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Turmoil in Russia's Mini-Empire

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A year ago, when Yel'tsin-leaning intellectuals criticized Gorbachev's nationalities policies by saying "if he keeps this up he'll have nothing left but Moscow," they were only half-joking. Their flippancy also revealed an underlying savvy: various national bids for sovereignty have been intertwined in the center-periphery dynamic. Given such complex interactions, each case must be examined in historical context. Even for Russia's "autonomous republics," specific legacies must be reviewed, indigenous leaders heard, and inter-republic relations assessed before generalizations can be made about whether a republic is likely to become a successful "nationalist" domino. The five mini-empire cases outlined here are in decreasing order of current secession-mindedness and turmoil.

Chechen-Ingushetia, in the incendiary North Caucasus tier, has a sad legacy as home to two of Stalin's "punished peoples," who were accused *en masse* of Nazism during World War II, deported to Central Asia, and then returned to a cropped territory corresponding neither to their self-defined homelands nor to the territory they had before the war. By 1989, the Chechen numbered 956,879, and the Ingush 237,438, respectively 58 percent and 13 percent of their republic's population.(1) By 1991, they were ready for divorce from each other, and the Chechen leader General Dudaev campaigned for separation from Russia. He employed the rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalism yet also advocated state secularism. Some of his "Islamic Path" followers had volunteered to fight in the 1991 Gulf War, for Iraq. Dudaev, perhaps symbolizing Russians' worst nightmares, was furthered in his polarizing cause when Yel'tsin declared a local state of emergency. After angry parliamentary debate, Yel'tsin,

and the speaker of the Russian parliament, Khasbulatov, a Russified Chechen, backed down. A few Russian troops in the region were surrounded by Chechen forces and sent packing. In late 1991, the Chechen, Ingush, Kabardin, Balkar, Karachai, Cherkess, Abkhas, Ossetians and others met for their Third Congress of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus and vowed to form their own confederation of independent states.(2)

Tatarstan presents only a slightly less anti-Russian, anti-Moscow case. Like the Chechen, many Tatars are Islamic, but some are proud of a reformist tradition, Jadidism, that at the turn of the century advocated education for women and sponsored a satirical journal called *Kha, Kha, Kha*. When Stalin's cronies were apportioning union republics to peoples with over a million in population, the Tatars qualified, but were denied the status, perhaps a slap against their already jailed "National Communist" leader Sultan Galiev. By 1989, the Tatars numbered 6,648,760. In 1991, their activist youth staged demonstrations demanding secession from Russia and return of Tatar lands.(3) Tatars form today about 50 percent of their republic, but nearly 75 percent live outside the republic. A referendum on independence could leave them within Russia, although radicals of the Ittifak (Alliance) Party are trying to lower the percent necessary for secession to less than 50. By 1992, Tatar legislators, with republic President Shaimiev, unilaterally declared Tatarstan to be a full member of the Commonwealth.(4)

Tuva was a country, Tannu-Tuva, bordering on and analogous to Mongolia, from 1918-1944. Incorporation into Russia meant loss of some land, many resources, and much dignity. Today, Tuvans agitate for boundary changes, ecological clean-up, and far greater political autonomy, if not outright secession. Their popular front, with both moderate (accommodate Russians) and radical (leave yesterday) wings, has tried to discourage violence against the local Russians, but serious violence occurred in May-July 1990, concentrated in areas of high unemployment and recent Russian settlement. Soviet troops were brought in to quell the disturbances, angering Tuvans even further. Russian refugees, estimated at over 10,000, have been fleeing since 1989 across the high Altai mountains, although local officials beg skilled workers and professionals to stay.(5) Tuvans numbered 206,629, and were 64 percent of their republic, in 1989. They

declared sovereignty as the Tuvan Socialist Republic in 1990. Their regional orientation is increasingly toward Mongolia.

Buryatia was gerrymandered in 1937. The homeland of the Mongolic Buryats, surrounding Lake Baikal, was divided into the Buryat Autonomous Republic, and the Agin and Ust-Orda Buryat Autonomous Okrugs, with interspersed regions considered Russian. Within the Buryat Republic, which declared sovereignty in 1990, Buryats are only 24 percent, but this percentage would rise if lands they claim were theirs. Buryats numbered 421,380 in 1989, when non-communist party politicians began quietly trying to negotiate increased economic, ecological and political rights. The Buryat national movement, represented in part by the newspaper *Tolon* (Sunrise), is strong and thus far not radical, with an educated liberal intelligentsia whose roots go back to pre-revolutionary times and a massive popular following. Buryat political and cultural revival has included overtures to Mongolia and a resurgence of Buddhism, publicized by a ceremonial visit of the Dalai Lama to Ulan-Ude in July 1991.(6)

The **Yakut-Sakha Republic**, declaring sovereignty in 1990, simultaneously signalled willingness to compromise with Russia by hyphenating their name. "Yakut" is an outsider's (Russian) name for the Sakha, who speak the farthest North Turkic language, and are neither Islamic nor Russian Orthodox. A cultural and spiritual revival that began before the Gorbachev era has led to resurgence of traditional religion and to rebirth of the Sakha language and literature. Although the Sakha occupy Siberian territory four times the size of Texas, they numbered only 381,922 in 1989, and were 33 percent of their republic population. While they too claim land (reaching to the Sea of Okhotsk) stolen from them under Stalin, this has not been the focus of ethnic politics. Rather, since 1990, a group called Sakha Omuk (the Sakha People) has led cultural, ecological and, especially, economic rights campaigns. Many Sakha, including republic president Nikolaev, reason that even if they had direct control of a mere 30 percent of their natural resources (oil, gas, gold and diamonds in abundance), they would be rich, and in a position to align themselves with Japanese, Korean and Western businessmen. Negotiations are proceeding, both with Yel'tsin's Moscow and foreign businesses. Leery

of Russian-led secessionist Siberian regionalisms (which currently divide into at least three geographical parts), Sakha leaders, some from the pragmatic, reformist former communist party elite, are trying to navigate on the thin ice of Moscow and local Russian rule.(7)

In sum, political and population dislocations produced by increasing nationalisms have been considerable and painful, in both union and autonomous republics. The flow of refugees from war zones into Russia, estimated at over 1 million by 1992, creates yet another tragic pull on resources stretched thin. Yet analysts must not jump to conclusions that most of the 25 million Russians living outside Russia will want to move back to its heartland, nor that most refugees are Russian. Many refugees from violence in Central Asia and the Caucasus are non-Russians (e.g., Mesketian Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Azerbaijanis), who sometimes move to non-Russian areas (e.g., Kazakhstan) before choosing Russia. Within Russia, Russian outflow from Tuva has been the most dramatic. Several thousand Slavic peoples also have been fleeing Chechen-Ingushetia, including some Cossacks whose houses have been raided. The Slavic majority in Tatarstan, Buryatia and Yakutia has been shrinking more slowly, especially through decline of in-migration. Estimates of refugee populations in the whole of the post-Soviet deconstructivist world vary widely (from 1-7 million), and require regional and comparative analysis.(8)

In most areas of Russia, non-Russian populations, who together number over 30 million, have moved in the past decade from mildly politicized ethnic consciousness to various forms of nationalism. But this hardly means each of the over 16 autonomous republics (depending on how unilateral claims are counted) is demanding the same degree of secession as Chechen, Tatars and Tuvans. Many want better deals with Moscow, and are negotiating with Yel'tsin from an unaccustomed position of relative strength. How the Russian parliament and Yel'tsin, whose learning curve has thus far been dramatic, manage the details of this messy internal process of genuine economic and political power sharing will make an enormous difference in the transformation of Russia from a mini-empire to a relatively democratic, perhaps smaller, federal state.

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

"Autonomous Formations"

"Autonomous Republics" (Have Asserted Independence)	Other "Autonomous Republics"	Other "Formations"
Tatarstan*	Kabardino-	Adygei Region
(Tatar Republic)	Balkar Republic	Gorno-Altai Region
Buryatia*	Severo-Osetin Republic	Karachai-Cherkess Region
(Buryat Republic)	Dagestan	Khakass Region
Yakut-Sakha*	Mordov Republic	Aginsk Buryat Region
(Yakut Republic)	Chuvash Republic	Evrei Region
Chechen-Ingushetia*	Mari Republic	Komi-Permyatsk Region
(Chechen-Ingush Republic)	Udmurt Republic	Koryak District
Tuvan Republic*	Karel' Republic	Nenetsk District
Kalmyk Republic	Komi Republic	Taimyr District
Bashkortostan		Ust'-Ordyn Buryat District
(Bashkir Republic)		Khanti-Mansiy District
		Evenki District
		Yamalo-Nenetsk District

*Discussed in this article

Notes:

1 Statistics here and below are from *Natsional'ny Sostav Naseleniya SSR* Moskva: Finansy i Statistika, 1991. Data and analysis are based in part on fieldwork, June-August 1991. See also Alexander Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples* (New York: Norton, 1978).

2 Ann Sheehy, "Power Struggle in Checheno-Ingushetia," *RL/RFE Report on the USSR*, November 15, 1991, pp. 20-26; Center for Democracy in the USSR Bulletin, 004, January 14, 1991; D. Mirzoev, "Dzhokhar Musaevich Dudaev," *Argumenty i Fakty*, 44, 1991, p. 8.

3 For example, "Tatarstan: Burlit Ploshchad' Svoboda," *Pravda*, October 17, 1991, p. 1. See also A. Zyubchenko et al., "O tak nazyvaemoi sultan-galievskoi kontrrevolyutsionnoi

organizatsii" *Izvestia TsK KPSS*, No. 10, 1990, pp. 75-88; Azade-Ayse Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience* (Stanford: Hoover, 1987).

4 "Tatarstan Announces Joining Commonwealth," Moscow Radio, FBIS, December 31, 1991, p. 50.

5 Ann Sheehy, "Russians the Target of Interethnic Violence in Tuva," *RL/RFE Report on the USSR*, September 14, 1990, pp. 13-17; M. Ya. Zhornitskaya "Natsional'naya situatsiya v Tuvinskoi ASSR i Khakasskoi AO," Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, 1990 MS.

6 Vladimir Kornev, "Poznavaya vseleennyu: k 250 letiyu buddizma," *Soyuz*, No. 30, July 1991, p. 14; Urbanaeva, I. S. et al., *Natsional'ny Vopros v Buryatii*, Ulan-Ude: A.N., 1989. See also Caroline Humphrey, *Karl Marx Collective: Economy, Society and Religion in a Siberian Collective Farm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

7 "Deklaratsiya," *Sotsialisticheskaya Yakutiya*, September 28, 1990, p. 1; "Ustav Sakha Omuka," August 10, 1990, MS.; interviews with Sakha leaders, June-July 1991.

8 P. Rudeev, interview, *Ekonomika i Zhizn'*, 26 June 1991, p. 10; L. Krasnovsky, "Russkie bezhentsy v Rossii," *Narodnoe Obrazovanie*, August 1990, pp. 21-23; Murray Feshbach, "Soviet Population Movements: Internal, External and Nowhere," *Oxford Analytica*, 1991, MS.; Klaus Segbers, "Migration and Refugee Movements from the USSR: Causes and Prospects," *RL/RFE Report on the USSR*, November 15, 1991, pp. 6-14.

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