Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation

This book seeks to explain how state institutions affect ethnic mobilization. It focuses on how ethno-nationalist movements emerge on the political scene, develop organizational structures, frame demands, and attract followers. It does so in the context of examining the widespread surge in nationalist sentiment that occurred throughout the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during the late 1980s and early 1990s. It shows that even during this period of institutional upheaval, preexisting ethnic institutions affected the tactics of movement leaders.

This book challenges the widely held perception that governing elites can kindle latent ethnic grievances virtually at will in order to maintain power. It argues that nationalist leaders cannot always mobilize widespread popular support and that their success in doing so depends in turn on the extent to which ethnicity is institutionalized by state structures. It also shifts the study of ethnic mobilization from the *whys* of its emergence to the *hows* of its development as a political force.

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For Ida and Jacob
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Preface

This book seeks to explain how state institutions affect ethnic mobilization. It does so in the context of examining the widespread surge in nationalist sentiment that occurred throughout the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during the late 1980s and early 1990s. My analysis of the development of minority nationalist movements during this period in four republics of the Russian Federation shows that even during this period of institutional upheaval, preexisting ethnic institutions affected the preferences and tactics of movement leaders. These Soviet institutions shaped the messages that were used to appeal for popular support, the form that ethnic mobilization took, and the reaction of both the elites and the masses to the nationalist message.

The story of nationalist mobilization during the perestroika period presents both interesting similarities and interesting variations across cases. The institutional explanation is strengthened by the fact that members of virtually every ethnic minority in the Soviet Union organized nationalist movements that were initially similar in form and goals. These movements differed greatly, however, in their ability to attract popular support. Furthermore, their uniformity of message did not last long – some movements began to articulate radical demands, while others remained moderate. The burden of this study is thus to show that the institutional explanation can account not only for the similarities in nationalist mobilization throughout the Russian Federation, but also for the differences across cases.

In the course of discussing ethno-nationalist mobilization in Russia, this book pursues two other objectives. One is to challenge the widely held perception that governing elites can kindle latent ethnic grievances virtually at will in order to secure or maintain their hold on power. I argue that nationalist leaders are not always able to mobilize widespread popular support and that their success in doing so depends in turn on the extent to which ethnicity is institutionalized by state structures.

The other objective is to shift the study of ethnic mobilization from the why of its emergence to the how of its development as a political force.
Throughout this study, I focus less on whether ethnic mobilization occurs because of economic grievances, cultural differences, or the activities of ethnic entrepreneurs and more on showing how ethno-nationalist movements emerge on the political scene, develop organizational structures, frame demands, and attract followers. The nature of these processes, I argue, is determined by the ethnic and political institutions established by the state.

In the course of writing this book, I have incurred many profound debts, both intellectual and personal. The project began as a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Government at Harvard University. Many thanks go to my teachers and advisors there, and especially to the members of my dissertation committee, all of whom read multiple drafts of the manuscript. Timothy Colton has been unfailingly supportive of my work on ethnic politics in Russia while at the same time encouraging me by his example to understand the multifaceted nature of Russian politics. Without Grzegorz Ekiert’s efforts to push me to understand the interaction between ethnic politics and social movements, this study would have taken a very different, and probably less interesting, form. Grzegorz has also been a model for me in my efforts to maintain a balance between academic pursuits and other interests. David Laitin has always pushed me toward greater scientific rigor, challenging me to clarify my initial puzzle and to select the right cases to test my theories. Finally, Mark Kramer, although not officially a member of my dissertation committee, took the time to read most of the chapters that make up the study and made numerous valuable suggestions for improvement.

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