



EMPIRICAL DATA ON THE ISSUE OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

This report attempts to shed light on the prospects of the eventual dismemberment of the Russian Federation, a possibility that has been much commented by international affairs analysts in recent times. The potential for ethnicity-based separatist movements is here assessed mostly from Census figures, geography and language maps. The data suggests that most ethnic minorities in the Federation are diasporas in an advanced process of assimilation, or consist of groups that do not have a serious potential for secessionism, either because (1) they share with the Russians the Christian Orthodox faith, (2) they are minorities (often very small ones) in their own title regions, (3) they are territorially surrounded by Russians, or (4) they practice religions that are not in conflict with the Russian state (such as Lamaist Buddhism or shamanism). Potential for secessionism is confined to some Islamic minorities in the Caucasus regions, especially the ones that underwent deportation by the Soviets in 1944.

RESUMEN

Este informe apunta a dilucidar las perspectivas de un eventual desmembramiento de la Federación Rusa, tema que en tiempos recientes ha dado lugar a mucha especulación. La posibilidad de que emerjan movimientos separatistas basados en la etnia es aquí evaluada a partir de cifras censales, la geografía y mapas lingüísticos. Los datos sugieren que la mayoría de las minorías étnicas de la Federación son diásporas en un avanzado estado de asimilación, ya sea porque (1) comparten con los rusos la fe ortodoxa, (2) ellas mismas son minorías (frecuentemente muy pequeñas) en su propia región titular, (3) están rodeadas territorialmente por rusos, o (4) practican religiones que no están en conflicto con el Estado ruso (como el budismo lamista o el shamanismo). El potencial para el secesionismo parece limitado a algunas minorías islámicas del Cáucaso, especialmente las que sufrieron deportaciones por parte de los soviéticos en 1944.

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Empirical Data on the Issue of Ethnic Minorities in Russia

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Is Russia ethnically so diverse?

It is a common view that the Russian Federation is ethnically a very heterogeneous country with a large potential for secessionism.

The last Soviet Census was performed in 1989. Since then, Russia has held a census in 2002 but the results have not yet been published, though they have reportedly been calculated and their release is imminent and overdue. According to the 1989 census, 18.5% of the population of the Russian SSR was non-Russian.¹ This is a relatively high number that suggests that large regions of Russia have minority-majorities and thus have a potential for secessionism. Dire forecasts about the possible break-up of Russia are regularly published by academic authors and in the press.

An example is the article by Peter Editin published on September 19, 2004 in the “Week in Review” section of *The New York Times*, titled “Russia’s Ethnic Jigsaw Puzzle”. It displays maps of Russia showing enormous minority-majority regions. Actually, most of those large regions have overwhelming Russian majorities or are thinly populated or both. Examples: The Evenk Autonomous Republic (AR) has just 25,000 people of which only 14% are Evenk. In Khanty-Mansi, the Khanty are 0.9% of the people and the Mansi are 0.5%. In Karelia, with 0.75 MM people, ethnic Karelians are only 10% and just half of these are Karelian mother tongue speakers.

Yet even such a prominent researcher as George Friedman² worries about the possibility of an eruption of Karelian separatism, in spite that news from Russia never mention the issue. Alarmist predictions about separatism in Russia are stimulated by the Chechnian experience and are found convenient by neo-conservatives and hawks (who use them to predict that Russia will adopt a hard military and neo-imperialistic attitude to keep its country united, which in turn brings water to the neo-con mills), by leftists and liberals of all stripes who like a failed post-Communist Russia as a post-mortem vindication of Communism that delegitimizes anti-communist efforts during the Cold War. They are widely accepted because most peoples enjoy feeling superior vis-à-vis others, in this case, a disastrous Russia. These catastrophic predictions are routinely made in spite of the historic resilience of the nation-state as an institution. Only Chechnya has developed an actual, militant separatism movement.

It is important to soberly assess the potential ethnic-based separatism in Russia. Of course, separatism can have motivations other than ethnic (economic or political, for example) but recent history suggests that those motivations are much weaker than ethnicity. One way to start is by studying the Russian census figures and try to discern to what extent are minorities dispersed among the Russians and therefore destined to assimilation if not already assimilated (whether or not censuses show this) and to what extent they are

territorially segregated in territories they control and have thus some serious potential for separatism.

Geographical distribution of ethnic minorities

What follows is an analysis of the geographical distribution of ethnic minorities in Russia among the different political administrative units into which the country is divided, on the basis of the census of 1989 (last Soviet census; the first Russian census after it was performed in 2002 but its results haven't been published yet).

The Russian Federation is often described as divided into 89 regions. But, only 79 of them are primary political units. The remaining 10 are "okrugs", special districts inside so many other primary units, similar to (ethnically based) counties inside a state, so counting them together with the primary units would be like adding corn grains together with corn ears.

The 79 primary units consist of:

51 "oblasts" or provinces with huge Russian majorities.

6 "krays" or territories that also have huge Russian majorities but for some reasons have been given this special status. Not ethnically based.

21 *Autonomous Republics* (AR) which are the equivalent of *oblasts* but are ethnically based. In 11 of them, Russians outnumber the main title minority.

One *Autonomous Oblast* (The Jewish Autonomous Oblast in Far East), where Jews are just 4% and they are Russian speakers.

As for the 10 *okrugs*, the equivalent of ethnically based counties, eight are part of so many other *oblasts* and the remaining two are included in *krays*. No *okrug* belongs in an AR. *Okrugs* have small populations and most of them have very large Russian (or at least Slavic) majorities.

Minorities in oblasts

Which minorities are diasporas and which are territorially segregated? Here we will argue that minorities in *oblasts* are essentially all diasporas caused by migration that has taken Ukrainians, Belarussians, Tatars, Bashkirs and others to all corners of Russia, including not just Moscow and St Petersburg but the north, south and Asian Russia. This needs some testing against the alternative proposition that those minorities might be living in lands where they are predominant but which were still annexed to the Russian dominated *oblasts*, perhaps out of political motives. We will see this isn't the case.

The argument that these minorities are essentially diaspora ones is supported by the following:

- The percentage of Ukrainians in six *oblasts* close to the borders with Ukraine/Belarus, namely Smolensk, Bryansk, Kursk, Belgorod, Voronezh, Rostov, is just 3.33% (arithmetic average).³ The % in six *oblasts* or *krais* very far from those borders and chosen at random over the entire Russian map (St Petersburg, Moscow, Arkhangelsk, Perm, Omsk, Khabarovsk) is 3.67% (arithmetic average), which is slightly higher. Both figures are very close to the average for the Federation of 2.97%. The largest Ukrainian minorities are found in the Far East (Magadan 15.44%, Kamtchatka 9.11%, Amur 6.74%), thousand of miles away from Ukraine.
- Three *oblasts* near the border with Belarus have 1.44% Belarussians (arithmetic average). The six distant *oblasts* mentioned in the paragraph above have 0.85% (arithmetic average). Russia as a whole has 0.92%.
- Four *oblasts* near Tatarstan (Kirov, Orenburg, Samara and Ulyanovsk) have 6.23% Tatars (arithmetic avge). The group of six *oblasts* mentioned above has 1.85% (arithmetic avge). The whole of Russia (excluding Tatarstan) has 2.57%. The average for those four *oblasts* is low enough to consider them diasporas. Anyway, those four neighbour *oblasts* hold only 12.7% of the total Tatar population outside Tatarstan. Bashkirs make (arithmetic avge) only 2.37% of their four neighbour *oblasts* (Sverdlovsk [or Ekaterinburg], Perm, Orenburg, Chelyabinsk). Chuvash make only 4.2 % (arithmetic avge) of their two neighbour *oblasts* (Ulyanovsk and Nizhny-Novgorod). Udmurts make 1.2% (arithmetic avge) of the people in their two neighbour *oblasts* (Kirov and Perm). Mordvins make 2.9% (arithmetic average) of their four neighbour *oblasts*: Ulyanovsk, Ryazan, Penza and Nizhny-Novgorod. Marians make 1.3% of the people of their two neighbour *oblasts*, Nizhny-Novgorod and Kirov. The small sizes of these shares in population of neighbour *oblasts* suggest that they can be treated as diasporas.
- The arithmetic average of the size of the largest minority in all the 57 *oblasts* and *krais* is 4.23%. The largest minority is in the Magadan *oblast* (Ukrainian, 15.44%), the second largest is in the Astrakhan *oblast*, where Kazakhs are 12.76%. 53% of the ethnic Ukrainians and 64% of the ethnic Belarussians (at least those residing in the 12 top *oblasts* by number of Belarussians in them) have Russian as their mother tongue, suggesting a long residence among Russians. In the case of Tatars, for those living outside Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, about 24% have Russian as their mother tongue. This suggests a shorter residence time among Russians, but not territorial segregation in those districts. The language maps published by the Summer Inst. of Linguistics (www.sil.org)⁴ do not show the tatar language predominating in any territory other than the A.R. of Tatarstan.⁵
- Three important minorities are obviously of the diaspora type: Germans, Jews (which shouldn't even been considered a minority, as they are all Russian speakers; almost all of them live outside the Jewish *oblast* in the Far East) and Armenians.
- The role of largest minority in the 57 *oblasts* and *krais* corresponds to Ukrainians in 39 cases, Belarussians in 2 cases, Tatars in 8 cases, Germans in 3 cases, and

Chuvash, Mordvin, Kazakh, Buryat and Karachay with one case each. In the eight cases where the role falls on the Tatars, their maximum share is 11.39%. In the five oblasts or krays where the role falls on Chuvashians, Mordvin, Kazakh, Buryat and Karachay, their respective shares are 3.61%, 5.74%, 12.76%, .84% and 5.05%.

- These low percentages suggest that the annexation of areas where neighbour minorities happen to be a majority (and that should have belonged to neighbour AR's if "ethnic geographical justice" had been done) is not a major factor in explaining the presence of minorities in those oblasts and krays.
- We had already found that Ukrainian, Belarussians and Germans are dispersed minorities. This additional information confirms that Tatars, Chuvash, Mordvin, Buryat and Karachay, when residing in oblasts or krays – as opposed to their A.R.s – are also dispersed.

Regarding all of the above, we can conclude that ethnic minorities residing in the 57 oblasts and krays are dispersed (diaspora type). Some doubts may remain however, for the minorities residing in the Stavropol kray (the *kray* neighbour to the Caucasus) and because of this, some of the minorities in that particular kray will be counted as segregated. Those are small minorities anyway.

With respect to the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in the Far East, we will not consider it segregated, as it represents just a tiny fraction of the (diaspora type) Jewish minority in the whole of Russia. Also, because this Jewish minority is Russian-speaking and is reported to be leaving the oblast.

Regarding the 21 Autonomous Republics and the 10 okrugs: in principle, at least their title minorities should be considered among the territorially segregated ones. In the few cases where an AR or okrug has two title minorities, both should be counted. One AR that requires exceptional treatment is Bashkortostan, where the title minority is smaller than the Tatar minority in it (which is an extension from neighbor Tatarstan). This justifies counting both minorities in it. Another AR requiring exceptional treatment is Dagestan, which has no title minority. For this region, we should consider at least the largest minority (Avar). However, a more inclusive approach should be adopted: since the purpose of this study is to estimate the size of the minorities that can be – potentially – motivated by separatism, for each region, we could count every minority that has substantially greater affinities with the title minority than with the Russians and could thus be expected of siding with the title minority in the event that the latter tried to seceded. The criteria proposed here are: a) in each AR or okrug, any minority sharing the religion and language family of the title minority (T.M.) should be counted together with the T.M. as a territorially segregated one, and b) if the title minority is Islamic, then every Islamic minority in the AR or okrug should be counted regardless of language family. This is because, in this day and age, Islamism is such a strong binding agent.

So, in the case of Karelian AR, we may count the Vesps together with the Karelians, because both groups speak languages in the Uralic group and share the Christian Orthodox

religion, but we don't count Finnish, whose language is also Uralic but whose religion is Lutheran.

Three alternative definitions

We have developed three definitions for deciding which minorities to count as territorially segregated:

Definition 1: only title minorities (T.M.) are counted. In the case of Dagestan, Avar is substituted for the TM.

Definition 2: same as in Criterion 1, but we also count the Tatars in Bashkortostan and all Islamic minorities in Dagestan.

Definition 3: same as in Criterion 2, adding all the minorities that comply with criterion in the paragraph above.

The ethnic composition of the 21 A.R.s and 10 okrugs are shown in the attached Excel file. The resulting percentages are calculated by dividing by the 1989 Russian population.

By Definition 1, the most restrictive, territorially segregated minorities (TSMs) are 8.4 million people, or 5.70% of the Russian Federation population of 1989.

By Definition 2, TSMs are 10.6 MM people or 7.24% of the R.F. population.

By Definition 3, TSMs are 11.48 MM people or 7.81% of the R.F. population.

We have also calculated that the bulk of the TSMs (per Definition 3) live in territories which are "pockets" inside Russia, without a coastline and without borders with other countries. In this subtotal, we have included Sakha (Yakutia), which does have a coast on the Arctic but at too high latitudes and not practical for year round navigation. "Pocket" TSMs account for 6.85 MM or 4.66% of the R.F. population, that is for three fifths of the TSMs population.

Many TSMs (by definition 3) are outnumbered by Russians in their own ARs or okrugs. Those TSMs account for 2.34 MM people or 1.60% of the R.F. population.

It is hard to believe that territorially segregated minorities could successfully push for secession in areas where they are outnumbered by the Russians, or if they are in "pockets" with no borders with outsiders nor access to the sea. It is therefore interesting to calculate the population of TSM's that is either "pocketed" or outnumbered. That population is 7.17 MM or 4.87% of the population of the Russian Federation.

Conversely, the population of the TSM's which is neither "pocketed" nor outnumbered is 4.30 million or 2.76 % of the R.F. population.

This is the core of the territories where separatism has at least some potential. ARs and okrugs falling in this narrow category fall into two distinct groups: Islamic ARs in the Caucasus, on the borders with Georgia or Azerbaijan. Ranked by TSM population size they are: Dagestan, Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia, Karachay-Cherkessia, with a total population of 3.39 MM or 2.30% of the R.F. population. Three oblasts and okrugs with a total population of just 0.67 MM or 0.46% of the Russian Federation population. These districts are: North Ossetia, with a Christian Orthodox minority that has no choice but being pro-Russian to protect itself in an Islamic sea. The other two (Tuva and Komi-Permyak) practice Lamaistic Buddhism or Orthodox Christianity or traditional religions and have very little inclination to separatism.

Conclusions

Clearly, the secessionist potential is limited to the five Islamic A.R.s in the Caucasus. The population of these A.R.s, of 3.39MM, or 2.3% of the R.F. population, is not negligible. But this hardly justifies a vision of a Russia bursting at its seams. About half of this population corresponds to peoples that were deported in 1944 in conditions of great cruelty and deprivation, causing the death of at least one fourth their populations of that time, making them fertile ground for separatism. One of those A.R.s (Chechnya-Ichkeria) is already involved in a major violent conflict with the Federal government. The other half of that population is concentrated in one A.R. (Dagestan), heavily Islamic but with an extreme language diversity that doesn't help the development of a national conscience that might evolve into separatism. So far, Dagestan hasn't shown any movement to separatism, though Chechen rebels have made a few incursions there.

In all our calculations we have used the 1989 Soviet Census figures taking them at face value. However, it is very possible that the Census inflates the diaspora minority populations.

Example: the Census shows 53% of Ukrainians having Russian as their mother tongue. It's reasonable to assume that another big chunk of those Ukrainians use Russian as their main vehicle. Plus, the Russian-mother tongue Ukrainians have been having children since 1989 who, under the Soviet passport system, could be assumed to be also officially listed as Russian-mother tongue speakers. And what is a Russian-speaking Ukrainian living in Russia if not a Russian? This reasoning also applies to some other diaspora minorities.

Post-1989 events that can be expected to deflate the diaspora minorities are:

1. The emigration of some diaspora minorities: Germans, Jews, Armenians, Greeks and some other very small European minorities.
2. The return of Russians from the C.I.S. countries. This is causing some Russification in Russia. According to the mini-census of 1994, may have caused the fraction of Russians in Russia to increase from 81.5% to 82.9%⁶ and this increase should have been much larger afterwards.
3. The emigration of Chechens and some other Islamics.
4. The intermarriage and assimilation since 1989 in the areas that have Russian majorities.

Of course, some other events may increase minorities, especially the segregated ones. Apparently, according to the mini-census of 1994, some ethnic individuals in the A.R.s who used to declare Russian as their mother tongue are now declaring the language of their group as their mother tongue. This “officially” causes a certain *language* de-Russification of those A.R.s. In principle, this language conversion among people who call themselves ethnic minorities could entail only a very small *ethnic* de-Russification of the Federation.

Ethnic Russians in some Islamic-dominated A.R.’s might be leaving them and moving to oblasts or krays. At least, this is happening in Chechnya. Islamic-dominated A.R.s are very likely to have higher birth rates than the Russian average.

NOTES

¹ Figures for the Soviet Census of 1989 have been taken from the Norwegian site: http://www.nupi.no/cgi-win/Russland/a_enhet.exe?sok. It has information on ethnic group populations and languages spoken in the various political-administrative units of the Russian Federation. No maps. Has information on the religions practiced by the different groups. For figures of the total population of Russia which have been used to calculate some present %, the CIA “World Fact Book” in www.cia.gov has been used.

² George Friedman, “Russia Has Much to Lose in Ukraine”, December 4, 2004, http://shininglight.us/mt/archives/foreign_policy/russia/

³ Information on the location of the districts (oblasts/A.R.s/krays) and the districts on which they border has been obtained from http://map.rin.ru/cgi-bin/main_e.pl?Region=karch –It has maps of districts, including okrugs. Source (1) has some (limited) information on borders.

⁴ Summer Institute of Linguistics, www.sil.org, then use the link “ethnologue”, for language groups, with information on the religions their speakers practice. With maps.

⁵ The Summer Institute of Linguistics (“SIL”, www.sil.org) publishes language maps for most countries, including Russia. Those maps often exaggerate the territorial extension of minority languages and are often in conflict with the figures for language speakers that SIL provides. Its maps often show a language as predominating in a territory where even SIL figures call it a minority. This may result from maps reflecting ethnicity, rather than language, in spite of their being titled “Language Map”. Sometimes they map is in conflict even with ethnic figures. E.g., for El Salvador and Honduras, SIL’s language map shows Lenca covering one third of El Salvador and one fifth of Honduras. Yet SIL says that Lenca is “nearly extinct”, with very “few speakers” (a category where SIL customarily classifies languages with less than 20 speakers, all elderly). SIL lists the Lenca ethnic group as having 100,000 members, or 0.8% of the combined population of El Salvador and Honduras, which would make those maps exaggerated even if they reflected ethnicity rather than language. Many more examples could be cited. SIL’s figures for minority, non-official language speakers tend to wildly exaggerate their extent. It shows Paraguay having only 6% Spanish speakers. Because of this, the SIL maps shown as annexes to this articles need to be taken with a grain of salt. SIL’s maps for Russia have obvious exaggerations. They show significant territories for Yukhagir (under 200 speakers) or Yenisei-Ostiak (under 1,000 speakers). They show Karelia as Karelian speaking, while 1989 census figures say only Karelian speakers are about 5% of the Karelian population. Because of this “politically correct” tendency to exaggerate, SIL figures and maps ought to be considered ceilings rather than floors. Even then, SIL maps show the “pocket” situation of minority languages in Russia.

⁶ *Merger Newsletter*, Vol 3. No. 2 (April 1996). It can be consulted in <http://www.ercomer.org/merger/vol3no2/mmerfsu.html>, site of ERCOMER, Faculty of Social Sciences, Utrecht University.