Șener Aktürk’s book aims to explain the reasons and processes underlying the “dynamics of persistence and change in state policies toward ethnicity” (p. 3). Looking at three case studies, Germany, Russia (as inheritor state of the former Soviet Union) and Turkey, Aktürk proposes a new tripartite typology of what he calls “regimes of ethnicity”, according to which states can be categorized as “monoethnic”, “multiethnic”, and “antiethnic”. Identifying to which category states belong requires looking at “the axis of membership and expression”, whose elements are: “ethnic priority in citizenship”, “ethnic priority in immigration”, “ethnic minority status”, “recognition of multiple ethnicities in the constitution”, “ethnic territorial autonomy”, “multiple official languages”, and “ethnic affirmative action” (pp. 10–11). Moreover, Aktürk aims to show that relevant changes in regimes of ethnicity can take place only if three conditions are met concurrently – namely, that counterelites armed with a new discourse on ethnicity and nationality garner a hegemonic majority at the political level.

During the Cold War and in the early 1990s, it was easier for an ethnic German from Central and Eastern Europe or from the Soviet Union to acquire (West) German citizenship than it was for the millions of (mainly Turkish) guest-workers who arrived to the Federal Republic in the 1960s and 1970s and for their families. Germany was thus to a large extent the paradigmatic case of a monoethnic regime. Aktürk’s analysis shows how the contestation of Germany’s ethnic regime eventually coalesced around the issue of citizenship. He unravels the slow development of a new discourse on the topic, capable of undermining deeply entrenched truisms about Germany not being an immigration country. Despite the existence of other periods in which a change in the conservative ethnicity regime could have been seen as possible, the revamping took place only when the political hegemony sustaining the monoethnic
regime was overturned by the victory of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens at the 1998 elections. The new majority was able to push for the drafting of a new citizenship law, making it easier for foreigners in Germany to acquire the German citizenship. According to Aktürk’s analysis, the reform was done in the name of assimilation, rather than in the name of multiculturalism: pursuant to Aktürk’s proposed typology, it suggests the move from a monoethnic regime towards an antiethnic one.

In contrast, in Turkey, the paradigmatically antiethnic regime, Aktürk identifies a turn towards a multiethnic one. He presents the challenges to the antiethnic regime imposed with the founding of the Republic in 1923, coming from Kurds and Alevis, supported at times by different other political forces. The author also emphasizes the rather unknown fact that “the 1960s was a period when Kurds’ economic, social and cultural integration [...] proceeded with relatively little conflict, let alone military conflict” (pp. 148–149). Yet no fundamental reform occurred then, “due to the lack of a new discourse on ethnicity and nationality [...], as well as a conspicuous lack of a politically hegemonic party or group of parties that would support such radically reformist proposals” (p. 150). Such a reform would take place only four decades and a military coup (1980) later: in 2004, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) “initiated broadcasting in Kurdish and four other minority languages (Arabic, Bosnian, Circassian, and Zaza)” (p. 163). Interestingly, this reform took place under the aegis of an Islamic multicultural vision, capable of both challenging the Kemalist antiethnic understanding of Turkish nationhood and integrating Kurds (and Alevis). Nevertheless, in my view, the recent rekindling of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s apparent turn towards authoritarianism suggest that going back towards an antiethnic regime or even moving towards a monoethnic one are also very much imaginable.

The third and last case Aktürk analyzes is the Russian case. He suggests that Russia moved from a multiethnic regime (to a large extent inherited from its predecessor, the Soviet Union) to an antiethnic one. The move is symbolized by the decision to remove the so-called “passport ethnicity” (the inscription of ethnicity in Russian passports), a “microfoundation of institutionalized multiethnicity in the Soviet Union” (p. 198) and subsequently in the Russian Federation. Aktürk shows that there were various other attempts to reform the multiethnic regime of the Soviet Union, including an until now rather unknown endeavor under Yuri Andropov. Nonetheless, only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Boris Yeltsin’s success in the 1996 elections was it possible to undertake a change and remove the inscription of ethnicity in Russian passports. This happened against the background of the stabilization of a new discourse on ethnicity mainly steered by ethnologist and politician Valery Tishkov.