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Contemporary Principles of Political Representation of Ethnic Groups

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Abstract

Contemporary principles of political representation of ethnic groups The article investigates some methods of political representation of ethnic groups, applied in different countries. The topicality of the research article is determined by 1) the growing influence of ethnicity and ethnic identity that differentiate people all over the world; 2) high potential for ethnic conflict in any heterogeneous society; 3) nationalization of many post-Soviet states and the exclusion of non-titular ethnic groups from the political life of these countries. The article aims to investigate basic principle, upon which more effective political representation of various ethnic groups is based. Among these principles factors are types of an electoral system, methods of positive discrimination and special ethnic institutions. The article states that principles appropriate for one country are improper for another, which is why in each case a specificity of the state, mentality of its people, history, and other factors must be taken into account. Nevertheless, the study of experience and mechanisms of representation in various countries is necessary for the assessment of the national policy of any state, where Kazakhstan is not an exception. 2015 is proclaimed as the year of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, which lead to the analysis of its results for a time of two decades in interethnic sphere including its constitutional right for political representation of ethnic groups.

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1. Introduction

The world in the 21st century has undergone significant changes. Countries all over the world proclaimed their commitment to democratic principles, among which are inalienable human rights, political and legal equality of all

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citizens, the rule of law, etc. Important role in the construction of democracy belongs to political representation, as to a method of forming of public authorities. Citizens delegate their rights and authority to representatives, which in turn exercise powers on their behalf. By virtue of political representation different groups can participate in the political life of the country, including various ethnic groups. The representation of the latter is of big importance, as most of modern democracies are ethnically heterogeneous. Even if the country is perceived as monoethnic, there are other ethnic groups living there, which, in turn, raise the question of their social, cultural and political rights. Thus, for instance, though more than 90% of the population of Poland is of Polish nationality, political representation of the rest ethnic groups is of big importance there either.

As Lord Acton once noticed “the most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities” (Acton, 2007, p.4). Political representation of women in government has been widely discussed by many authors, while the situation with ethnic representation needs further investigation. In most cases, cultural and social rights of ethnic groups are well protected, while their participation in political life of a country is not sufficient, as a result some ethnic groups are overrepresented in the power while others are underrepresented.

In view of the above, an analysis of the contemporary principles of political representation of ethnic groups is very relevant and deserves close study.

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of “representation” is quite broad and is used in many areas of public life. One of the most often cited definition of “representation” belongs to Ankersmit, according to whom “representation is a making present (again) of what is absent. Or, more formally, *A* is a representation of *B* when it can take *B*’s place; hence, when it can as *B*’s substitute or as *B*’s replacement in its absence” (Ankersmit, 2002, p.109). In general, representation should be understood as actions of a representative in the name and on behalf of those whom he (she) represents, while political representation refers here to the representation in legislatures.

There are different types of representation, thoroughly discussed in Pitkin’s book *The Concept of Representation* (1972). For describing rights of ethnic groups for representation, many authors use descriptive and substantive types (Bird, 2003; Floor Eelbode, 2010).

Descriptive representation means that parliament of a given country mirrors demographic structure of a state. In other words, political representation of ethnic groups in legislatures should be in direct proportion to the percentage of these groups in the overall composition of the country. On the one hand, descriptive representation has advantages for ethnic groups, as they may experience greater confidence in delegates who resemble them in different issues (E.g., ethnicity or gender); representatives of ethnic groups can serve as a model of their rights’ protection for other ethnic minorities; and it leads to more justice and legitimacy of the political system.

On the other hand, the question of whether the Parliament should exactly mirror the society remains controversial, being opposed by some authors (Melissa Williams, Iris Young, Jane Mansbridge, Will Kymlicka), as “this would lead to an unworkable proliferation of group representation and undermine the process of representative government” (Bird, 2003, p.65).

Substantive representation means that representative acts on the behalf of and in the interest of the represented. Substantive representation is obtained if the interests and needs that representatives fulfill reflect those that exist in a society. However, minorities can be underrepresented at the substantive level, if the dominant political culture interferes with the access of their interests and demands to the political agenda.

In general, there are both positive and negative aspects of these types of representation and highlight the best type, appropriate for each state is nearly impossible. As it was already noted every case has its own peculiarities that need to be taken into consideration. However, basic principles of political representation of ethnic groups serve as a base from which we can make a start.

It should be noted from the beginning, what we mean by ethnic group. First of all, opposed to Kymlicka, the article does not distinguish national minorities from ethnic groups or immigrants (Kymlicka, 1995), considering their right for political representation as equal. Secondly, ethnic groups are not differentiated by national, regional or global context (Gracia, 2005, p.62). In particular, for instance, recognizing that Russians in Russia are in some ways different from Russians in Kazakhstan, they are both understood as members of one ethnic group.

Finally, ethnic group is understood here as a group sharing common culture, national origin, language, identity and consciousness, and which is “socially distinguished, by others or by itself” (Yang, 2000, p.11).

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