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Autonomy in the USSR and the post-Soviet space: continuity and/or change?

The paper focuses on the evolution of official perceptions and legislative fundamentals of autonomy arrangements in the late Soviet and in the post-Soviet period. Seven former Soviet countries include or recently included territorial federative or autonomous units, partly inherited from the Soviet past, while most of these entities are widely referred to as ethnicity-based arrangements. Some of the post-Soviet countries have also adopted legislative provisions pertinent to so-called non-territorial autonomy. The author addresses the conceptual organization, legal embeddedness and institutional underpinnings of autonomy arrangements before and after the Soviet Union's collapse. The author argues that the post-Soviet autonomy arrangements to a large extent embody the Soviet way of framing ethno-politics, institutional legacies and techniques of government. Among them are the silent symbolic recognition and also non-articulation of the autonomous entities' ethnic underpinning; the prevalence of informal institutions and their symbiosis with the formal ones; and systemic discrepancies between symbolic and instrumental policies. Thus, the ethnic basis of autonomy in formal sense remains primarily a symbolic arrangement, while the division of powers rests on informal agreements. Non-territorial autonomy, officially rejected during the Soviet rule, in practical sense is confined to a symbolic recognition of ethnicities as social entities regardless of their territorial status; the same approach was present in the Soviet doctrine albeit framed through a different wording.