This is undoubtedly one reason why comparative analysis reveals no significant correlation between the percentage of the population of a federal unit belonging to the titular nationality and the tendency to secede—in either the Soviet or the Russian case (Emizet and Hesli, 1995; Treisman, 1997).

Another problem for this essentialist explanation for the collapse of the USSR and non-collapse of the Russian Federation is the remarkably high number of Russians who opted to support the national independence movements in various Soviet republics during the *perestroika* period. In Ukraine, for example, the referendum on independence received large majorities among both Ukrainians and Russians. Many Russians in the Baltic states, too, apparently saw independence from Moscow as promising greater material enrichment—obviously at the expense of whatever emotional pull toward Russia they may have felt subjectively. That Russians in, say, Sakha, Karelia or Primorskii Krai have so far seemed unwilling to join movements for regional independence thus cannot be explained simply as a reflection of their “primordial” ties to Moscow. In fact, the history of the Russian Civil War from 1918-1920 demonstrates quite clearly that ethnic Russians, under certain conditions, are quite capable of pledging their loyalty to regional rather than central elites. The problem, then, is to specify what those conditions are, and why they so far do not obtain in the Russian Federation—a task concerning which the essentialist paradigm provides little guidance.⁴

In sum, there seems to be no good way to reconcile the essentialist interpretation of nationalism with the divergent dynamics of secessionism in the Soviet and Russian cases. At best, analysts relying on this approach are forced into the position of arguing that primordial ties must assert themselves in the long run, despite various short-term anomalies. Perhaps the Russian Federation *will* eventually fracture along the lines of its ethnic republics. Or, as another influential essentialist theory would have it, perhaps the most important fault lines in the former Soviet Union will arise at the borders of the “civilizations” of Western Christianity, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism (Huntington, 1996). Such arguments are inherently non-falsifiable, since empirical counterevidence can always be explained away as temporary detours from the main path of “history.” In any case, long-run prophecies about the inevitable resurgence of underlying “cultures,” however defined, leave us without

⁴ In this context it is worth remembering that the opposing armies in the U.S. Revolutionary and Civil Wars also shared a common dominant ethnicity.

any compelling explanation for the actual course of events from *perestroika* to the present.

Instrumentalists

The various problems with the essentialist approach examined above have led the majority of analysts of post-communism to adopt what is generally known as the “instrumentalist” theory of nationalism. Thus, a number of scholars have endeavored to show that the supposedly primordial sentiments underlying secessionist movements—in the Soviet Union and elsewhere—are little more than ideological constructs utilized to legitimize the behavior of perfectly rational, self-interested elites. From this point of view, as Kempton puts it, “ethnic arguments are more frequently a justification rather than an actual cause of contention” (Kempton, 1996, p. 588). Instrumentalist reasoning has given rise to a whole series of arguments about why regional elites have stopped short of demanding full independence from the Russian Federation. First, scholars have pointed out that the vast majority of Russian regions lack an international border and lie far from Western markets, making secession potentially more costly (Slider, 1994, p. 243). Second, the hierarchical integration of the post-Soviet Russian economy ties most regions to Moscow, both through trade dependencies and reliance on direct subsidies from the center; thus, even a border republic like Tuva with a high concentration of the titular minority relied on subsidies for 90 percent of its budget in 1993 (Kempton, 1996, p. 588). Third, careful empirical analysis demonstrates that many regional elites have been rewarded monetarily for early assertions of “sovereignty”—as long as they stopped short of demands for full independence (Treisman, 1996).⁵ The so-called “parade of sovereignties” in the Russian Federation from 1990 to 1993, then, can be explained as “elements of a rational competition over distributional outcomes” (Treisman, 1997, p. 247). Since regional elites were competing for resources, rather than struggling for genuinely held principles, one can explain the subsidence of regional separatism after 1993 as a product of the combination of carrots and sticks used by the Yeltsin administration to keep the Federation together.

Rarely, though, do instrumentalists examining the non-collapse of the Russian Federation include a comparative analysis of the reasons for the Soviet collapse. Unfortunately for the instrumentalist argument, every one of the aforementioned factors—geographic isolation, economic interdependence, and the possibility of using sovereignty declarations as part of a bargaining strategy—was arguably present in the case of Soviet secessionist movements under Gorbachev as well.

⁵ Treisman has calculated that a region’s declaration of “sovereignty” as early as 1990 earned it an average of 18,600 rubles in extra government transfers and tax breaks in 1992 (Treisman, 1996, pp. 319–320).

To begin with, the evidence for geographic explanations for independence drives in the Soviet republics is far more ambiguous than it may appear in retrospect. While it is true that proximity to Scandinavia played an important role during the Baltic independence movements, and that Moldova's status as a former part of Romania must be taken into account in explaining that country's secessionist drive, it is hard to argue that the presence of an "international border" was the key factor motivating secessionism elsewhere. All of the newly independent states of Central Asia or the Caucasus, for example, have had great difficulties exporting their raw materials to international markets since the breakup of the USSR in 1991. Nor can geographic proximity to the West explain Russia's own drive for secession from the USSR, which left the country with diminished access to both the Black and Baltic Seas. For a country like Tajikistan, proximity to international borders has been a security curse rather than an economic blessing—a concern about full independence that has also been raised in the otherwise restive regions of the Russian Far East. Perhaps reasons such as these explain why Treisman (1997) found no correlation whatsoever between geographical placement and secessionist activity among ethnic republics in the Russian Federation. If so, it seems unlikely that geographical factors played the key role in the earlier Soviet secessionist crisis.

Nor is it easy to make the case that economic interdependence among regions is decisively greater in the Russian Federation than it was in the USSR. On the contrary, the post-1991 collapse of interrepublican trade ties and the loss of central subsidies, especially in the energy sector, played a major role in causing the prolonged economic recessions experienced by every one of the newly independent states. Indeed, the intense desire of most post-Soviet leaders to reestablish these former economic links has played a large part in sustaining the generally ineffective Commonwealth of Independent States. Nonetheless, over 90 percent of the Ukrainian population voted for independence in the December 1991 referendum—including majorities even in largely Russian industrial regions—even though the economic linkages between these two territories were perhaps the most severely damaged by the Soviet breakup. No doubt the mass *perception* at the time was that independence would increase, rather than decrease, national wealth—but then the explanation for secessionism must turn on subjective (and ultimately incorrect) popular evaluations rather than objective economic calculations. If it is true, as may well be the case, that Russian regions today don't perceive the same economic advantages to full secession from the center that were commonly anticipated among Soviet republics in 1990-1991, it is not because their objective economic positions are ostensibly all that different.

Finally, it is hard to see how the element of strategic calculation in most Soviet secessionist movements differed substantially from the contemporary situation in Russian regions. No doubt it is true that skillful

politicians like Nikolaev in Sakha and Shaimiev in Tatarstan have obtained good deals for their republics from the central government through what appears on occasion to have been a rather cynical utilization of the threat of full secession (Kempton, 1996; Walker, 1997). But the nationalist “commitments” of high Communist Party officials such as Kravchuk in Ukraine, Karimov in Uzbekistan, and Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan—all of whom became separatists only after the failure of the August coup—were scarcely more genuine. Perhaps a sophisticated rational choice analyst could reply that the independence bandwagon in the USSR was catalyzed by a few genuinely committed nationalists in places like the Baltic states and Western Ukraine, while those who jumped onto this bandwagon did so out of rational self-interest when the center’s final collapse was imminent.⁶ But the fierce resistance of much of the population of Chechnya to the Russian military invasion—at enormous cost—has demonstrated that similar passionate commitments exist within at least some regions of the Russian Federation as well. Why, then, didn’t Chechnya’s successful defiance of Moscow’s authority inspire a bandwagon of secessionism in the Russian Federation analogous to that in the USSR? Once again, an instrumental approach provides no obvious criterion to distinguish the Soviet from Russian cases.

An alternative instrumentalist argument to explain the Soviet collapse and Russian non-collapse focuses not so much on the potential economic advantages of seceding—or threatening to—but instead on the costs and benefits to self-interested regional elites of joining secessionist struggles. Furtado, Jr. and Hechter have argued, for example, that the greater level of nationalist mobilization in Estonia as compared to Ukraine in 1989 can be explained by the lesser degree of CPSU control over the Estonian party as compared to the Communist Party of Ukraine under Shcherbyts’kyi, combined with the higher potential for Ukrainian party leaders loyal to Moscow to be promoted to the highest CPSU organs (Furtado, Jr. and Hechter, 1992). Do careerist officials in Russia today perhaps have greater incentives to tow Moscow’s line than republican elites in the waning years of *perestroika*?

Such an argument seems rather hard to sustain. Surely the very late date at which most republican party leaders finally broke with the Soviet center suggests that they continued to see loyalty to Moscow as the best instrumental strategy for career advancement during most of this period. It is easy to forget, in retrospect, that communist officials who joined with the Baltic, Caucasian, and Russian independence movements before 1991 still perceived themselves to be taking a potentially dangerous risk. In addition, while the level of coercion utilized by the center to try to hold the Union together perhaps turned out to be less than might have been

⁶ Chong (1991, p. 195), for example, has argued within the rational choice paradigm that collective action against the government requires the presence of some “charismatic” leader or leaders who act without regard to personal payoffs.

originally feared, some demonstrators nonetheless did pay with their lives for their resistance in Georgia and Lithuania. Such evidence of personal sacrifice on behalf of the cause of independence is hard to reconcile with a strictly instrumentalist approach. Indeed, despite the weakening of the center's institutional power caused by Gorbachev's reforms, the majority of instrumentalist analysts writing during the 1989-1991 period argued that the careerist incentives of republican elites, combined with the center's continuing powers of coercion, would allow the Soviet state to hold together (Hough, 1990; Laitin, 1991).⁷ In sum, most of the geographical, economic, and institutional arguments used by instrumentalists to argue for the Russian Federation's long-term viability can be equally applied—and in fact were applied—to the Soviet case.⁸ Arguably, the widespread assumption that complete secession by the Soviet republics was simply not “feasible” was one of the main reasons for Western analysts' failures to recognize that the Union was collapsing, even as late as 1991.

Of course, instrumentalists analyzing the motivations of strategic actors during the Soviet breakup can always reply that people's precise

⁷ Furtado Jr. and Hechter themselves, in a postscript to their original essay written in November 1990 to explain the increasing mobilization of Ukrainian nationalism, emphasized that the modest success of Rukh in the 1990 elections to the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet forced rational Ukrainian Communist Party elites to pay more attention to nationalist publics and less attention to Moscow. However, this argument implicitly places the actual explanatory weight on the ability of Rukh leaders to mobilize nationalist sentiment at a time when the movement could not easily monitor its members' behavior and had very little to offer in terms of concrete collective goods—a phenomenon not well explained by Hechter's theory of group solidarity. See Furtado Jr. and Hechter (1992), Hechter (1987). In any case, the fact that regional elites must take their own populations' demands into account as well as those of the center may be why statistical analysis shows no significant correlation between the potential for elite “upward mobility” within the central government and regional tendencies to secede (Hale, 1998).

⁸ One of the few instrumentalists who has tried to address the different outcomes of the secession crises in the USSR and Russian Federation is Steven Solnick (1998). Solnick argues that the Russian Federation has paradoxically benefited from the institutional “asymmetries” between its ethnic republics and nonethnic regions, because the former group's relatively greater resources and status have allowed it to form a coherent lobby opposed to the competing claims of ordinary oblasts. Yeltsin's regime can therefore survive by playing one group off against the other. By contrast, Solnick argues, the more symmetrical arrangement of the 15 Soviet Republics encouraged simultaneous moves toward greater regional autonomy that ultimately left no role for the center whatsoever. Solnick's argument is original and intriguing, but begs the question of why apparently similar asymmetries between the Baltics and the remaining Soviet Republics didn't generate bargaining strategies similar to those he documents in the Russian Federation. Why didn't the Baltic Republics, utilizing their greater popular mobilization and support from the West as bargaining resources, simply organize as a bloc to upgrade their status within a reformed Union? Why didn't Gorbachev, like Yeltsin, respond to Baltic secessionism with payoffs designed to divide and conquer his regional oppositions? Why did other Soviet republics such as Russia and Ukraine demonstrate ever-greater solidarity with the Baltics after 1990, instead of allying with Gorbachev against them?

preferences are exogenous to economic theory. Perhaps people in the former Soviet republics simply revealed a more intense “taste” for nationalism than most regions of the Russian Federation have so far demonstrated (Austin, 1996, p. 3). Such an argument begs the question, however, of just why “tastes” of this sort emerge where and when they do.

Toward an Alternative Approach

The simultaneous failure of both essentialist and instrumentalist approaches to make sense of the divergent outcomes of secession crises in the Soviet Union and Russian Federation has not been widely noted in the scholarly literature. This has led to an often sterile debate between adherents of the two approaches, in which the sincere passions of committed nationalists in secessionist regions are cited as conclusive proof of the essentialist perspective, while the evidently strategic behavior of political elites in other regions are cited as conclusive proof of the instrumentalist view. In fact, serious empirical analysts of both cases are forced ultimately to conclude that belief and calculation are simultaneously at work in motivating the behavior of regional actors. Bremmer, for instance, attributes the appearance of nationalist movements in the Soviet republics under Gorbachev to the fact that the center’s “‘carrot’ of economic incentive diminished, and its authoritarian ‘stick’ became less ominous as the state apparatus appeared fragmented and weak” (Bremmer, 1997, p. 10). Treisman, meanwhile, finds a statistically significant correlation between belief in Islam and secessionism in Russian regions for which he provides no theoretical explanation (Treisman, 1997). Hale, in a comprehensive empirical study of ethnic activism in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, finds that both wealth and ethnic distinctiveness are statistically significant predictors of secessionism (Hale, 1998).

In fact, if one sees perceived non-Soviet/Russian identity and perceived economic incentives as separate factors that vary independently—rather than simply reducing one to the other—one obtains a simple 2x2 matrix of possible attitudes toward secessionism which may be useful in explaining republican and regional responses to the federal state crises of 1991 and 1993 in the Soviet Union and Russia:

	High Perceived Economic Incentives for Secession	Low Perceived Economic Incentives for Secession
High Identity Distinctiveness	(A) “Catalysts”	(B) “Followers”
Low Identity Distinctiveness	(C) “Fence-Sitters”	(D) “Integrationists”

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Thus, it might be hypothesized, it is precisely in places where a high level of perceived cultural distinctiveness from the dominant imperial nation is combined with perceived material incentives to push for independence that one is likely to find the “catalysts” of secession crises (Category A). Logically, too, the absence of either of these factors should lead regional elites to prefer the continuing “integration” of the federal state (Category D).

Where only one or the other factor prevails, however, responses to state crisis are likely to be more ambiguous. In regions with strong identity distinctiveness and weak perceived economic incentives for secession (Category B), a desire for the *status* of full independence will conflict with rational calculations about its *feasibility*; such regions may therefore settle for symbolic expressions of sovereignty while maintaining existing institutional ties with the center. However, to the extent that visible “catalyst” regions prove that full independence is indeed achievable, popular pressures to “follow suit” may overwhelm the initial pragmatic hesitation of regional leaders to sever federal ties. Conversely, in regions where elites perceive that there are significant economic interests that may be realized through secession, but there is no mobilization around symbols of cultural distinctiveness to provide ideological justification for a risky drive for independence, regional leaderships will be “fence-sitters” (Category C) whose behavior will be driven by purely instrumental calculations. If many or most other similar federal units appear to be headed for secession, this will lower the perceived cost of joining the “independence bandwagon,” given the center’s decreased capacity to fight on many fronts simultaneously. If, on the other hand, catalysts are met with strong resistance by the central government and potential followers also hold back, fence-sitters will conclude that the short-run costs of declaring independence may outweigh the long-run benefits of ruling an independent state, and will remain within the existing federal system.

However, this sort of typology, while potentially an improvement on reductionist essentialism and instrumentalism, ultimately still fails to provide a compelling explanation for the different outcomes in the two secession crises examined here. Indeed, its application to the Soviet and Russian cases appears once again to highlight their remarkably similar dynamics. In both cases, committed “catalysts”—the Baltic States and Chechnya—declared full independence even when it was demonstrably risky to do so; both were attacked, ultimately ineffectively, by the coercive powers of the center. In both cases, the behavior of the catalysts inspired organized secessionist movements in republics and regions with strong perceived identity distinctiveness from Moscow, which in turn put pressure on their leaders to move further toward autonomy. In still other Soviet republics and Russian regions, elites with little ostensible personal commitment to nationalism, and pressured very little by their

populations, nonetheless cautiously explored the option of secession in order to realize potential economic gains from control over local exportable raw materials. Yet the Soviet Union collapsed, while the Russian Federation has so far held together. Why?

One major difference between the two cases, in terms of the matrix presented above, would seem to be the much larger number of Russian regions as compared to Soviet republics with neither perceived cultural nor perceived economic reasons to secede (i.e., regions in Category D). This difference reflects the greater local autonomy afforded by Soviet republican institutions under Leninist rule as compared to that granted to federal units of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic (RSFSR). Within the Russian Federation itself, secession “catalysts” and potential “followers” are largely concentrated within the former autonomous ethnic regions, while the majority of Russian oblasts are “integrationist” in orientation. Nothing like this bloc of staunchly integrationist regions existed to counterbalance the dynamics of secession in the USSR. Thus the “path dependent” effects of the different institutional structures of Soviet and RSFSR federalism have undeniably played an important role in generating the different outcomes of the two states’ later secessionist crises.

However, because most of the regions of the Russian Federation lacking both identity distinctiveness and exportable raw materials are clustered within the core of European Russia, the existence of a greater number of integrationist regions alone hardly explains why the USSR collapsed entirely, while the post-Soviet crisis in center-periphery relations ended with the central government officially in control of its entire original territory save Chechnya. In the Soviet case, one can easily imagine an alternative outcome in which ethnically-ambiguous Byelorussia remained fully committed to integration (as indeed the Belarus leadership is today) and in which “fence-sitters” like Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan and Kravchuk in Ukraine ultimately sided with Moscow instead of with their own domestic nationalist movements. Conversely, had Chechnya’s independence declaration catalyzed more uncompromising secessionism in even a few of the other ethnic republics from 1991 to 1993, it is not hard to picture a more chaotic secessionist dynamic in the Russian Federation in which at least some wealthy Russian regions might also have claimed full “national” status. Institutional differences between the USSR and the Russian Federation do help to explain why the core of European Russia itself is highly unlikely to splinter into dozens of separate states, but for a satisfying explanation of the total collapse of the Soviet Union and nearly total cohesion of the Russian Federation to date, we must look elsewhere.

The Ideological Environment

As we have seen, it is difficult to arrive at a compelling account of the reasons for the Soviet collapse and the Russian non-collapse through a concentration on the nature of the federal units alone. Perhaps, then, we need to redirect our focus to examine the sorts of “centers” from which Soviet republics versus Russian regions were declaring autonomy in the two periods. Here, a major and seemingly obvious difference between the two cases arises: the USSR was officially a Marxist-Leninist state, while the Russian Federation appears to lack any consensual ideological justification whatsoever (Breslauer and Dale, 1997). That this difference has been largely ignored in the literature on Soviet and Russian secession crises, I think, has been due to the general tendency of scholars in both the essentialist and instrumentalist camps to see ideology as epiphenomenal. Essentialists have generally seen nationalist ideology as a natural product of underlying ethnic solidarity (e.g. Geertz, 1976); instrumentalists have seen ideology as little more than a mask for naked material interest (e.g., Marx and Engels, 1978 (1846)). In fact, remarkably few social scientists have treated ideology as an independent variable in their analyses.⁹

Why does the official ideology of the center matter? At least four essential differences between the dynamics of the Soviet secession crisis versus the situation in contemporary Russia can be traced directly to the Marxist-Leninist nature of the former regime: the different strategies for preserving the state pursued by Gorbachev and Yeltsin, the increased perceived legitimacy of secession from a “totalitarian regime,” the dissimilar positions of “Russia” during the two crises, and the differing response of the Western powers toward independence movements in the Soviet and Russian cases. I will deal with each of these points in turn.

To begin with, the crucial role of Gorbachev in allowing the formation of nationalist movements throughout the territory of the USSR cannot possibly be understood without reference to the leader’s own faith in Leninism. That Gorbachev appeared to be remarkably naive about the potentially catastrophic effects of nationalist mobilization on the Soviet regime has been pointed out many times. What is less often noted, however, is that the General Secretary’s blindness to the power of national ideology was wholly consistent with his deeply held views about the “maturity” of Soviet socialism. Precisely this conviction was what made Gorbachev initially so confident that he could mobilize the “Soviet people” for enthusiastic participation in a campaign to “reconstruct” the socialist system (Hanson, 1997). Logically, if one embraced Lenin’s assumption that nationalism was a transitional phenomenon that would be eroded by socialist economic development—as Gorbachev certainly

⁹ Elsewhere I have argued that ideology may under certain conditions generate the basic social institutions that define a given regime-type (Hanson, 1995; 1997). For additional arguments supporting this view, see Jowitt (1992); Chirot (1994).

did—then there could be little concern that a people who had irrevocably made the “socialist choice” in 1917 might return anachronistically to pre-socialist corporate identities. To the extent that resentment of national minorities against the center existed, Gorbachev ascribed this to an insufficiently responsive party bureaucracy that behaved with Stalin-like “great Russian chauvinism” toward the non-Russians.

For these reasons, Gorbachev not only did not try to repress the earliest forms of nationalist mobilization in the form of the Baltic Popular Fronts, but actually hailed them as a sign of the success of *perestroika*. To be sure, nationalist elites themselves did their best to cloak their own ultimate aims in terms consistent with Gorbachev’s own favored priorities—especially environmentalism (Dawson, 1997). But the ultimate secessionist intent of the vast majority of activists in these movements in places like Estonia and Lithuania should have been obvious by 1989. That Gorbachev failed to rein in the Popular Fronts while he still had the power to do so—allowing only occasional half-hearted (if nevertheless ugly) applications of force organized by his subordinates—can be explained only by his remarkably Utopian confidence that “objective economic links” would suffice to preserve the republics’ ties with Moscow. The vague and almost certainly unworkable nature of the Union Treaty upon which Gorbachev was working during his last months in office provides another indicator of his confusion about the nature of national aspirations.

By contrast, Boris Yeltsin was under no similar illusions that the Russian Federation would hold together automatically. After encouraging regional secessionism in 1990 (“take all the sovereignty you can swallow”) and, in a more restrained manner, wooing regional elites during his battle with the Russian Supreme Soviet in 1992-1993, Yeltsin consciously utilized a combination of coercive and accommodative strategies in holding the federation together. On the one hand, Yeltsin unilaterally abrogated the Federation Treaty after the violent disbanding of the Russian Congress, rewriting the Constitution to declare ethnic republics and Russian oblasts as equal “subjects of the federation”; he outlawed the regional soviets; and finally (albeit unsuccessfully and at enormous cost) he launched a full-scale invasion in an attempt to quell the Chechen independence movement. On the other hand, he negotiated a whole series of separate deals with various regions and republics, promising them increased economic subsidies and allowing for symbolic expressions of local “sovereignty.” This combination of threats and inducements may not suffice to hold the Federation together in the long run. Indeed, the decision to invade Chechnya arguably has had a deleterious effect on the country’s cohesion. Nonetheless, the contrast between Yeltsin’s often successful attempts to keep regional elites in check, versus Gorbachev’s Utopian disregard of the danger of ethnic separatism, is striking.

Second, the continuing identification of the Soviet “center” with Marxism-Leninism made it relatively easier for nationalist activists in the

national republics to rally public support for their cause. Deep-seated ideological disputes between “civic” nationalists committed to the institutionalization of liberalism and “ethnic” nationalists striving primarily to purge the country of foreign influence could be ignored as long as both groups were engaged in a common struggle against “totalitarianism.” Ironically, the historical result of seven decades of the CPSU’s attempt to “solve the national problem” by establishing an alternative form of modernity was to alienate nationalists and would-be modernizers simultaneously. Surely this is what accounts for the surprising support of many educated Russians for the Baltic independence movement, as well as the remarkable consensus between both ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians for full Ukrainian independence in December 1991. Not since the original establishment of nationalist ideology in England under Henry VIII had “civic” universalism and “ethnic” particularism seemed so ideologically compatible (Greenfeld, 1992).

By contrast, moves for greater autonomy among ethnic republics and oblasts of the Russian Federation have been much more difficult to legitimate. Indeed, the very fact that Yeltsin’s regime lacks ideological underpinnings makes it harder to rally ordinary people against it. Yeltsin’s transparent strategy of utilizing “carrots and sticks” to keep the regions in line is paralleled by the equally obvious instrumentality of regional elites utilizing their positions to further their own personal interests. Meanwhile, sincerely committed separatists in the national republics and autonomous regions appear to be motivated by purely “ethnic” rather than “civic” concerns, which scares off potential supporters within the regional ethnic intelligentsia in many republics.¹⁰

Third, and crucially, the existence of a Marxist-Leninist ideological center during the Soviet secession crisis made it possible for “Russia” to secede from the “Soviet Union.” The pivotal role of anti-Soviet Russia nationalism in catalyzing the breakup of the Soviet regime has been well described by analysts (Dunlop, 1993). But the remarkable way in which this process depended upon Gorbachev’s continued ideological identification as the head of the “Soviet” state has been insufficiently appreciated. As in the case of the other Soviet republics, common opposition to the Gorbachev “center” allowed Russian civic nationalists to

¹⁰ For the marginalization of ethnic separatists in Tatarstan, see Walker (1996); for the negative reaction of the Sakha minister of culture to ethnically motivated attacks by Sakha youth, see Balzer and Vinokurova (1996). The one ethnic separatist who appeared to have some success in mobilizing mass support for nationalist ideology was Dzhokhar Dudayev. However, this support became much greater after Yeltsin’s attack on Chechnya appeared to prove Dudayev right about the unchanging nature of Russian imperialism. It is not at all clear, despite the bitter historical experience of the Chechens under Russian and Soviet rule, that the region’s population could not eventually have been coaxed into remaining within the federation through methods similar to those used in Tatarstan (Lapidus, 1998).

unite with others of an ostensibly more ethnic orientation—symbolized most visibly in the electoral alliance of Boris Yeltsin and Aleksandr Rutskoi. As in other republics, too, the inspiring struggle against “totalitarianism” obscured very serious disputes among Russian leaders about the proper boundaries and identity of the new postcommunist state. The result was an absolutely unprecedented nationalist uprising to destroy a regime long identified both internationally and domestically with the nation itself. Yeltsin’s alliance with and tactical support for independence movements throughout the USSR, which played an indispensable part in the peaceful breakup of the Soviet empire, is thus inexplicable outside of the bizarre context of a decaying Marxist-Leninist regime.¹¹

By contrast, it is almost inconceivable that an alternative, even smaller “center” will spring up in Moscow and ally with regional separatist groups to challenge the integrity of “Russia.” Whatever the policy disputes between Yeltsin and Yurii Luzhkov—and some are quite serious—it is hard to imagine Luzhkov developing an ideology of “Muscovy” nationalism that identifies the Russian Federation as an oppressive anti-national force. Indeed, to the extent Luzhkov has articulated his own state-building preferences, they have been territorially expansionist rather than the reverse. Surely a mayor of Moscow who claims Sevastopol’ as a part of Russian territory will not be seen by ethnic minorities or restive regional elites as a potential ally in a struggle to dismember the Russian Federation. Strategically, though, the fact that any conceivable Moscow leadership is likely to oppose the further diminishment of “Russian” territory enormously reduces the bargaining power of would-be regional secessionists as compared to the position of the leaders of non-Russian republics during Yeltsin’s struggle against Gorbachev.

Finally, the association of the Soviet regime with Marxism-Leninism, and of Yeltsin’s regime with “democracy and the market,” has played an important role in shaping Western responses to the Soviet and Russian secession crises. During most of the post-war era, to be sure, the dominant perception of the Soviet Union among Western publics and elites alike was as a single geopolitical unit, more or less synonymous with “Russia.” Still, vocal and influential anticommunist elites continued throughout this period to emphasize the fundamentally “artificial” nature of the Soviet state—even if in reality few of them actually expected its imminent collapse. In addition, the United States’ non-recognition of Stalin’s incorporation of the Baltic states into the USSR in 1940, the vocal anti-communism of emigrés from Russia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Armenia,

¹¹ The argument here is not meant to imply that Yeltsin desired the breakup of the union all along. Indeed, there is much evidence that he did not. However, his decision to unite with republican leaders also demanding “sovereignty” logically implied this potential outcome—which, after all, he did ultimately embrace in December 1991.

and even the absurd compromise by which Stalin was granted seats in the United Nations for Byelorussia and Ukraine as well as the Soviet Union, all combined to reinforce the idea that the Soviet regime was an ideological construct made up of more “genuine” national units. Reagan’s identification of the Soviet regime as an “evil empire” provided an especially memorable codification of this view. This alternative paradigm for analysis of the Soviet nationalities problem gradually gained increasing influence during the secession crisis sparked by *perestroika*. At first, Western concerns about control over Soviet nuclear weapons, fears of ethnic warfare, and support for Gorbachev personally persuaded key Western leaders publicly to oppose any change in Soviet borders. Indeed, U.S. president George Bush famously sided with Gorbachev against Ukrainian “suicidal nationalism” only months before the USSR’s final disintegration. At the same time, however, Western officials increasingly sought out various forms of informal contact with new nationalist elites in the Soviet republics. By the summer of 1989, for example, Baltic secessionist leaders had initiated a series of visits to consult with United States Ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack Matlock; although Matlock was careful not to promise official U.S. support in their battles with Gorbachev, he did emphasize the continuing U.S. nonrecognition of the incorporation of the Baltics into the USSR (Matlock Jr., 1995, pp. 227-232; 265-267; 322-327). During Gorbachev’s economic blockade of Lithuania in 1990, the U.S. Congress passed resolutions condemning Soviet actions. From 1990 on, Western officials and heads of state increasingly made a point of visiting Kiev, Alma-Ata, and other republican capitals during their official visits to the USSR.

The Western strategy of formal support for Gorbachev combined with increasing informal contacts with republican elites had the effect—whether intended or not—of raising the hopes of secessionist leaders that the republics would be speedily admitted into the Western international community once independence was achieved. The collapse of communist control over Eastern Europe in 1989, followed by the rapid unification of Germany, greatly strengthened this impression. By the summer of 1990, optimism about eventual Western recognition had spread even to Central Asia: thus one of the leaders of the Erk party in Uzbekistan could already tell Ambassador Matlock that he hoped to become independent Uzbekistan’s Ambassador to the United States in five years’ time (Matlock Jr., 1995, p. 395).

As we now know, such predictions about the Western stance on republican recognition ultimately turned out to be entirely accurate. In the wake of the failed August coup, even the most hesitant Western heads of state, such as Bush, began to shift their official focus from preservation of the union to managing its disintegration in an orderly way. Given the liberal international order, the most obvious way to do so was via full recognition of all fifteen former Soviet republics—a possibility

increasingly recognized and encouraged by the republican elites themselves. Gorbachev himself soon realized that such expectations of rapid entry into the Western global system were undermining any a crumbling communist empire to legitimate the sovereignty of post-Soviet states whose boundaries were drawn up by Stalin in the 1930s, but in a “reformed Russia” to delegitimize the sovereignty of populations brutally deported from their homelands by the same dictator.¹² This changed international context, which has undoubtedly played a large role in discouraging further moves toward regional secession in the Russian Federation, can itself be fully explained only with reference to the radically different hope of preserving the union: “The republics that want to break away, especially Ukraine...think the West is going to shower them with dollars” (quoted in Grachev, 1995, p. 16). In September 1991, U.S. Secretary of State visited the newly recognized Baltic States as well as Alma-Ata. October saw official visits of Yeltsin to Germany, Akayev and Ter-Petrossian to the United States, and Hans-Dietrich Genscher to Ukraine (Matlock Jr., 1995, p. 621). Then, on the eve of the crucial Ukrainian independence referendum, a press leak announced that the United States would extend formal diplomatic recognition to Ukraine in the event of a “yes” vote (Grachev, 1995, p. 132). Thus, the general Western movement toward acceptance of the final breakup of the Soviet State was clear well before the final breakdown of negotiations between Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and the other republican leaders and the signing of the Belovezhskaia Pushcha agreement that finalized the Soviet breakup.

The Western stance on secession from the Russian Federation, by contrast, has been unambiguously hostile. This was most spectacularly illustrated by the almost total lack of Western criticism of Yeltsin’s invasion of Chechnya, despite the blatant violations of the CSCE treaty and the violations of the rights of civilians involved in the military campaign (Lapidus, 1998). Indeed, President Clinton went so far as to compare Yeltsin’s actions to those of Abraham Lincoln, who “gave his life for [the principle] that no state had a right to withdraw from our union” (quoted in the *Washington Post*, April 21, 1996). One has a very hard time imagining such a sentiment being expressed publicly by any Western leader about the deployment of troops to the Baltic states under Gorbachev.¹³ Paradoxically, Wilsonian ideals of national self-

¹² For a trenchant examination of how international liberalism paradoxically reinforces ethnic particularism in new “nations,” see Cirtautas (1995).

¹³ George Bush did rather obliquely compare Gorbachev to Lincoln at the Malta summit in December 1989: “We all recognize a dynamic new Soviet leader willing, as Lincoln said, to think anew” (quoted in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 5, 1989, p. B-10). But when Soviet officials themselves tried to make the Lincoln-Gorbachev analogy during the 1990 blockade of Lithuania and 1991 use of military force in the Baltics, they were met with official Western silence and substantial hostility on the editorial pages of U.S. newspapers. William Safire, for example, responded: “Lincoln believed in human

determination were seen ideological environment within which Western elites now evaluate Moscow's behavior.

Conclusion

If the analysis above is correct, the main factors that combined to produce a secessionist bandwagon that destroyed the USSR—Gorbachev's inept policies, the unified action of ethnic and civic nationalists in the Soviet republics, the secession of "Russia" from the "center," and the willingness of the Western powers to recognize the former Soviet republics as newly-independent states—are all ultimately traceable to the official Marxist-Leninist identity of the Soviet regime. Conversely, the absence of a coherent state ideology underlying Yeltsin's government has produced what is arguably a more typical pattern of center-periphery bargaining in postcommunist Russia, in which elites on both sides compete purely strategically while committed ideologues are, for the time being, marginalized. Thus, if "essentialist" theories of nationalism appear to work well in explaining the Soviet collapse, while "instrumentalist" theories seem to make sense of the various "sovereignty" declarations in the Russian Federation, this is not because either theory is correct in general. Rather, a third variable—the ideological context in which center-region disputes are played out—has acted to change the dynamics of secessionist movements from one period to the other. The struggle against a Marxist-Leninist regime created an environment in which committed "catalysts," expecting both material and cultural benefits from secession and encouraged by realistic hopes of rejoining the "West," inspired other culturally-distinct groups (including part of the old center itself) to become "followers," which motivated even instrumental "fence-sitters" ultimately to join the secessionist bandwagon. By contrast, the main catalyst of a potential dismemberment of the Russian Federation, Chechnya, found itself condemned by the West and unable to inspire potential followers for struggle against a non-ideological center; this naturally kept the fence-sitters firmly planted on the fence.¹⁴

freedom, and Mr. Gorbachev was trying to preserve a system of political slavery" (*New York Times*, January 17, 1991, sec. A, p. 23).

¹⁴ This argument appears to be further validated if one extends the comparison to include other Leninist ethnic federal states. Thus, both in Yugoslavia in 1990 and in Czechoslovakia in 1992, three of the four factors identified as critical here were also at work: alliances between "ethnic" and "civic" nationalists in each region, the secession of "core" regions (Serbia and the Czech Republic) from the larger federation, and Western support for and recognition of at least some of the newly resulting states (see Bunce, 1998). The fourth factor—Gorbachev's own naive Leninism—arguably played an indirect role, by generating an international environment in which the breakup of Leninist states appeared historically "natural." This may also help to explain the most significant secessionist movements in the other post-Soviet republics, such as those in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, begun before the breakup of the Leninist regime in 1991—demonstrating once more the difficulties of mobilizing separatist

The argument here should not be taken to imply that the Russian Federation will necessarily endure forever. Indeed, as Ordeshook has argued, given the absence of any national integrative institutions that might weld local interests more tightly to the center, Russian federalism faces a rocky and uncertain future (Ordeshook, 1996). A slow de facto erosion of central state control over the current territory of the Russian Federation, especially if the current economic crisis continues, is quite possible. Ironically, however, if the analysis above is correct, Yeltsin's regime has managed thus far to contain the tide of outright secessionism at least partly as a result of its *failure* to promote any genuine state ideology against which independence movements within Russia might rally. The one instance in which Yeltsin did decide to "take a stand" to assert the center's authority—the invasion of Chechnya—thus predictably exacerbated, rather than ameliorated, tensions in Russian center-periphery relations.

The emergence of a more avowedly ideological leadership in Moscow, too, might be expected to increase the secessionist tendencies of Russia's republics and regions, which would then have increased reason to fear the consequences of remaining subject to the central leadership—unless, over time, evolutionary social change in Russia produces a coherent social base for some formal state ideology that can attain more genuine and widespread legitimacy than any of those currently contending. Under present conditions, however, one should not expect a secessionist "bandwagon" to escalate quickly and produce the breakup of the Russian Federation.

movements in the post-communist context (Rubin, 1998). By contrast, non-Leninist ethnic federalism in such places as Canada, India, and Switzerland has thus far proven surprisingly durable.

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