2. Ethnic Separatism

Emil A. Payin*

Background

Although the Constitution of the Russian Federation does not mention special ethnic-territorial entities, such entities do exist.1 Autonomous republics, okrugs, and oblasts were formed and developed as expressions of political self-determination and ethnic self-defense by so-called “titular” nationalities (representatives of ethnic communities lending their names to the appropriate administrative units). Beginning in the late 1980s, titular nationalities became more concentrated in their respective “autonomies” as their share of the total population increased (exceptions are the Khakas, Mariyts, and Mordovian groups in the corresponding republics of Khakasia, Mari El, and Mordovia, and also some smaller indigenous ethnic groups in the autonomous okrugs of Siberia and the Far East).2 Parallel to this, the share of the “non-titular” population groups decreases, as does their number, while their migration from many republics increases. For the period between 1989-1994, the number of Russians decreased in such republics as Kalmykia, Adygeya, Karachaevo-Cherkessia (within 1 percent), Dagestan (3.5 percent), Buryatia (3 percent), Yakutia (more than 11 percent). Needless to say, the most significant reduction in the Russian population (by more than two-thirds) has taken place in the Chechen Republic.3

* The author is Advisor to the President of the Russian Federation on Nationality Problems, and Director of the Center for Ethnopolitical and Regional Research.

1 In Russia, 89 regions count as subjects of the federation. Each of these falls into one of two basic categories: 1) ethnic-territorial entities, 32 in total (21 republics, 10 autonomous okrugs, and 1 autonomous oblast); 2) administrative-territorial entities, 57 in total (these are the krais and oblasts, populated mostly by ethnic Russians, and the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg). The term “subject of the federation” was first used following the signing by the representatives of the majority of these entities of the agreement separating regional and federal authority (the so-called Federal Agreement). Two republics, Tatarstan and Chechnya, refused to sign the Federal Agreement.

2 These conclusions are made on the basis of comparative analysis of the data obtained as a result of the All-Union Population Census of 1989 and the Microcensus of the Population of Russia of 1994, kindly provided to the author by the Statistical Committee of the Russian Federation. So far, there is no data on the population more recent than that provided by the Microcensus of 1994.

3 Since the microcensus in the Chechen Republic was not conducted in 1994, all conclusions regarding the changes in the population are made on the basis of expert estimates.
Ethnic Russian emigrants from the newly independent states and the “autonomies” of Russia have relocated largely to the predominantly Russian krais and oblasts of the Federation. Thus, the territorial delineation of the basic ethnic communities of the country has become all the more noticeable. This, in turn has further accentuated the contradictions between the two types of territorial units in the Russian Federation.

The Evolution of Separatism

“The Parade of the Sovereignties”

From 1990–92, the autonomous republics in the Russian Federation followed in the footsteps of republics of the Soviet Union and declared sovereignty. The leaders in this so-called “parade of sovereignties” were Tatarstan, Yakutia, and Checheno-Ingushetia. That “sovereignty” was precisely what was intended is indicated by the new constitution and initial legislation adopted in Tatarstan. In the constitution, the republic was defined as “a sovereign state, subject to international rights” and associated with Russia through a “constitutional agreement” that allowed for unilateral disassociation. In the republic’s “Law on Natural Resources,” all state property and natural resources located in Tatarstan were claimed as the exclusive property of the republic. The republic’s law, “Conscription and Military Service of the Republic of Tatarstan’s Citizens,” required the citizens of the republic to perform military service only within Tatarstan’s borders. Almost identical examples could be cited for the other “autonomous” republics.

The Russian authorities, frightened by the outbreak of armed ethnic conflicts in other former Soviet republics and remembering the failures of Gorbachev’s ethno-political policies, were initially very accepting of the declarations of sovereignty by the “autonomies.” In fact, the latter’s real political weight was increased by the establishment, under Yeltsin’s chairmanship, of a council of republican leaders which was supposed to resolve major issues of national policy. This accommodating approach initially had positive results and prevented ethnic bloodshed on Russian territory. By 1993, however, the concessions made by Yeltsin’s administration to the “autonomies” became a subject of increasing criticism.

The escalating struggle for power in Moscow frequently failed to take into the account the consequences to state politics, and speculations on the problems of federalism and separatism for inter-political purposes made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for Russia to conduct a coherent ethno-federal policy.
By the spring of 1993, the confrontation between the parliament (the Congress of National Deputies and Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation) and the government (the President and Council of Ministers of Russia) had led to something approaching complete political paralysis. In the course of their struggle, moreover, a tug-of-war began between the parties for the purpose of attracting regional authorities into their respective camps. Understanding the importance of their support, the leaders of the “autonomies” began to ask a higher price for it. Thus, the regional leaders became a “third force” with a stake in the struggle between the two branches of federal authority and an interest in prolonging it.

Taking advantage of the weakness of federal authority, Chechnya, Tatarstan, Bashkiria, and Yakutia stopped all payment of federal taxes, placing the full federal tax burden on the shoulders of the predominantly Russian regions. Similarly, Yakutia demanded and obtained permission to retain 25 percent of the diamonds extracted there, as well as a substantially greater share of profits from the sale of “its” gold. In the political realm, things went so far that the Kremlin almost agreed to incorporate a provision allocating the “autonomies” as many seats in the upper chamber of the Russian parliament as the much larger and more populous Russian krais and oblasts in the new constitution it was drafting.4

Furthermore, President Yeltsin agreed that relations between all of the “autonomies” and the federal authorities could be regulated by bilateral agreements of the sort that had been concluded with Tatarstan and Chechnya after the latter refused to sign the Federation Agreement.

Despite these concessions, radical movements in a number of republics in Northern Caucasus, Volga region, and Siberia continued to demand either outright secession or further concessions that directly threatened the integrity of the Russian state. This tendency was most pronounced in the Chechen Republic, where Dudaev’s extremist nationalist group seized power and announced the republic’s secession from Russia. However, it was also very strong in Kabardino-Balkaria and elsewhere. In fact, in 1992–1993, Russia faced a real threat of a number of republics seceding, which would inevitably have given rise to bloody conflicts. Yeltsin’s forcible dissolution of parliament in October 1993 deserves credit for averting this outcome and preventing Russia’s possible complete disintegration, whatever its demerits in other respects.

4 The provision was in fact incorporated in a very early draft of the presidential version of the new constitution.
The Search for Consent

The restoration of meaningful central power as a result of the “October events” was undoubtedly an important factor in convincing the majority of regional councils to rescind their decisions to disregard presidential decrees. The firmness displayed by federal authorities in halting extremist actions (for example, in not allowing the capture of government buildings in Kabardino-Balkaria’s capital) also drastically reduced ethnic tensions and helped stabilize the political situation. Nevertheless, the main result of the “October events” and the subsequent elections to the Federal Assembly was a decision by both federal and regional authorities to change political tactics and seek compromise.

The 1994 Agreement on Public Accord, and the 1994-95 agreements on the differentiation of jurisdiction and authority between the federal center and a number of republics were milestones in this regard. The agreements with the republics in many cases became the instrument for bringing local laws into conformity with the Federal Constitution. Similarly, it became much harder for republic leaders to pander to secessionist sentiment once they had signed (as all except Dudayev did) the Agreement On Public Accord with its affirmation that “... the rights of the Federation’s subjects can be realized only if the state integrity of Russia and its political, economic and legal unity is maintained.”

One of the first practical expressions of the new concept of “consent” was the agreement “On the Differentiation of Authority Between Various State Agencies of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tatarstan.” The agreement severely weakened the positions of radical nationalist forces in the republic, whose influence was based almost entirely on fear of an “imperial enemy.” The agreement between Moscow and Kazan dissipated this fear in Tatarstan, and the radical nationalist movement, which up to that point had been fairly strong, literally fell apart. By late 1993 to early 1994, a similar, though less complete, weakening of separatist tendencies began in the majority of the “autonomies.”

The continuation and acceleration of this process culminated in the 1995–96 defeat of the separatist forces in local elections in the overwhelming majority of the republics, as well as in the elections to the State Duma and the presidential elections. Certainly, it would be incorrect to speak of the elimination of all disagreements between the federal authority and the ethnic republics, because all of the latter still have laws on their books that contradict the Constitution of Russia; and because, in the territory of the Chechen Republic, Russian laws are completely inoperative. However, the threat of Russia’s disintegration has undoubtedly decreased for the present, and Chechnya is now alone in claiming independence from Russia.
Future Scenarios

Looking ahead, one can envision a number of mid- to long-term scenarios of ethno-political development.

Scenario 1: Continued Stability

A number of features of political development in Russia distinguish it from the USSR (as well as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia), and suggest that it will probably preserve its territorial integrity. Whereas the ruling elites of all of the constituent republics of the USSR sought to free themselves from Moscow’s overbearing domination, the leaders of Russia’s krai and oblasts are increasingly resentful of the political privileges of the ethnic “autonomies.” Among other things, they remember all too well the enormous difficulties that arose after the breakup of the USSR—the disruption of traditional economic relations, the establishment of customs and political barriers to trade, etc. The regions have also felt the negative consequences of separatism in the Russian Federation itself, where Kalmykia, Dagestan, the Chechen Republic, and some other “autonomies” have made territorial claims to the neighboring Russian oblasts. Hence, they strongly favor equality for all subjects of the federation and are determined to preserve the country’s territorial integrity.

Leaders apart, the population of the Russian Federation is far more ethnically homogeneous than was the population of the USSR. Russians make up 83 percent of the total population, and between 85–98 percent of the population of over half (49) of the country’s regions. Furthermore, the non-Russian population of the Federation is rather non-homogeneous. The majority of it (approximately two-thirds) is comprised of so-called “diaspora” communities (Ukrainians, White Russians, Poles, etc.) that aspire to nothing more than cultural autonomy. Titular nations, residing within the borders of their ethnic territories, make up less than 5 percent of the population of the Federation, and they are the only ones capable of seeking independence from Russia. However, only those titular peoples who make up a majority of the population in the territory of their republics are at all likely to claim independence with any seriousness, and such majorities constitute less than 3 percent of the country’s total population and can be found only in the Northern Caucasus (with the exception of Adygeya), Kalmykia, Chuvashia, and Tuva.

Looking at these six cases, Northern Ossetia can be excluded at once because, as the only Christian “autonomy” in the Muslim North Caucasus, it will not want to leave Russia under any readily conceivable circumstances. Secession from the
Federation is also unlikely in the North Caucasus republics that have two or more titular nationalities—Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia—since the majority of the population realizes that even the suggestion of secession from Russia would invite an explosion of demands for internal secession and of internal conflicts. Finally, Chuvashia is also an improbable candidate since it has no borders with other states and, hence, could be completely blockaded by Russia.

**Scenario Number 2: Contagion from Chechnya**

Today’s Chechnya is, *de facto*, independent of Russia, as neither the Constitution nor the laws of the Russian Federation are enforced on its territory. Federal authorities do not control Chechnya and have practically no influence on its politics. Just the opposite is true: with the opening of the Chechen link in the pipeline that transports Caspian oil from Azerbaijan to the West, it is Grozny that will acquire a dangerous weapon for blackmail and pressure against Moscow. Hence, there is little probability that Chechnya will ever return to the Russian Federation. The question is rather: will an “independent Chechnya” inspire other republics to emulate it?

This might not be a farfetched idea if one could imagine a prosperous, independent Chechnya. In fact, however, the prospects for simply restoring Chechnya’s economy in the near future are highly problematic, as are the prospects for political stability. The very conditions that helped the Chechen forces supporting Djokhar Dudaev and his close colleagues achieve military success will interfere with any attempt to establish domestic peace; namely, the existence of military settlements and an armed population. Given the current state of destruction, these particular conditions will lead to increasing criminal activity, both inside and outside the Chechen Republic. Even now, in fact, the level of incursions on neighboring territories is increasing. Although the republic’s leaders are trying to stabilize the situation, they cannot sanction those who only yesterday comprised the elite and the nucleus of their own armed forces. Dudaev could not do it, and there is no compelling reason to believe that his successors will be more successful.

The presence of strongly armed and increasingly criminalized armed bands creates insurmountable obstacles to any reorganization plans if the Chechen government poses a serious threat to Chechnya’s immediate neighbors, especially the peoples of Dagestan. Under these conditions, anti-Chechen sentiments are growing in the neighboring republics, and the probability that Dagestan or any other republic of the Northern Caucasus will voluntary join
Chechnya or follow in its footsteps is very low. Nor is the Chechen leadership likely to sponsor an invasion of Dagestan in the hope that their forces would be supported by a “fifth column” of similar communities and that Russia would be unable to react effectively. While this eventuality cannot be entirely ruled out, for the foreseeable future the Chechen leadership is likely to be much too preoccupied with domestic issues to think about foreign or irredentist adventures.

Scenario Number 3: Growing Great Russian Chauvinism

In theory, it is possible to imagine political developments that would bring radical nationalists to power in Russia and to the formation of a government that would repudiate federalism and try to abolish all attributes of statehood in the “autonomies.” In response to this, strong separatist movements of the non-Russian peoples would reemerge.

The detonator of the outbreak of Russian nationalism could be the discontent of marginal groups among the Russian population, above all in the “near abroad,” where the anger engendered by real and imaginary ethnic discrimination against Russians is much higher than it is in the “autonomies” of Russia proper and where a virulent species of Russian nationalist irredentism has already appeared in the Crimea, in Northern Kazakhstan, and in Transdniestra. This irredentist nationalism is being actively cultivated by Great Russian chauvinists within Russia and, in connection with the outbreak of ethnic violence in the “near abroad,” could help the latter create a powerful mass movement for the “reunification” of all “Russian” lands.

In addition to members of the “Russian diaspora,” Russian refugees from zones of conflict (about 1.5 million people, concentrated largely in the conflict-prone area of North Caucasus) could be the source of growing Russian nationalism. Indeed, many refugees already have a radical nationalist orientation. Furthermore, and perhaps even more disturbingly, radical nationalism is also on the rise among the Cossacks, especially among the militarized Cossack formations in the North Caucasus, where they come into direct contact with other armed groups, particularly the Chechens. Thus, in the case of sharp deterioration of ethno-political relations in Russia’s neighboring states, or of an increase in the already large refugee flow from conflict-prone Russian “autonomies,” one could expect a growth of radical nationalism among both the Russian and non-Russian populations.

It is also impossible to exclude a resurgence of “nomenclature nationalism” under the aegis of members of the former political elite (as a rule, of its second
and third echelon) who today are returning to influential posts in the governing bodies in Moscow, and of regional political leaders who have begun to openly express the nationalistic views they concealed when they first came to power in the aftermath of the breakup of the USSR. Both these groups not only share typical Soviet prejudices (against the West, against Jews, Muslims, etc.) but are also pragmatically interested in fanning mass nationalism. Doing so allows them:

• to shift the blame for their own mistakes in governance to their “Gaidarist” predecessors, whom they accuse of having betrayed Russia’s national interests for the benefit of the West;
• to lobby on behalf of those businessmen who want state protection from foreign competitors; and
• to defend themselves from criticism on the ground that they are being criticized for being “true to the national idea.”

The success of their efforts can be seen in recent surveys which show a significant increase in xenophobia among the supporters of even those political parties and movements which eschew ethnocentrism in their platforms and programs.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis shows that the severity of ethno-political problems in Russia has not really lessened, but that their intensity has varied over time. If the danger of the disintegration of Russia under pressure from the separatist-oriented nationalist movements was quite real between 1991 and 1993, then today the greatest danger is the growth of mass xenophobia as a prelude to the introduction of radical nationalist policies.