Two closely related but essentially divergent political projects coexist on the post-Soviet states current political agenda: the formation of a modern civic nation and the consolidation of state institutions and national (nation-state) identity. The search for effective instruments to bridge the deep social and ethno-cultural cleavages their societies confront while promoting these projects brings identity issues to the forefront of political discourse. The article presents the results of a comparative analysis of identity politics strategies and practices pursued by political elites in three post-Soviet republics – Kazakhstan, Armenia and Belarus – cases that demonstrate a diversity of ethnic and cultural composition and of social and economic development resources. The research is based on in-depth interviews taken in research and expert institutions in these countries and is preceded by a critical overview of the concepts of the nation and nation-building in the post-Soviet context. The authors argue that there is a consistent divergence in the trajectories of the state and nation-building projects, and demonstrate that the potential of civic identity is often used to different ends in political and intellectual discourses. The political elites give a clear priority to the state-building agenda, while identity politics promoted by the state focus on the legitimization of the existing political regimes. An assessment of the prospects in post-Soviet societies for nation-building questions the universal appraisal of the “nation state” project in a transforming world order.
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