

Introduction to the Special Issue “Parliamentary formations and diversities in (post-)imperial Eurasia”

Ivan Sablin

Abstract

Addressing the entangled histories of deliberative decision making, political representation, and constitutionalism in several geographic and temporal contexts, this Special Issue offers nuanced political and intellectual histories and anthropologies of parliamentarism in Eurasia. It explores parliaments and quasi-parliamentary formations and the designs of such in the Qing and Russian Empires, the late Soviet Union, Ukraine, the Russian Far East, and the Russian-Mongolian borderlands (from Buryat and Mongolian perspectives) in seven contributions. Apart from the regional interconnections, the Special Issue foregrounds the concepts of diversity and empire to enable an interdisciplinary discussion. Understanding empires as composite spaces, where the ambivalent and situational difference is central for the governing repertoires, the articles discuss social (ethnic, religious, regional, etc.) diversity in particular contexts and the ways it affected the parliamentary designs. The multitude of the latter is understood as institutional diversity and is discussed in relation to different levels of administration, as well as the positions of respective parliamentary formations within political systems and their performance within regimes. The contributions also investigate different forms of deliberative decision-making, including the soviet, the Congress of People’s Deputies, and the national congress, which allows to include conceptual diversity of Eurasian parliamentarisms into the discussions in area and global studies. The Special Issue highlights the role of (quasi-)parliaments in disassembling and reassembling imperial formations and the ways in which parliaments were eclipsed by other institutions of power, both political and economic.

Keywords

Empire, Mongolia, parliament, Qing, Russia, Siberia, Soviet

The articles were ordered chronologically, and the Special Issue starts with Anton Kotenko’s contribution. Focusing on the works of Mykhailo Drahomanov, Kotenko examines the views of Ukrainian intellectuals on parliament in the second half of the 19th century. He argues that Drahomanov’s main innovation in the debates was his federalist approach to the imperial transformation, in which local self-government was to play the central role. The ideas of Drahomanov and other proponents of decentralization became part of the political mainstream during the Russian Revolutions of 1905–1907 and of 1917 and represented a peculiar take on dealing with the imperial crisis, manifested globally (Sablin & Semyonov, 2018).

The discussion of the imperial crisis and transformations continues with Egas Moniz Bandeira’s contribution

focusing on the constitutionalization of the Qing Empire’s peripheries—Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Bandeira analyzes the integration of these regions in the newly established parliamentary institutions at the provincial and central levels. He argues that the main goal of the reform was the stabilization and strengthening of the imperial state and notes how the late imperial approaches to diversity management in a constitutional regime informed the

University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany

Corresponding author:

Ivan Sablin, University of Heidelberg, Grabengasse 3-5, Heidelberg 69117, Germany.



post-revolutionary dynamics, contributing thereby to the rather scarce literature on the matter (Brophy, 2012).

Parliaments in imperial transformations are also at the center of Alexander Semyonov's article, which interprets the first Russian parliament as a parliament of a hybrid empire. Semyonov foregrounds the imperial context, that is, the layered sovereignty and heterogeneous society which produced diverse political subjectivities, in the history of early Russian parliamentarism. He concludes that the first Russian parliament proved more inclusive than the parliaments of renown liberal democracies, such as France and Great Britain. Semyonov's work continues the exploration of the Eurasian imperial parliaments not from the perspective of their ultimate failure, but from that of concrete political developments and their importance in the global context (Kayali, 1995).

Addressing the next period of the Russian imperial transformation, Tanja Penter and Ivan Sablin analyze the *soviets*, a key conceptual and institutional innovation of the Russian Revolutions, and their performance as bodies, alternative to Western parliaments, in the city of Odessa at the Black Sea and the Russian Far East adjacent to the Pacific Ocean. They demonstrate that regionalisms and localisms were used as organizing principles on par with nationalism across the former empire. At the same time, the comparison of the two peripheries shows that the two early Soviet governments functioned as *ad hoc* committees and hence did not offer a viable extra-parliamentary alternative in governance (Resnick, 1973).

Carolina de Stefano's article focuses on the late Soviet transformation and the role of the parliament, the Congress of People's Deputies, in the management of diversity. Focusing on the proliferation of parliamentary commissions and committees aimed at dealing with specific national problems, de Stefano discusses the parliamentary representation of ethnonational groups and minorities and, more specifically, the continuities and novelties in the functioning of the committees vis-à-vis their previous Soviet counterparts. The article contributes to the discussions of Soviet disintegration (Suny, 1993) by analyzing how the Soviet central leadership tried to control and handle the national question through the parliament.

The late Soviet transformation is also at the center of Melissa Chakars' article, but she analyzes it from the perspective of a concrete national group as organized at an *ad hoc* assembly—the All-Buryat Congress for the Spiritual Rebirth and Consolidation of the Nation. Chakars discusses the elections, carried out in the disjointed Buryat ethnonational units, the diverse representation at the congress itself, and the debates on the concrete approaches to national self-organization of the Mongolic-speaking indigenous people in the Russian-Mongolian borderland. The article demonstrates the

heterogeneity of the national groups and complicates the history of the late Soviet transformation.

Marissa Smith takes up the discussion of the Russian-Mongolian borderland from the Mongolian perspective and during the post-socialist period. Although Mongolia is usually celebrated as a notable and regionally exceptional success in the transition to democracy (Fish, 2001), Smith successfully demonstrates that the politics on the local and provincial levels is influenced by the post-imperial entanglements, such as the presence of the Soviet-cum-Russian and other internationalized infrastructures at the borderland, with the locality-center relations complicating the understandings of the current constitutional regime.

This Special Issue on Eurasian parliamentarism, informed of current developments in history, anthropology, and political science and attentive to the peculiarities of global, regional, and local contexts, seeks to fill some of the gaps in the discussions of democracy in Eurasia and beyond by exploring several key conjunctures and trends of democratic developments. Attempting to overcome narrow state-centered approaches, the articles in this Special Issue discuss the transboundary interactions between politicians and intellectuals, the circulation of ideas and concepts, and the entangled imperial and post-imperial political practices.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This Special Issue was prepared as part of the project "ENTPAR: Entangled Parliamentarisms: Constitutional Practices in Russia, Ukraine, China and Mongolia, 1905–2005," which received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 755504). Most articles were developed from the presentations at the Workshop "Parliaments and Political Transformations in Europe and Asia: Diversity and Representation in the 20th and 21st Century," hosted by the University of Heidelberg (Germany) on February 12–13, 2019.

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