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## **CHAPTER 11**

# **ANALYSIS OF THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN TÜRKİYE AND AZERBAIJAN: IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERNIST, ETHNO-SYMBOLIC, AND POSTCOLONIAL PARADIGMS**

**Ruhiyya MAMMADOVA**

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IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERNIST, ETHNO-SYMBOLIC, AND  
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**Abstract**

The article, “Analysis of the Formation of National Identity in Türkiye and Azerbaijan: In the Context of Modernist, Ethno-Symbolic, and Postcolonial Paradigms,” examines the nation-building processes in Türkiye and Azerbaijan from the early 20th century onwards, analyzing them through various paradigms and theoretical frameworks. The study focuses on modernist, ethno-symbolic, and postcolonial/post-socialist paradigms, investigating how national identity has formed in both countries within these frameworks. The research aims to conduct a comparative analysis of nation-building processes in Türkiye and Azerbaijan, highlighting the divergent paths each society has taken in forming national identity due to complex socio-political events. Despite sharing a common ethno-cultural heritage, the article explores the contradictions arising from modernist and colonial influences on this ethnic and cultural identity. Within this approach, historical legacy, power relations, political ideologies, and discourses are treated as key factors shaping national identity.

**Keywords**

*National Identity, Ethno-symbolism, Liberalism, Postcolonial Theory, Modernism*

## **Introduction**

The process of national identity formation is one of the most widely debated and theoretically complex areas in contemporary social sciences. National identity and the concept of the nation cannot be explained solely as natural, immutable, and ahistorical phenomena, nor merely as instrumental political constructs of the modern era. In post-imperial, postcolonial, and post-socialist contexts, national identity emerges as a dynamic and contingent process shaped by the interaction of state-building, historical memory, cultural heritage, power relations, and the international context. In this respect, the examples of Türkiye and Azerbaijan offer a productive comparative framework for analyzing different, yet interrelated, trajectories of national identity formation.

Although Türkiye and Azerbaijan share common ethno-linguistic and cultural roots, their nation-building processes unfolded under distinct historical and political conditions. In Türkiye, the modern nation-state emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire within a primarily non-colonial, elite-driven, and state-centered modernization project. In Azerbaijan, the development of national identity was closely linked to the colonial governance structures of the Russian Empire, and later, the Soviet Union. These divergent experiences indicate that explaining national identity through a single theoretical paradigm is analytically limiting and requires a multidimensional approach.

The main objective of this study is to provide a comparative analysis of nation-building processes in Türkiye and Azerbaijan, showing the historical, institutional, and discursive mechanisms through which these processes occurred, and explaining why different models of national identity emerged despite a shared ethno-cultural base. The article also analytically addresses the tensions between the modernist state model, ethno-cultural narratives, postcolonial legacies, and liberal principles.

Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative and interpretive approach. The analysis combines conceptual-theoretical frameworks with discourse analysis, examining official ideologies, political discourses, historical narratives, and academic literature as primary sources for understanding the formation of national identity. The comparative method identifies similar and distinct structural mechanisms in Türkiye and Azerbaijan, while discourse analysis helps understand inclusion/exclusion mechanisms, as well as power and legitimacy relations. This approach treats national identity not as a static outcome, but as the product of socio-historical processes, socio-political conflicts, and negotiated settlements.

The article is structured in four main sections. The first section conceptually analyzes national identity formation through modernist, ethno-symbolic, and postcolonial lenses. The second section examines the formation of national identity in Azerbaijan in the context of postcolonial and post-socialist legacies. The third section analyzes nation-building in Türkiye through the state-centered modernization model and ethno-cultural transformations. The fourth section provides a comparative evaluation of Turkish and Azerbaijani national identity models from modernist and ethno-cultural perspectives. Ultimately, the article argues that the continuity and legitimacy of national identity cannot be conditioned solely on institutional organization or ethno-cultural cohesion; this process is only possible through recognition of cultural diversity and liberal governance.

Nation-building and the formation of national identity have been mainly studied within modernist, ethno-cultural (ethno-symbolic), and postcolonial paradigms. Modernist approaches explain nationalism as the product of industrialization, a centralized state, and functional political administration (Gellner, 1991; Anderson, 2006). Within the modernist tradition, individualist approaches emphasize citizenship, legal equality, and rational consent (Habermas, 1999; Rawls, 2003), while communitarian perspectives highlight the normative significance of collective identity and social cohesion (Taylor, 1994; Kymlicka, 1995).

However, modernist theories have been criticized for insufficiently accounting for historical contingency, coercion, and elite-driven manipulation. O'Leary (1997) emphasizes that modernist models risk normalizing top-down imposition of national identity, while Goswami (2002) stresses that nationalist projects are adopted differently across social and colonial contexts. These critiques reveal the analytical strengths of modernist approaches but also expose their normative and cultural limitations (Gellner, 1991, pp. 42-44).

Ethno-cultural (ethno-symbolic) paradigms complement modernist explanations, arguing that national identity is built on historical memory, myths, symbols, and pre-modern ethnic cores (Smith, 2000). According to this approach, modern nations selectively reinterpret historical cultural resources to create political legitimacy. However, ethno-symbolism is criticized for romanticizing history and exaggerating continuity (Özkirimli, 2003).

The postcolonial paradigm analyzes national identity formation in the context of power hierarchies, epistemic dominance, and imperial legacies (Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994). This perspective views national identity as a hybrid, discursive, and contested process, questioning the position of marginalized subjects in national narratives (Nichols, 2010).

In Türkiye, nation-building and national identity formation have primarily been examined through the lens of Kemalist modernization, state-centered nationalism, and secular homogenization policies (Kadioğlu, 1996; Özkirimli, 2003; Canefe, 2002; Akman, 2004; Özdoğan, 2010; Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm & Gençkal Eroler, 2023). In Azerbaijan, national identity is studied in the context of Soviet nationality policies, post-socialist transformation, and postcolonial discourses (Ergun, 2022; Khalid, 2007; Ismayilov, 2022; Chari & Verdery, 2009; Valiyev, 2005).

This article does not base the formation of national identity in Türkiye and Azerbaijan on a single theoretical model. Instead, it analytically combines modernist state-building mechanisms with ethno-cultural symbolic resources and postcolonial/post-socialist legacies. This approach demonstrates that national identity in both countries has formed differently depending on historical conditions and institutional contexts, and considers national identity as an ongoing socio-political process rather than a finalized outcome.

Although the article examines national identity formation in Türkiye and Azerbaijan from multiple theoretical paradigms, it has limitations. First, it primarily relies on conceptual and discourse analysis, limiting empirical investigation through surveys or ethnographic data. Consequently, how national identity is experienced in everyday life or perceived across different social groups is addressed only theoretically. Second, the sources used focus mainly on political, historical, and ideological discourses, while social, economic, and demographic factors are treated more superficially, leaving some aspects incompletely addressed.

## **1. Theoretical Analysis of National Identity: Modernist, Ethno-Symbolic, and Postcolonial Perspectives**

In contemporary scholarship, the formation of national identity cannot be explained solely as a mechanical continuation of ethnic-historical identity or merely through state institutional intervention. Modernist approaches present national identity as a political project shaped by industrialization, centralized state structures, and education systems, while ethno-symbolic approaches emphasize the role of historical memory, cultural symbols, and collective memory. Liberal theory seeks to normatively justify national identity within frameworks of individual rights and citizenship, while communitarian critiques highlight cultural and moral dimensions of belonging. Postcolonial and post-imperial perspectives analyze imperial legacies, center-periphery relations, and the shaping of identity through hegemonic discourses. In post-imperial societies like Azerbaijan and Türkiye, studying these paradigms is essential for understanding how national identity is reconstructed in both modernization and historical-cultural continuity contexts.

### **1.1. Analysis of National Identity through Modernist and Ethno-Symbolic Paradigms: Communitarian Liberalism as a Bridging Approach**

Modernist approaches link national identity formation to the structural needs of the modern state, explaining it as a product of social organization rather than historical continuity. National identity emerges through industrialization, mass education, centralized administration, and the creation of a unified legal-political

space. Gellner's classic thesis underpins this perspective: nationalism arises in response to functional requirements of modern society and necessitates the dissemination of a standardized "high culture" to ensure social mobility (Gellner, 1991). In this view, national identity is not a spontaneous continuation of cultural heritage, but an institutional project promoted by the state.

A key advantage of the modernist approach is its potential to build national identity on a participatory citizenship model, uniting ethnic, religious, and regional differences under a common legal status and directing political loyalty toward state institutions. When combined with liberal political theory, it provides a normative foundation for protecting individual rights, rule of law, and equality of citizenship. Habermas' concept of constitutional patriotism exemplifies this synthesis, constructing national identity based on commitment to democratic principles rather than shared cultural origins (Habermas, 1999).

However, this model's structural strengths do not always align with its cultural outcomes. Modernist nation-building requires cultural standardization, often marginalizing local identities, regional languages, and alternative historical narratives. Gellner's "high culture" concept, while analytically useful, may legitimize cultural homogenization in political practice (Gellner, 1991). O'Leary (1997) critiques this approach, noting that it neglects coercion, pre-existing ethnic identities, and historical contingencies in shaping national consciousness. Goswami (2002) highlights the importance of historical, political, and economic context in forming national identity, emphasizing its contingent character. Smith (2000) argues that building national identity solely through institutional mechanisms weakens its emotional and symbolic foundations, rendering social loyalty fragile.

Ethno-symbolic nationalism, particularly developed by Anthony D. Smith, links national identity formation to historical ethnic cores, collective memory, myths, and symbols. Modern nations emerge not only from institutional structures but also through selective reinterpretation of pre-modern cultural resources (Smith, 2000, pp. 85-94). This approach enhances understanding of the emotional depth, continuity, and social resonance of national identity.

The main tension between ethno-symbolic and modernist approaches arises because modernist theories explain national identity primarily through industrialization, state-building, and institutional standardization. However, as Özkirimli (2003) notes, this critique partially misrepresents modernist positions: modernists do not deny the existence of pre-modern ethnic ties, but argue that they acquire political significance only under modern conditions (p. 344). Collective memory and historical continuity must be understood as socially constructed, reinterpreted, and continually contested processes (Özkirimli, 2003, p. 348). Ethno-symbolic nationalism risks romanticizing historical continuity, potentially overshadowing alternative identities, minority experiences, and contemporary socio-political challenges (Goswami, 2002, p. 797).

Thus, while ethno-symbolic nationalism addresses gaps in modernist approaches, it also carries the potential for exclusion and conflict. It must be examined in critical dialogue with modernist and liberal frameworks. Unlike individualist liberalism, communitarian liberalism reconciles individual identity and rights with the cultural and social contexts of society. National identity, therefore, forms not only through legal and political frameworks but also through shared values, history, and symbols (Taylor, 1994; Kymlicka, 1995). This model manages tensions between national identity and individual rights, foregrounding ethno-cultural diversity within a liberal normative framework.

## **1.2. Why a Postcolonial Approach?**

The postcolonial approach in contemporary social sciences is not merely a framework for describing historical colonial relations. It is an essential analytical paradigm for understanding how such relations persist, are reproduced, and transformed in the present. Its central premise is that identities, knowledge systems, and political subjectivities are neither natural nor fixed; rather, they are discursively constructed in historical, social, and political contexts (Nichols, 2010, pp. 139-140). Consequently, postcolonial theory

allows scholars to analyze the formation of national identity not only through institutional or economic factors but also through language, representation, and knowledge regimes.

One key reason for the relevance of the postcolonial paradigm today is that colonialism continues not just as a political or economic system but also as a form of epistemic and discursive power. Chandra (2013) notes that postcolonial states often retain administrative structures and knowledge hierarchies established during colonial rule, which marginalize local agency and alternative political imaginaries (pp. 484-486). Similarly, Rukundwa and van Aarde (2007) argue that colonialism was not only the appropriation of territory and resources but also of consciousness, normalizing a sense of inferiority and presenting the colonizer's worldview as "natural" and "universal" (pp. 1185-1186). In this context, postcolonial analysis is critical for uncovering the psychological and cultural persistence of colonial legacies, not merely their material effects.

The postcolonial paradigm's emphasis on discourse is particularly significant. Drawing on Foucault's theory of knowledge-power relations, this approach demonstrates that discourse does not merely describe reality; it produces it. Discourses determine who can speak, which knowledge is legitimate, and which identities are recognized (Nichols, 2010, p. 139). In colonial contexts, language, historiography, law, and science became key instruments of imperial power. Yet, as Miller (1990) warns, reducing discourse to a tool of domination risks rendering human agency invisible (pp. 121-124). Postcolonial research, therefore, seeks to manage this tension, acknowledging the regulatory power of discourse while examining how subjects resist, reinterpret, and reshape it.

In nation-building, discourse is particularly influential in postcolonial contexts. Spivak's (1988) well-known assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" highlights that even when marginalized groups have a voice, their speech is often unrecognized or distorted by dominant discourses (p. 294). This demonstrates that the formation of national identity is selective, hierarchical, and potentially exclusionary. Spivak (2009) further argues that the nation is not a natural affiliation but a collective imagination learned and internalized through education, literature, and media (pp. 77-81). Postcolonial discourse analysis thus enables the examination of how national identity is "taught" and who is systematically excluded from these narratives.

Moreover, the postcolonial paradigm reconceptualizes identity as hybrid and processual. Rukundwa and van Aarde (2007) and Chemyakin (2020) emphasize that postcolonial identity is neither a return to a pure precolonial past nor full adoption of colonial culture; rather, it is a hybrid construction shaped through interaction, translation, and adaptation (pp. 1188-1189; pp. 198, 205-206). This hybridity allows scholars to treat national identity not as a fixed essence but as a dynamic process of ongoing negotiation and contestation.

Nevertheless, the postcolonial paradigm is not free from normative risks. Zhang (2023) warns that postcolonial nationalist discourses can sometimes be appropriated to legitimize authoritarianism, nativism, or ethnic exclusion (pp. 1-2). Similarly, Woods (2016) notes that cultural nationalism may function both as a tool of resistance and a mechanism of exclusion, depending on how discourse is constructed and ethically guided (pp. 429-436).

Thus, analyzing the features of the postcolonial approach demonstrates that it is indispensable for studying national identity formation in societies with imperial histories. It treats national identity not as natural or purely institutional but as a dynamic process shaped at the intersection of power, knowledge, and discourse. Without this paradigm, it is impossible to adequately understand the historical traumas, epistemic dependencies, and contemporary political risks affecting national identity.

## **2. Azerbaijan in the Soviet Space: Postcolonial and Post-Socialist Perspectives**

The formation of national identity in Azerbaijan cannot be explained solely as a product of modernist state-building, nor merely as the outcome of historical-cultural continuity. It developed within a complex historical context where imperial administration, socialist modernization, and post-Soviet transformation

intersected. Therefore, using postcolonial and post-socialist approaches together is analytically necessary; they complement rather than duplicate each other, filling explanatory gaps left by the other.

Postcolonial theory shows how imperial power was exercised not only through territorial control but also via knowledge production, discourse, and normative subjectivity. Nichols (2010) highlights that, drawing on Foucault, colonial power operates through representation (p. 139). Yet focusing solely on discourse is insufficient; colonial and postcolonial power also continues through everyday governance, norms, and self-regulation—that is, at the level of governmentality (Nichols, 2010, pp. 143-144). This is particularly relevant for post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where imperial legacies persist not only symbolically but also in administrative culture and citizen-state relations.

Here, the post-socialist approach is crucial. If post-colonialism uncovers the cultural and discursive dimensions of imperial legacies, post-socialism demonstrates how structures and habits created under socialist rule continue after independence. Moore (2001) explains the lack of integration between these two fields as a “double silence”. On one hand, postcolonial studies hesitated to analyze the USSR as a colonial power; on the other, post-Soviet societies did not identify with “Third World” postcoloniality, favoring a Eurocentric modernist aspiration (Moore, 2001, pp. 118-119).

Once this silence is addressed, it becomes clear that Soviet governance, while not identical to classic Western colonialism, produced similar effects. Expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia involved territorial conquest, cultural coercion, political subordination, and control over populations (Moore, 2001, pp. 120-124). Socialist modernization rhetoric framed this control as “liberating” and “developmental,” but local experiences resembled classical colonial dependency, leaving deep marks on the formation of Azerbaijan’s national identity.

Khalid (2007) emphasizes that Soviet rule was not merely political control but a large-scale social engineering project aimed at reshaping identities. While ethnic and cultural differences were officially recognized under the “friendship of nations” ideology, non-Russian peoples remained hierarchically subordinate in practice (Khalid, 2007, p. 469). This tension contributed to both the institutionalization of ethnic identity and the weak development of citizenship-based national consciousness in Azerbaijan.

Religion played a key role in this process. As Khalid (2007) notes, the Soviet state did not eliminate Islam entirely but transformed it into a controlled, depoliticized form (p. 467). This aligns with postcolonial concepts of “cultural governance.” Islam remained part of cultural memory in Azerbaijan but lost political agency. Valiyev (2005) observes that post-Soviet Azerbaijan revived Islam primarily as a national-cultural symbol; the state used it for legitimacy but did not elevate it to the level of a political actor (pp. 5-6).

The intersection of postcolonial and post-socialist perspectives becomes clear in Chari and Verdery’s (2009) analysis. Both colonial and socialist regimes used bio-political mechanisms targeting differences to govern populations. The distinction lies in exclusion criteria: colonial systems emphasized race and culture, while socialist systems focused on class and political loyalty (Chari & Verdery, 2009, p. 26). These mechanisms shaped national identity as both integrative and exclusionary.

Isaacs and Polese’s (2015) argument can be clarified by unpacking how post-Soviet legacies shape the gap between official nationhood and everyday identity, and how this gap manifests particularly sharply in Azerbaijan. In the post-Soviet space, national identity was not rebuilt from a social vacuum after 1991. Instead, newly independent states inherited Soviet-era institutional frameworks, ethnic classifications, and modes of governance. The Soviet system formally promoted “nationality” as an ethnic category while simultaneously discouraging genuine civic participation and autonomous political identity. As a result, post-Soviet elites often constructed top-down national narratives in state sovereignty, historical continuity, and symbolic nationhood, without strong societal mechanisms for civic engagement or democratic negotiation. This creates a structural tension between the “imagined” nation articulated by political elites and the lived realities of citizens, whose identities remain shaped by local, ethnic, regional, and pragmatic concerns rather than abstract civic ideals (Isaacs & Polese, 2015, pp. 375-376).

In Azerbaijan, this tension is particularly pronounced due to the persistence of Soviet ethnic categorization and the relative weakness of civic national consciousness. Soviet policies framed Azerbaijani identity primarily in ethno-cultural terms while subordinating civic identity to loyalty toward the central state. After independence, Azerbaijani elites sought to reassert national identity through historical symbolism, language, and territorial narratives, especially in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, these narratives often remained elite-driven and instrumental, rather than socially negotiated.

Within this context, Ergun (2022) analyzes the discourses of Azerbaijanism and Turkism. Azerbaijanism represents a modernist post-socialist response, emphasizing citizenship, inclusivity, and political loyalty (pp. 815-818). Turkism draws on postcolonial and ethno-symbolic resources to generate historical continuity and cultural resonance (Ismayilov, 2022, pp. 814-815). Their coexistence is not coincidental: one fills gaps left by Soviet modernity, while the other compensates for the moral and cultural disruptions of imperial legacies.

In post-Soviet Azerbaijan, national identity formation occurs under the hybrid influence of both post-Soviet and postcolonial legacies. While this hybridity facilitates national integration, it also introduces risks and challenges. Ethno-symbolic elements may be instrumentalized to serve the interests of dominant discourse, while minorities and subaltern groups risk marginalization. The tension between modern and ethno-symbolic components in hybrid identities may generate social and political integration difficulties.

### **3. National Identity in Turkiye: Modernist State Nationalism and Ethno-Cultural Transformations.**

Turkiye's nation-building process is considered one of the most instructive cases in studies of nationalism. This is primarily because the process developed outside the classical anti-colonial trajectory, was based on a state-centered model of modernization, and is characterized by a continuous negotiation between civic-state structures and ethno-cultural identity. Although the Republic of Turkiye emerged from the collapse of a multiethnic empire, its modernization and Westernization project was carried out not through foreign colonial intervention but as an internally directed process led by political elites. This unique trajectory complicates traditional categories of nationalism, highlighting the dialectical interplay between state-centered modernism, symbolic-cultural resources, and inclusivity-exclusivity (Özkirimli, 2003; Canefe, 2002).

Unlike many nation-states formed through decolonization, Turkiye's nation-building trajectory developed in a non-colonial yet post-imperial environment. Akman (2004) characterizes this as a "modernist nationalism" model, noting that the Kemalist elites understood nationalism more as an instrument of civilizational and cultural transformation than merely an expression of ethnic belonging (p. 385). In this approach, the nation was constructed less as historical continuity and more as a means of applying a Western-oriented modern lifestyle to society. The adoption of the Latin alphabet, secular dress codes, and state control over religious institutions were presented as core indicators of national identity (Akman, 2004, pp. 397-399).

Although this non-colonial modernization was voluntary in principle, its implementation was coercive. Western models were not rejected as imperial impositions; rather, they were deemed necessary for state survival and international legitimacy. Akman (2004) compares this model with Soviet and Chinese modernization, emphasizing that cultural transformation was "engineered" by the state before democratic participation (pp. 393-394). Within this context, legal rights and freedoms were deferred "until society was ready for modernization," prioritizing state continuity over participatory politics (Akman, 2004, p. 403).

State-centered modernism was also functional in managing the multiethnic legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Canefe (2002) notes that the early Republic faced the challenge of unifying Anatolian Muslims, Balkan refugees, and various ethnic groups under a single national identity (pp. 138-140). The state attempted to address this through shared historical narratives, selective Islamic motifs, and cultural homogenization

strategies. As a result, “Turkishness” was inclusive of diverse Muslim populations while simultaneously creating an exclusive framework that marginalized non-Muslims and alternative identities (Canefe, 2002, pp. 138-140).

While the state-centered modernist model established the institutional foundations of national identity, it was eventually complemented by ethno-symbolic and cultural resources. Özdoğan (2010) observes that national identity was reinforced not only through legal and institutional mechanisms but also through official historiography, educational programs, and the cultivation of collective memory (pp. 85-88). In this process, loyalty to the nation was equated with loyalty to the state, while alternative forms of identification were excluded from the normative framework.

Canefe (2002) links the ethno-cultural transformation in Turkish nationalism to the selective reinterpretation of the Ottoman past. While the Republic rejected certain aspects of the imperial legacy, it simultaneously employed ancestral myths, collective memory, and cultural symbols to create an illusion of national continuity. Özkirimli (2003) critiques this ethno-symbolic approach, emphasizing that such romanticization obscures the socially constructed nature of collective memory and its instrumentalization for political purposes. This, in turn, may legitimize exclusive forms of nationalism.

Religion also plays an ambivalent role in this context. Despite the secular modernization ideology, Islam was selectively mobilized as a cultural resource to facilitate national integration. It functioned inclusively to unite the Muslim population, yet simultaneously generated tensions with secular state principles (Canefe, 2002, pp. 150-151).

Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Gençkal Eroler (2023) add a spatial dimension to ethno-symbolic nationalism, showing that Turkish national identity is formed through the combined discursive structuring of history, culture, and geography. Drawing on Lefebvre’s theory of space, the authors emphasize that geography was not merely physical but also used as a political and symbolic resource. Shifts from Europe-oriented modernist discourses to Pan-Islamist and Neo-Ottoman visions demonstrate the changing and contested character of national identity (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm & Gençkal Eroler, 2023, pp. 23-30).

The Turkish case demonstrates that nation-building is neither static nor uniform. The ongoing dialectical interaction between state-centered modernism, ethno-symbolic resources, and religious-cultural elements has ensured national integration while simultaneously generating significant tensions regarding democratic participation, pluralism, and minority recognition. Thus, Türkiye serves as a rich empirical case for both analytical and critical studies of nationalism.

#### **4. Comparative Analysis of National Identity Formation in Türkiye and Azerbaijan**

The formation of national identity in Türkiye and Azerbaijan is characterized by both a shared ethno-cultural base and the influence of distinct historical and political contexts. In both societies, this base has been mobilized differently through modernist, ethno-symbolic, and postcolonial mechanisms. In Azerbaijan, Soviet colonial traditions shaped national identity for decades, instrumentalizing ethnic and cultural identity as tools of political and social control while restricting religious and ethno-cultural resources (Khalid, 2007, pp. 466–470). Ethno-cultural identity was “forgotten” or symbolically depoliticized. In the post-Soviet period, these identities resurfaced, yet remnants of colonial power discourse persist. The state and elites have used ethno-cultural elements as instruments of political and strategic interests, generating tensions between inclusive modernist projects and exclusive ethno-symbolic approaches (Ergun, 2022; Valiyev, 2005).

This produces a hybrid model of postcolonial nationalism in Azerbaijan: modernist elements emphasize citizenship, legal equality, and state loyalty, whereas ethno-symbolic elements create national continuity, historical memory, and collective resonance. However, the colonial administrative legacy continues to affect normative tensions, social integration, and ethnic inclusivity—one of the inherent risks of national identity formation.

In Türkiye, the modernist foundations of national identity were established through Atatürk's nationalism. This model is built on state-centered modernization, secular legal equality, and a homogenized national identity (Akman, 2004, pp. 385–408). Ethno-symbolic elements were used to sustain national continuity through the selective reinterpretation of Ottoman heritage (Canefe, 2002, pp. 138–150). Contradictions emerge, however: while the modernist project is centralized and rationalist, ethno-symbolic elements require collective memory and cultural resonance. Consequently, national identity is shaped simultaneously by formal institutional structures and symbolic-emotional foundations.

In contemporary Türkiye, efforts to revive Ottoman traditions, use religion as a form of identity, and emphasize cultural heritage create tensions with the secular and homogenizing principles of modernist nationalism (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm & Gençkal Eroler, 2023, pp. 23-30). This illustrates the dynamic nature of nationalism: the state seeks modernist legitimacy and institutional stability, while society strives to sustain and develop identity rooted in ethno-symbolic and religious heritage.

Türkiye's selective post-colonialism reflects its non-colonial history and its instrumental engagement with postcolonial discourses. On one hand, Turkish nationalism accepted Western modernity as a normative model for state survival and development; on the other, it developed narratives criticizing the West as a political and cultural hegemon (Akman, 2004, pp. 390-394). This dual stance recalls the "imitation and resistance" paradox often observed in postcolonial societies.

Selective post-colonialism is particularly evident in discourses of cultural sovereignty. Ottoman heritage, Islam, and "local-national" values were reinterpreted as alternatives to Western-centered modernity, yet these elements were chosen not to support pluralistic equality but to reinforce state legitimacy (Canefe, 2002, pp. 150-151). Postcolonial critique, therefore, was mobilized normatively within a state-centered framework rather than emancipatorily.

Consequently, Türkiye's post-coloniality emerges not from anti-colonial resistance but from a post-imperial sense of asymmetry and the need to position itself vis-à-vis the West. This characterizes Turkish nationalism as a hybrid construct that is neither fully postcolonial nor purely modernist.

Comparative analysis indicates that in both societies, national identity is shaped under the hybrid influence of modernist and ethno-symbolic elements, but the mechanisms differ:

In Azerbaijan, postcolonial and post-Soviet legacies allow both modernist and ethno-symbolic elements to be distorted or instrumentalized, with colonial discourse remnants potentially undermining inclusivity and legitimacy.

In Türkiye, Atatürk's nationalism dominates as a modernist state project, but the selective use of ethno-symbolic and religious elements creates a contradictory and dialectical system, with Ottoman heritage and religion adding cultural resonance to modernist nationalism.

In conclusion, the cases of Türkiye and Azerbaijan demonstrate that national identity cannot be explained solely through institutional or ethno-cultural factors. In both countries, it has developed as a hybrid and dynamic phenomenon shaped by historical context, state strategies, and post-imperial or colonial legacies. Comparative analysis highlights how a shared ethno-cultural base can lead to divergent solutions in different historical-political contexts, emphasizing the processual, inclusive–exclusive, and instrumental nature of national identity.

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed the formation of national identity in Türkiye and Azerbaijan through a comparative framework that integrates modernist, ethno-symbolic, and postcolonial/post-socialist paradigms. The analysis demonstrates that national identity in both cases is neither a purely institutional construct nor a direct continuation of ethno-cultural heritage, but a historically contingent and politically mediated process shaped by state strategies, cultural resources, and imperial legacies.

The findings indicate that modernist nation-building played a central role in both countries, though under markedly different historical conditions. In Türkiye, national identity emerged through an elite-driven, state-centered modernization project rooted in Kemalist nationalism, emphasizing secularism, legal equality, and cultural homogenization. In Azerbaijan, modernist elements of national identity developed within the framework of Soviet colonial governance and post-socialist transformation, where citizenship and ethnic identity were institutionalized through hierarchical and disciplinary mechanisms. These distinct trajectories reveal how similar modernist logics generate divergent outcomes depending on political context and historical experience.

Ethno-symbolic resources have been crucial in sustaining national cohesion in both societies. In Azerbaijan, ethno-cultural identity re-emerged after independence as a response to the symbolic void left by Soviet modernity, while in Türkiye such resources were selectively mobilized through reinterpretations of Ottoman heritage and Islamic cultural references. However, in both cases, the instrumentalization of ethno-symbolic narratives has produced tensions between inclusivity and exclusion, particularly regarding minority recognition and social pluralism.

Finally, the postcolonial and post-imperial perspectives employed here highlight the persistence of power asymmetries and epistemic legacies beyond formal empire. Azerbaijan reflects enduring colonial and post-socialist governance practices, whereas Türkiye exhibits a form of selective postcoloniality shaped by its ambivalent positioning toward Western modernity. Overall, the study concludes that national identity in both countries is a hybrid and dynamic construct whose long-term legitimacy depends on balancing state-led modernization, cultural diversity, and liberal-democratic principles.

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