



# An old Soviet response and a revolutionary context: Dealing with the national question in the committees of the USSR Congress of People's Deputies (1989–1991)

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## Abstract

The article deals with the parliamentary representation of ethnic/national interests and demands in the crisis years between 1989 and 1991, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union. It focuses primarily on the proliferation of committees dealing with ethnonational questions after the creation of the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, a parliamentary body that existed from 1989 until 1991. The article shows that the new parliamentary architecture was not only the inevitable consequence of social and national mobilization but also an expression of the Union center's response to the ongoing national crisis. Building mostly upon unpublished archival material, the article focuses on debates in 1989–1991 within the Committee of Nationalities Affairs and Interethnic Issues of the USSR Supreme Soviet. In so doing, it identifies some of the dilemmas the committee faced and some of the changes in its functioning brought about glasnost and perestroika. The article makes two key contributions. First, it helps to shed much-needed light on Soviet nationalities policy during perestroika. Second, the analysis of debates internal to parliamentary committees in those critical years contributes to the existing literature on Soviet and Russian parliamentarism and institutional transformation during the transition from the USSR to the Russian Federation.

## Keywords

Congress of People's Deputies, ethnic diversity, parliaments, perestroika, Soviet Union

## Introduction

The article investigates the evolution of the representation of ethnic and national interests and grievances during perestroika in the Soviet parliamentary system, from 1989 until 1991. Above all, it shows—against the backdrop of democratization and increasing national mobilization under Gorbachev—how traditional institutional responses of the Union's leadership to popular discontent started to function differently and even contributed, in some cases, to strengthening the position of the representatives of the republics and ethnic territories, leading to unexpected and watershed outcomes.

An extensive academic literature since in the early 1990s has analyzed in detail the significant impact glasnost and perestroika had on the “national question” in the Soviet

Union (*natsional'nyi vopros*).<sup>1</sup> These studies largely agree that the creation of a new parliamentary body—the Congress of People's Deputies (CPDs)—in 1989 and the holding of the first semi-democratic elections in Soviet history had an outside impact on national mobilization.<sup>2</sup> However, the specific consequences that reforms and the rapidly evolving sociopolitical circumstances of these years

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had on parliamentary representation of republican and ethnic interests have been overlooked.

The article tackles this issue by looking at the phenomenon of the proliferation of parliamentary committees that resulted from the creation of the Congress in 1989 that were aimed at discussing, and dealing with a varied set of ethnonational issues and demands. These included demands for territorial sovereignty and, toward the end of the crisis period, independence; the expression of ethnic grievances (beginning with the demand for rehabilitation of populations that were repressed and massively deported under Stalin); and interethnic conflicts and tensions.

Building on a collection of largely unpublished materials from the Fond of the CPD of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and interviews conducted in Moscow in 2019, the article shows that the establishment of parliamentary committees and subcommittees to address the national question reflected not only the new and evolving circumstances of democratization but also the traditional bureaucratic reflex in Soviet policy-making. In so doing, it sheds much-needed light on the evolution of Soviet nationalities policies in the twilight years of the USSR.

It is generally assumed that the Union's leadership—beginning with the USSR leader Michail Gorbachev—underestimated the national question and proved unable to control and dissuade centrifugal forces during perestroika. Although correct, this approach fails to provide an in-depth analysis of the role that the Union's central elite played in the political and institutional evolution of center-periphery relations in the years prior to the collapse of the USSR. It notably overlooks the amount of room to maneuver and the range of options open to the Soviet leaders in reacting to and addressing national problems. The extensive use of ministerial and parliamentary committees to deal with national issues offers us evidence of this.

Second, by delving into the functioning of the Congress Committee for Nationalities Affairs and the evolution of its internal debates, the article contributes to the existing literature on Russian and Soviet parliamentarism during the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation.<sup>3</sup> Besides, the debates in the Committee for Nationalities reflect and follow the deepening of the Soviet institutional crisis in 1989–1991 and the increasing inability of central authorities to deal with the “national question.”

The article is divided into three main parts. The first part sketches the political background to the establishment of the Congress, detailing the uncertainty and rapid shifts in center-republic relations and the intensifying national mobilization of the period. The second part analyzes the Soviet “committee response” to the national question after 1987, particularly within the new parliament. The third section focuses on the organization and meetings of the Committee for Nationalities and Interethnic Affairs of the Supreme Soviet to identify some of the main novelties in the way national issues were debated during perestroika. In

addition, it offers a brief sketch of important decisions reached by some of the ad hoc committees established by the Congress in 1989.

### The CPDs and the parliamentarization of the “national question”

At the XIX Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), in the summer of 1988, its secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, announced radical reforms of the Party and the country's parliamentary system (Pikhoya, 2019, p. 11; Taubman, 2017, pp. 337–375). Next to a substantial transfer of power from the Communist Party to the State, the most significant institutional change the program envisaged—in line with the series of reforms of democratization underway—was the establishment of an unprecedented two-tier legislative structure. In addition to the two existing parliamentary chambers of the USSR Supreme Soviet (*Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR*), the Soviet of the Union (*Soviet Soyuz SSSR*) and the Soviet of Nationalities (*Soviet Natsional'nostei*), a new body was set up—the CPDs (*S'ezd Narodnykh Deputatov SSSR*) (KPSS, 1988, p. 58).

The CPDs, with its 2,250 deputies, became the Union's highest legislative body and the only one elected directly by the population. In turn, its functions included electing the members of the two chambers of the Supreme Soviet.<sup>4</sup> Six months later, the structure and functioning of the Congress were defined with the law of 1 December 1988, on “amendments and additions to the USSR Constitution (Fundamental Law)” (Zakon USSR ot 1 dekabriya, 1988a). On the same day, it was also decided to schedule elections for 3 months later, in March 1989 (Zakon USSR ot 1 dekabriya, 1988b).

Whereas the general structure and competences had been determined, in March 1989, the impact of the new Congress and institutional reforms on the representation of the titular nationalities (*titul'nye natsii*)—above all within the Soviet of Nationalities—was still unknown. More broadly, it remained unclear how the growing national and ethnic demands, grievances, and tensions emerging in almost every corner of the country would play out. Formally, the legislation of 1988 introduced no substantial changes in the logic of representation or in the factual composition of the chamber. The second chamber of the Supreme Soviet was composed of deputies coming from national-territorial districts, with the only substantial novelty being the quota of deputies coming from social organizations (Art. 111, Zakon USSR ot 1 dekabriya, 1988a).

The establishment of the Congress came, however, at a moment of rapid and dramatic exacerbation of national issues. Since 1987, popular fronts, particularly strong in the three Baltic republics, had increasingly advocated republican sovereignty under the banner of glasnost and

perestroika (Lapidus, 2004, p. 133). At the beginning of 1988, a conflict between the Armenian and the Azeri population exploded in Nagorno–Karabakh and interethnic tensions mounted in several regions, especially in the Caucasus (de Waal, 2003). Thus, the 1988 legislation on the new Congress reflected in part the increasing salience in the country's politics and decision-making process of what in the Soviet Union was referred to as the “national question” (*natsional'nyi vopros*).

Anatoly Lukyanov, the future head of the USSR Supreme Soviet, was the principal architect of the institutional architecture of the new legislative chambers (Remington, 2001, p. 55).<sup>5</sup> The two chambers of the Supreme Soviet have been de facto equal in competences in the prior system of organization. Under the new dispensation, the decision was made to differentiate them depending on composition and specificities. In this framework, the Soviet of Nationalities strengthened its “national and nationalities” profile. For the first time, it recognized the “constitutional responsibility” of the Soviet of Nationality for interethnic (*mezhnatsional'nye*) relations.<sup>6</sup>

Uncertainties over the role of national issues in the new parliament, and concerns about these among that part of the Soviet establishment that had opposed the creation of the Congress, intensified during the electoral campaign of these first (and, indeed, last) semi-democratic elections in Soviet history, which saw an unprecedented social and national mobilization.

In the late summer of 1989, the Letter Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party registered with concern a dramatic surge in incoming letters about “interethnic issues” to the CPSU from Soviet citizens and Party members of different republics. Between 1988 and the first half of 1989, some 57,700 messages related to national problems were received (RGANI, Fond. 100, op. 1, d. 309, 2). According to a departmental report, the letters proved the “complexity of the situation of national issues” and how interethnic tensions had reached boiling point all over the country. Indeed, in the first half of 1989, the vast majority of the letters received by the Central Committee complained about the worsening of interethnic relations, calling for a central solution to the national question (RGANI, Fond. 100, op. 1, d. 309, 3).

The Communist Party secured a large, and predictable, landslide victory at the March polls. Nevertheless, as borne out, among others, by the testimony of Sergey Stankevich, a deputy member of the then Inter-Regional Group, it appeared clear at the very opening of the Congress in May 1989 that the political strength of the leaders of the popular fronts and “the opposition” had exceeded expectations and the formal number of seats at their disposal.<sup>7</sup> As the historian Rudolf Pikhoya affirms, the establishment of the Congress legitimized republican demands by providing them with an unprecedented political platform.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Congress had the effect of parliamentarizing the

national question, turning it into one of the most heated subjects within the CPDs and the Supreme Soviet. In this sense, it dominated general discussions at the Union center and became the sharp end of criticism leveled against it right through to the end of the USSR.<sup>9</sup>

### **Committee policy-making. An old Soviet response in search of a new nationalities policy**

The unprecedented role acquired both by the leadership of the popular fronts and by several singular, specific demands (such as the rehabilitation of the population repressed under Stalin) was reflected, in practice, in the immediate establishment of a series of parliamentary committees dealing with national issues. In June 1989, the Soviet of Nationalities authorized the creation of two permanent commissions—the Committee for social and economic developmental issues of the Union's and autonomous republics (*Komissiya po voprosam sotsial'nogo i ekonomicheskogo razvitiya soyuznykh i avtonomnykh respublik*) and the Committee for nationalities policy and interethnic relations (*Komissiya po natsional'nostyam i mezhnatsional'nyim otnosheniyam*, see below) (Pravda, 1989a, p. 1).<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the creation of additional committees was supported by the representatives of the popular fronts in the first place, notably to investigate the recent military repression of popular rallies in Georgia that had taken place only 1 month before, in April 1989, and to ascertain the existence of the secret protocol of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact that had led to the Soviet annexation of the Baltics in 1940. The commission on the Tbilisi crackdown was ultimately created at the sixth session of the First Congress. It was headed by the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) deputy, lawyer, and future St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak and composed of 24 members representing, among others, nine Soviet Socialist Republics. The Committee was called to report on the results of the investigation at the second CPDs to be held 6 months later, in December 1989 (Sobchak, 1993).

For its part, the Commission for the Political and Legal Assessment of the Soviet–German Non-Aggression Pact of 1939 was established in July 1989 under pressure from the popular fronts and a decision by the first CPDs (Bergman, 2019). A significant number of its members were representatives of the popular fronts of the Baltic republics, including the future chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament, Vytautas Landsbergis, and the next Estonian Prime Minister, Edgar Savisaar (Sato, 2010). Committees were also created to determine the conditions for the return of Crimean Tatars to Crimea and handle the question of the German Russians (Postanovlenie Verkhovnogo Sovieta SSSR, 28 November 1989).<sup>11</sup> Finally, several local representatives requested to create ad hoc committees—and even subcommittees, beginning with the one

on “small populations” (*malochislennye narody*)—to analyze other critical national issues (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 263).

To evaluate these institutional bodies, a first point of order is to recognize that organizing parliamentary work into committees, subcommittees is standard practice in all national parliaments (Martin, 2014). As such, the establishment of new committees in 1989 was not distinctive to the Soviet parliamentary system or the new Congress *per se*. Second, as briefly explained here, the investigative committees were established under strong pressure from the representatives of opposition forces, which were making their historic debut in the Soviet parliament.

However, it would be wrong to look at the proliferation of committees on national issues in the Supreme Soviet after 1989 as an outcome of mere procedural norms or as a passive reception of demands coming from the republics. It was, in fact, also the result of a genuine attempt by some of the most reform-minded Party leaders to address pressing concerns in the framework of glasnost and democratization. Moreover, it was a function of the urgency among the Union’s central authorities to elaborate a new Soviet nationalities policy and resolve the interethnic conflicts roiling the country.

First, the creation of committees was largely supported by the Union’s establishment—even as Party leaders were bitterly divided on many issues of the period that are beyond the scope of the present article. The role that the Congress committees should play was expressed by Lukyanov himself, when, at the first session, he affirmed,

“I am sure that in the field of interethnic relations the majority of issues can and should be solved exclusively through painstaking, very delicate, very consistent work to unleashing all kinds of knots and prejudices.” He continued by saying that these questions had to be analyzed within the Supreme Soviet and that probably what was needed was “not only one committee, but a system of committees” in the Soviet of Nationalities. (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 326)

As for Gorbachev, he fully adopted Lukyanov’s stance when, with reference to the elaboration of a new nationalities policy in line with political developments, he declared,

It can be said that a political mechanism is currently being created to ensure a reasonable and fair approach to the issues related to interethnic relations, the development of solutions that would meet the interests of each of the Soviet nations, as well as the interests of the whole nation. I have in mind both the already published drafts of laws on these issues, and the great preparatory work for the Plenum of the Central Committee, specially dedicated to them. Most importantly, the upcoming work of the Supreme Soviet and its Committees, within which national problems should find a comprehensive solution. (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 461)

As for the ad hoc committees, their creation was also made possible by the overt support of those Party reformers who saw them as a necessary step to guarantee and deepen

the process of glasnost underway. In the case of the Commission on the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, a decisive role was played in particular by the Politburo member Aleksandr Yakovlev (Bergmane, 2019, p. 75). Although it should be noted that in the first session of the Congress, many who were not among the reformers—such as the Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet Vitaly Vorotnikov—supported the idea of creating an “independent” commission to clarify the dynamics of the Soviet military crackdown of the anti-Soviet and anti-Abkhazian rallies that enraged in Tbilisi in April 1989 (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, pp. 48, 531–39).

Apart from the distinct novelties the Congress had introduced from the outset and the intense pressure from the republics, the overwhelming support for the creation of committees to discuss national issues was also an expression of traditional Soviet policy-making. This Soviet “bureaucratic reflex” was characterized, particularly in the Brezhnev years, by a proliferation—if not hypertrophy—of state bodies to cope with problematic societal and economic issues. Against a backdrop of strong Party centralization, committees were hardly meant to reach final or definitive decisions, but instead to dilute or mollify conflicts and avoid a direct challenge to the political center (Barabashev, 2019; Jones, 1984). This pattern continued into the perestroika era, wherein the predominant central institutional reaction to the emergence of overt social and national discontentment was the formation of ad hoc committees and departments—within the Party, the ministries, and other state structures.

Party member Vyacheslav A. Michailov foregrounded the need for new structures to deal with national issues in an early letter addressed to Gorbachev and Yakovlev in 1987. The letter stressed the unjustified absence of a department of nationalities policies within the Party. One was swiftly set up, with Michailov as its head, in the following months.<sup>12</sup> Next to this department—whose goal was to scout for a new and comprehensive approach to nationalities issues—committees had started to emerge outside the parliamentary structures, beginning with the Committee of the Communist Party “on additional analysis of materials related to repression that took place during the 30s–40s, and early 50s.” The Committee was established in 1988 and was headed by Aleksandr Yakovlev.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, the proliferation of parliamentary committees must also be understood as part of a broader firmament of bodies and institutions created during perestroika in line with the reflexive Soviet bureaucratic approach. These had two primary, albeit distinct, aims. On one hand, for a part of the ruling elite wishing to air dirty laundry they served as an open forum—the right place to unveil the uncomfortable truths of the Soviet past, especially during the Stalin years. On the other, they reflected an attempt by the Union leadership to scout for a new nationalities policy and, more generally, a position of compromise between the central authorities and the republican leadership, as well as solutions to interethnic conflicts.

## The national question in the Congress committees 1989–1991: the rise of the experts and watershed decisions

Despite the continuity with the Soviet tradition of policy-making, there were many new elements in the way committees worked within the Congress and the Supreme Soviet. Moreover, throughout the existence of the CPDs (i.e., from 1989 until September 1991), the number and seriousness of national issues grew dramatically.

First, there were uncertainties over the general functioning of the parliamentary committees, and their organization and structure. As the Latvian deputy and university professor, A. Plotnisk noted that neither the constitutional legislation nor the parliamentary regulation clearly defined how they were supposed to be working (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 24). Second, a crucial novelty was debating the composition of the commissions, which had to be negotiated (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, pp. 24–25). In several cases, deputies explicitly requested that “apparatchiks” (i.e., Party and bureaucratic functionaries) be excluded from the committees or demanded “independent members” to deal with investigations (see Note 3).

In the opposite direction, the deputy from the Orlov oblast, V. Samarin, observed that an important number of deputies elected by the Congress to form the two chambers of the Supreme Soviet did not come from the Union but the republican governments. For this reason, he warned of the risk that, once the committees formed, they would end up working not in the interests of the Union, but for personal, localist interests (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 126).

The transcripts of the meetings of the Committee on Nationalities Affairs and Interethnic Relations between 1989 and 1991 help shedding light on the central dilemmas and issues the committee faced and how its members debated national issues. They also pinpoint a degree of evolution in the way the Committee worked across these 2 years. In the beginning, the Committee was composed of 41 deputies, was headed by Georgy Tarazevich, and mirrored the multiethnic composition of the Soviet of Nationalities (GARF, F. 9654, op. 7, d. 1050, pp. 16–18).

The Committee met for the first time in June 1989. As emerges from the discussions of that day, the activity, organization, and functioning had to be determined from scratch. Tarazevich started by stressing the difficulty of the issues the commission was called to work on in future months. He called on the members to “think a lot about the structure of [the] committee, about the organization and the working agenda, on the issues [to] deal with, on the relations with other committees of the Soviet of Nationalities, and maybe with the committee of the Council of the Union.” This work, he concluded, would “require creative inputs of each member of the committee” (GARF, F. 9654, op. 7, delo 1050, p. 4).

In this period of glasnost, one of the first issues brought to the table concerned the publicity of the proceedings of the committee, with some of the republican representatives pushing for the minutes of meetings to be made available to the respective electorates (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 13). As archival material shows, one of the main novelties in the way the commission worked throughout its existence in 1989–1991 was its increasing appeal to external experts who came primarily (though not only) from the USSR Academy of Sciences and the tone of the discussions. This was justified by the exacerbation of national and interethnic tensions, and the increasing difficulty of central structures to find adequate solutions. The idea of relying on experts to assess the situation was expressed already in June 1989. Tarazevich affirmed that, maybe, the commission would have needed “to establish a sort of an academic center analyzing these questions,” and noticed that, on the same direction, within the Apparat of the Supreme Soviet, a department on nationalities affairs was already being formed (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, pp. 12–13).

One of the turning points in the evolution of center–republican relations was the elections for the Republican Supreme Soviets in March 1990. The vote, among others, sanctioned the creation of a Russian CPDs, heralded the political ascent of Boris Yeltsin, and paved the way for Russia’s declaration of sovereignty in June 1990 and the “parade of sovereignties” that followed (McFaul, 2001, pp. 78–88).

The evolution of the overall situation, which by September 1990 had become critical, came up in the Committee for nationalities at a meeting that focused on the latest development of the deadly riots between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek populations in the Kyrgyz city of Osh in June (McGlinchey, 2014). The September meeting saw the additional participation of members of the Committee for State Security (KGB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and other ministerial structures. On that occasion, the conclusions of the delegation that had been dispatched on the ground were that

[M]any negative tendencies, linked to the activation of nationalist elements . . . emerged during the campaign for the elections of the Republican Supreme Soviets. The leaders of the oblasts, having flirted with the leaders of informal organizations, yielding to their requirements, lost the initiative and the threads of management. (GARF, F. 9654, op. 7, d. 1053, p. 77)

Having listened to the report, one of the main proposals of the committee to cope with the conflict was to involve more experts on Central Asia to better assess the situation in the republics (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 79).

Only 2 weeks after, on 4 October, the deputy minister of the Committee, Erkin Auelbekov, warned of the committee’s scant knowledge of what was actually happening in the republics. In his view, it was necessary that committee members

[S]trengthen the relations with the Socialist Republics, know the situation there, and provide them with more help. Together with deputies, members of the Supreme Soviet need to go in those places, deal with complaints, provide support in the resolution of concrete issues, particularly those related to national demands, participate in their examination within the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Council of Ministers, and other ministries and departments . . . and rely on the help of academic experts of the USSR Academy of Sciences, who work on the problems of these republics. (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 147)

At the end of October, the Committee met with members from the KGB, the Ministry of Internal and Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Justice, among others in attendance. The putative agenda concerned the “500 days,” an economic plan for the transition to a market economy (Pikhoya, 2019, p. 20), although the meeting was soon dominated by discussions on the increasing loss of grip of central structures on the republics and the interethnic conflicts roiling the country. The Congress deputy A. Chekhoev was especially forthcoming with concerns about the situation and the inability of the authorities to restore a sense of control over events: “our commission is not reacting, in any manner. Is this good or bad, is this right or wrong? The republics already act in accordance with their own laws” (GARF, F. 9654, op. 7, d. 1053, p. 156). A key dimension identified was the urgent need to get ahead of conflicts, which were intensifying, before new ones broke out. Chekhoev noted that

We have to forecast interethnic conflicts. . . . First, [we need] a mechanism to liquidate both their consequences and the premises of future ones. Second, we need to have forecasts and analyses of current nationality policy in all corners of the Union. (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 162)

In April 1991, after the March referendum on the conservation of the Union, prominent academic experts—sociologists, ethnographers, geographers—were invited to a meeting of the committee to present concrete proposals on “some approaches for the elaboration of mechanisms to overcome interethnic conflicts” (GARF, F. 9654, op. 7, d. 1055), together with members of the department of Nationalities Affairs of the Secretariat of the Congress. Among others, speeches were made by the head of the center for the studies of sociopolitical processes of the Institute of Sociology of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (RAN), by the head of the RAN Institute of Ethnography Valery Tishkov, and by the sociologist Leokadia Drobizheva. As was explained at the beginning of the session, this meeting represented the “first attempt at dealing with academic tendencies, to understand the scientific trends that our scientists possess precisely in resolving interethnic conflicts” (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a, p. 17). The head of the committee, Georgy Tarazevich, notably observed how “in other countries” there were several institutes, centers, that

concretely dealt both theoretically and in practice with all these questions and how serious those were in the Soviet Union at that moment (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989a).

The growing appeal to experts, and the unprecedented frankness of the debates, reflected both the dearth of solutions available to the central authorities in Moscow and the radically new political context that glasnost had given birth to. While comprehensive solutions to solve the national question were not forthcoming, more visible, and watershed decisions were being made by those ad hoc committees that had been established already at the first Congress in 1989 to deal with national demands and critical issues.

First, as decided at the First Congress in May 1989, the Commission on the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was called to report on the results of its works at the Second Congress, on 23 December of the same year. The head Aleksandr Yakovlev read the conclusions publicly. He pointed out that “the consensus was not easy [since] there were many disputes and clashes of opinion.” However, “they did not undermine the general constructive atmosphere of the discussions. With all the diversity of approaches, points of view, emotional shades, the desire not to disclose episodes of the past prevailed” (Pravda, 1989b).

Notwithstanding the nuanced and balanced tone that reflected internal disagreements, the substance of the speech was clear and historical—the Nazi-Soviet pact was an illegitimate annexation and ought to be publicly recognized as such. As the hard-liner Soviet politician Egor Ligachev recalls in his memoirs, Yakovlev’s words sparked “very harsh discussions.” According to his account, a voice from the tribune erupted with bitterness and pronounced the “prophetic words”: “What are you doing?! Come to your senses! You are giving the green light to the breakup of the Soviet Union!” Overall, Ligachev (2010) referred to the historical decision of the Molotov–Ribbentrop commission when he wrote that the “tense, mudslinging atmosphere at the Second Congress” was a “harbinger of crisis in perestroika” and the stimulus for the growth of the “nationalist wave” in the Baltics at the end of 1989 (p. 227).

The day after, on 24 December, the final report of the committee condemned “the fact that—simultaneously with the treaties of August 23 and September 28, 1939—secret protocols were signed, whose existence is confirmed by the findings,” defining these acts as having been “a departure from the Leninist principles of Soviet foreign policy.” Having listened to the report, the CPD voted in favor of the declaration that the pact had been void since its ratification in 1939. In so doing, the Soviet parliament recognized that the Baltic countries had been annexed against their will, thus paving the way for their independence (Sato, 2010).

On the same day, the special commission on the military crackdown in Tbilisi in 1989 also presented its final assessment. While conceding that popular rallies in Tbilisi were extremely difficult to handle and that central authorities had the constitutional right to use force to reestablish public

order, the report argued that, on that specific case, violent measures had not been justified and were not proportionate. It noted, in particular, that

General Rodionov (Commander of the Transcaucasian Military District, a.n.), with his ill-conceived actions, allowed the Soviet Army to perform functions unfamiliar to it, grossly violating the directive of the General Command on assigning to the army units only those tasks associated with the protection of specially designated objects.

In addition, the report declared that “The commission notes with special concern that the leadership of the army tried to deny the very fact that toxic substances were used” (Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR, 1989b, pp. 4–33). In conclusion, the report recognized the responsibility of the local governmental forces in the crackdown against the demonstrators and called for further investigation, and subsequent sanctions, of the people directly, or indirectly, involved in the crackdown (Sobchak, 1993). Overall, both for the way the debate on the matter unfolded and the final decision of the commission, the “Tbilisi Affair” was a watershed and proved that “the center could no longer use force against the population” (Shevardnadze, 2009, p. 181).

## Conclusion

During perestroika, one of the primary responses of the central leadership to handle the national question was to set up a long and differentiated series of ad hoc committees, especially after the creation of the CPDs in 1989, but also within the Party structures and the ministries.

This response was in line with an established Soviet tradition of bureaucratic policy-making, although glasnost and the evolving sociopolitical reality brought about, very rapidly, new modes of functioning and discussions of the national question within this archipelago of legislative and governmental platforms. In this sense, the internal architecture of the newly established Congress was not merely an inevitable reaction to the growing emergence of national sentiments all over the Soviet Union but also the result of the support of the central leadership (and not only of its more reformist wing).

The debates of the general sessions of the Congress, as well as the minutes of the ones internal to the Committee of Nationalities Affairs of the Supreme Soviet, helped identifying a series of new elements in the organization and activity of USSR parliamentary committees in 1989–1991. Besides, the latter reflected how, from 1989 until the Soviet collapse in 1991, there was an increasing appeal to external expertise since Committee members and Union’s central institutions were proving unable to find compelling solutions to ethnic conflicts and center–periphery relations more in general. Finally, and contrary to the past mode of functioning of state committees typical of Soviet history, some of them ended up taking decisions that directly, overtly, and publicly challenged central political authorities.

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## Notes

1. On the national question in the Soviet Union, see Cadiot (2007), Martin (2001), and Smith (1999). On the perestroika reforms, see, among others, Graziosi (2008) and Brown (1996). Works by Gail Lapidus (1992, 2004) are among the main contributions discussing the impact of perestroika on the national question.
2. Both scholars and direct participants fully agree on the assembly’s unanticipated transformation into an arena for the expression, legitimation, and strengthening of national demands and grievances in the USSR, an outcome that was entirely unprecedented in Soviet experience. See, among others, Hough (1997), Pikhoya (2000), Remington (2001), Ryzhkov (2009), and Sheinis (2012).
3. On institutional and imperial transformations at the twilight of the USSR (Sablin & Semyonov, 2018).
4. Like in the previous legislative system, 750 deputies came from ordinary territorial districts, 750 from national–territorial districts (*natsional’nye territorial’nye okrugi*). In contrast, the most important novelty was the introduction of 750 seats for “social organizations” (*obshchestvennye organizatsii*), such as trade unions and the Komsomol.
5. A friend of Gorbachev since their university days and a legal expert, Lukyanov had participated in the drafting of the 1977 Soviet Constitution. He was for years an important legal adviser in the Party, performing a range of functions. In 1987, he became a member of the CPSU Central Committee and in September 1988 a candidate Politburo member. From the summer of 1988, Lukyanov (2010) worked on the blueprint for the new legislative system (p. 13). He was elected vice-chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union in March 1989, and then chairman on the following year.
6. The word “mezhnatsional’noe” is generally translated into English as “interethnic,” which is preferred to the literary translation “inter-national.”
7. Interview with the author, Moscow, October 2019. Formally, the Inter-Regional Group was created during the First Congress and met for the first time in June 1989.
8. Interview with the author, Moscow, October 2019.
9. The Congress was dissolved in September 1991.
10. The other two permanent commissions of the Soviet of Nationalities were the Commission for Consumer Goods, Trade, Communal–Domestic, and Other Services to the Population and the Commission for the Development of Culture, Language, National and International Tradition, and Preservation of Historical Heritage.

11. On the rehabilitation of the Crimean Tatar population, see also the documents available on the digital archive of the Yakovlev Foundation: <https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/68185>.
12. Interview with the author, Moscow, October 2019.
13. An important part of the material, including the transcripts of the meetings, related to the Commission is available on the on-line archival database of the Yakovlev Foundation (<https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org>). Within the Council of Ministers, there had also been attempts to create a USSR Ministry for Nationalities, although they ultimately failed.

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