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THE EMERGENCE OF NON-RUSSIAN NATIONALISM:

THE LEGACY OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE

Mark N. Katz

Professor, George Mason University

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the disintegration of the last great European colonial empire. Just as when the European powers withdrew from their colonies, the new nations which have emerged from the Soviet empire are experiencing a host of problems: economic dislocation, weak political structures, ethnic tension, and even warfare.

Although not the sole source of these problems, a factor contributing toward all of them is the emergence of nationalism in the newly independent non-Russian republics. Nationalism, of course, is not necessarily a destructive force. Indeed, it is something that occurs in virtually all nations and can be a unifying force within a country. But just as in many Third World states when they became independent, what has emerged in the newly independent non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union is often a vengeful form of nationalism. While the nationalisms of the non-Russian republics tend not to be expansionist (though there are some that are), they do tend to be ethnically exclusivist.

What gives rise to this ethnically exclusivist form of nationalism? Several factors can be identified. One is the very newness of independence for these republics: non-Russian nationalism is being embraced vigorously by peoples whose nationalism was long suppressed both by the Russian-dominated Tsarist and communist regimes. Another is the relative insecurity of these new nations. Having experienced domination by Russians for so long, they fear losing their independence to the Russians again, just as many of those nations gained independence when the Tsarist empire collapsed but lost it when the communists in Moscow became strong enough to reconquer them. Of course, the newly independent non-Russian republics do not just fear the possibility of Russian domination. They often fear each other as well as their immediate neighbors outside the former USSR. And like many Third World states, many of these former Soviet republics fear Western economic domination.

Some scholars see particularly virulent forms of nationalism as inherently temporary phenomena. While possessed of a highly defensive nationalism at first, it is argued, new nations gradually acquire the experience and self-confidence which allows them to put aside nationalist policies which are recognized to be counter-productive.[1] The experience of many Third World nations which used to ban or severely restrict Western investment in their countries but which now actively seek it is an example of this.

[1] This argument was forcefully made in Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York: The Free Press, 1992), ch. 25.

Many observers see democratization in particular as a means by which extreme nationalism is ameliorated. The theory is that democracies do not go to war with each other (or with themselves) because they resolve their conflicts through peaceful methods.[2] The fact that most of the non-Russian republics have either embarked on the path toward democratization, or have at least stated their intention to do so, appears to offer the hope that extreme forms of nationalism in them might abate.

Perhaps ethnically exclusive forms of nationalism will eventually recede in the non-Russian republics as a result of democratization, economic development, or other positive factors. It is highly doubtful, however, that this will occur any time soon in this particular region. For there exists in the former Soviet Union, as in many parts of the Third World, a problem that serves to heighten insecurity, and thus to enhance extreme nationalism. This problem is that the existing set of borders between the newly independent republics of the former USSR were not drawn by the imperial power (Moscow) to reflect actual ethnic and national differences, but for its own convenience. It is not clear whether or to what extent the newly opened Soviet archives will demonstrate that Moscow deliberately drew and redrew contentious borders among neighboring non-Russian nationalities so that they would each look to Russia for protection against the other. Whatever Moscow's past intentions, however, the borders it drew did indeed serve to exacerbate relations among ethnic groups. The borders for the union republics – which are now all independent states – often, included two or more nationalities which have historically had poor relations. Nor were the borders drawn to include ethnic groups entirely within them; large segments of them were sometimes incorporated within the territory of a neighboring republic.[3] And just as with the retreat of West European colonial empires from the Third World, the demise of the Soviet empire meant that there was no longer a central authority to regulate relations among these nations.

While the Soviet Union may no longer exist, the legacy of empire which it bequeathed in the form of highly contentious borders has fueled nationalism in the newly independent non-Russian republics. Non-Russian nationalism, of course, is not a homogenous phenomenon; its character and intensity vary not only across ethnic groups, but also

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[2] Fukuyama, chs. 23-24; Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80 (1986), pp. 1151-69; Zeev Maoz and Nasrin Abdolali, "Regime Types and International Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35 (1989), pp. 3-35; and David A. Lake, "Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War," *American Political Science Review* 86 (1992), pp. 24-37.

[3] For a useful map detailing the ethnic and nationalist territorial disputes within the former USSR, see U.S. Department of State, Office of the Geographer, "Ethnicity and Political Boundaries in the Soviet Union," March 1990.

within them. Contentious borders, however, contribute to five different types of problems which fuel ethnically exclusivist forms of nationalism in the non-Russian republics: 1) nationalists in neighboring republics claiming the same territory; 2) regionally-dominant minorities seeking secession; 3) communist-turned-nationalist regimes seizing on territorial disputes to justify authoritarian rule; 4) the effect on non-Russian nationalism of rising Russian nationalism within the Russian community living in the non-Russian republics; and 5) the effect on non-Russian nationalism of rising nationalism emanating from Russia. Each of these problems will be examined in turn, followed by a discussion as to what these problems imply for the future international relations of the non-Russian republics of the former USSR.

Nationalists in Neighboring Republics Claiming the Same Territory

There are several outstanding examples of nationalists in neighboring republics claiming the same territory. The dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan kindled a war between the two neighboring republics which began almost four years before they became independent. The conflict centered on the question of whether Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian region which Soviet authorities assigned to Azerbaijan despite its immediate proximity to Armenia, should belong to Azerbaijan or Armenia.[4]

It cannot be said with any degree of certainty that if Moscow had drawn the borders differently back in the 1920s – if Nagorno-Karabakh and the tiny sliver of territory between it and Armenia had been assigned to Armenia instead of Azerbaijan – that the current conflict could have been avoided. What can be said, though, is that the way the Soviets did draw the borders between them has served to inflame both Armenian and Azeri nationalism. Each side believes that its absolutely vital interests are at stake in the dispute. Neither government has been willing to compromise, despite the fact that the war has devastated the economies of both nations, aggravated Armenia's relations with its Muslim neighbors Turkey and Iran, and led to political turmoil within Azerbaijan. And the reason neither government has been willing to compromise is because this would mean political suicide for them: public opinion in both nations has adopted an extremist nationalist position regarding the territorial dispute. It is doubtful that greater democratization in either country would alter this, at least at present.

Another case in which a territorial dispute is causing serious tension between two neighboring states is the Crimea. An independent Muslim khanate previously, Crimea

[4] Elizabeth Fuller, "Nagorno-Karabakh: Internal Conflict Becomes International," *RFE/RL Research Report,* 13 March 1992, pp. 1-5.

was conquered by Russia in the eighteenth century. It was ruled as part of the Russian Republic after the Bolshevik revolution until 1954 when Khrushchev transferred it to Ukraine. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, Crimea belonged to it. Russian nationalists, though, claim that Crimea should belong to Russia. Shortly before it was abolished in 1993, the communist-dominated Russian Parliament formally laid claim to Crimea. Although president Boris Yeltsin repudiated this claim, the conviction that Crimea should belong to Russia has strong support among the Russian public. Similarly, Ukrainians of every political hue are determined to retain Crimea. They fear that giving it up would be the first step toward the dissolution of Ukraine altogether.[5]

In both these cases, nationalist passion makes compromise difficult, if not impossible. There are other territorial disputes between republics which have not so far inflamed nationalist passions, but have the potential to do so.[6] What the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh shows in particular is that once such disputes do energize nationalist passions on opposing sides, they can be extremely difficult to resolve.

Regionally-dominant Minorities Seeking Secession

When the Soviet Union broke up, it was only the so-called "union republics" which became independent. There were a host of other ethnic groups which predominated (or once predominated) within certain areas that under the Soviet union were organized into "autonomous republics," "autonomous regions," or other arrangements. Many of these ethnic groups have asserted their desire for independence also. The distinction between a union republic and an autonomous republic may have seemed clear to the Soviet inventors of the concepts, but it was and is not clear to the inhabitants of the autonomous republics, some of which have larger populations than the now independent union republics.

Inside Russia, some autonomous republics – including oil-rich Tatarstan – have declared themselves independent. Yeltsin has refused to recognize their independence, although he has been unable to prevent the governments of the autonomous republics, etc., from increasing their authority at the expense of Moscow's within their own borders.[7]

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[5] Roman Solchanyk, “Ukrainian-Russian Confrontation Over the Crimea”, *RFE/RL Research Report*, 21 February 1992, pp. 26-30.

[6] This is especially true of the complicated borders drawn in the Fergana Valley of Central Asia. See Martha Brill Olcott, "Central Asia's Catapult to Independence," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1992, p. 112.

[7] Steven Erlanger, "The Dissents from Russia's Frayed Edges," *The New York Times* (Week in Review), August 22, 1993.

But Russia is not the only former Soviet republic facing secessionist demands. Several of the newly independent non-Russian republics also possess one or more regions where smaller ethnic groups are demanding independence. Georgia is facing secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Gagauz and the "Trans-Dniester Republic" have asserted demands for independence from Moldova. In Central Asia, there are secessionist movements in northern Kazakhstan, eastern Tajikistan, and western Uzbekistan, as well as others. In the Crimea, there is a movement which favors independence and opposes adhesion to either Ukraine or Russia.

In all these cases, the newly independent non-Russian republic asserted its own right to secede from what was the Soviet Union, but has refused to recognize the right of any region to secede from it. Nor are these newly independent republics willing to allow referenda within regions where secessionist movements are active to determine whether or not they should become independent. In republics with undemocratic regimes, governments are unwilling to do this since allowing one or more regions to determine their own future democratically would raise demands throughout the republic for democracy.

Nor is this a problem that can readily be resolved through democratization at present. Under the Soviet Union, Moscow's power was not diminished through transferring territory from one republic to another. It is, however, virtually impossible for the governments of the newly independent republics to relinquish any territory voluntarily for fear of being ousted in a nationalist backlash at the next election, or possibly sooner by undemocratic means. This political fact of life hardens the attitude of governments toward not just actual, but even potential secessionist movements. And this hardened attitude, of course, does not necessarily encourage minority groups to integrate into the larger nation, but instead can inflame their desire to secede.

Communist-turned-nationalist Regimes Seizing on Territorial Disputes to Justify Authoritarian Rule

In most of the newly independent non-Russian republics, the government has remained under the control of the former communists. Their primary goal, not surprisingly, is to remain in power. Communism, though, is no longer a particularly popular ideology, and all the communists who inherited power have changed their name and claim to be adherents of democracy. Many, of course, are not democratic, and even those that are do not wish to be voted out of office. Nationalism, though, is a popular ideology which the former communists can capitalize on, especially where the republic faces a territorial dispute with a neighbor or an attempt at secession.

For those communists which are more democratically-oriented, a nationalist position regarding a territorial dispute or attempted secession can serve to bolster support for them internally, at least within the majority ethnic group. For those which are less democratically-oriented, a territorial dispute or attempted secession can be a useful means of justifying continued authoritarian rule. In Kazakhstan, for example, where there are almost the same number of Russians as there are Kazakhs, many believe that democratization will lead to the emergence of Kazakh and Russian nationalist parties, whose fears of each other will escalate and possibly lead to civil war. Continued rule by the authoritarian but relatively benevolent regime headed by Nursultan Nazarbayev is seen as preferable to this.[8]

Nationalism emerging in response to a territorial dispute or a secessionist movement can not only be useful in helping former communists remain in power, but also in regaining power where they have lost it. Geidar Aliev, the former communist party boss of Azerbaijan whom Gorbachev had dismissed, regained power in 1993 mainly due to the collapse of authority which the democratically elected leader of Azerbaijan suffered as a result of his government's inability to halt Armenian advances in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.[9]

When former communists (or others) exploit nationalist sentiment over territorial disputes or secessionist movements, they risk creating conditions that make attempting to reach a compromise settlement over such issues extremely difficult. In September 1993, for example, the outline for a settlement of some of the issues outstanding between Russia and Ukraine was announced. The proposed agreement involved Ukraine relinquishing its claims to the disputed Black Sea fleet in order to pay off its mounting debt to Moscow for Russian oil shipments, and to allow nuclear warheads in Ukraine to be shipped to Russia and dismantled there in exchange for supplies of uranium needed for Ukraine's nuclear reactors. Nationalist opposition to the proposed agreement in Ukraine grew so intense that the Ukrainian leader, Leonid Kravchuk, had to repudiate it almost immediately. One of the concerns of the nationalists was that by giving up the Black Sea fleet, Ukraine would have a weaker claim to the Crimean Peninsula where much of the fleet is based.[10]

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[8] Author's interviews with Russians and Kazakhs in Almaty, June 1992, October 1992, and September 1993.

[9] Elizabeth Fuller, "Azerbaijan's June Revolution," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 13 August 1993, pp. 24-9.

[10] Bohdan Nahaylo, "The Massandra Summit and Ukraine," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 17 September 1993, pp. 1-6.

Finally, just as defeat in a territorial dispute or failure to prevent secession can severely weaken a government consisting of non- or anti-communists, these can also weaken a government consisting of former or renamed communists. The failure of Eduard Shevardnadze, the restored former communist boss of Georgia, to prevent secession by Abkhazia in September 1993 led instantly to an upsurge in the rebellion against his rule led by the elected but deposed anti-communist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia.[11]

The nationalism that authoritarian governments fan with regard to territorial disputes and attempts at secession can be useful in justifying authoritarian measures, but this nationalism can also trap an authoritarian regime into pursuing uncompromising policies toward these problems for fear of being overthrown if they back down at all. Unwillingness to compromise, though, can lead to warfare breaking out or escalating. And if the government loses, it may also be ousted.

The Effect on Non-Russian Nationalism of Rising Russian Nationalism within the Russian Community Living in the Non-Russian Republics

The presence and the actions of large Russian communities in several of the non-Russian republics has also served to inflame non-Russian nationalism. There are approximately 25 million Russians living in the non-Russian republics. During the Soviet era, these Russians enjoyed preeminent status in the non-Russian republics they resided in. They held most of the top positions in the local economic, political, military, and educational structures. Official business was conducted in Russian, not the local language.

The non-Russians, not surprisingly, often viewed the Russians in their republics as colonial occupiers. Upon independence, or even before it, the non-Russians sought to end Russian dominance in their republics. Most have deposed Russian as the language of official business and have replaced it with their own. The non-Russians have also sought to oust Russians from the leadership positions they hold.

The position of the Russians in the non-Russian republics resembles that of the European colonists resident in the Third World when countries there became independent. In many cases, the European population emigrated en masse back to Europe either because the new government drove them out, because they feared that nationalist policies or sentiment would make life uncomfortable for them, or because while the new government wanted Europeans to remain, they would no longer have

[11] Catherine Dale, "Turmoil in Abkhazia: Russian Responses," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 27 August 1993, pp. 48-57; Lee Hockstader, "Shevardnadze Vows to Avenge Defeat," *The Washington Post*, September 29, 1993; and "Rebels in Georgia Capture Major City," *The Washington Post*, October 18, 1993.

nearly as much decision-making power in the new state as they did when it was a colony.

For those Europeans returning to Britain, France, Portugal or wherever, the transition was often very difficult. They had to find places for themselves in societies experiencing difficult economic circumstances. At least, however, there was a capitalist economy for them to integrate into. The Russians in the non-Russian republics face a much more difficult situation if they return to Russia. The Russian economy is in complete disarray. For returning Russians, the prospects of finding jobs or even housing back in Russia are extremely bleak.

Not surprisingly, most Russians do not want to return to Russia. On the other hand, they do not want to adjust to the reality of independence for the non-Russian republics. They do not want to give up their high status jobs. They do not want to learn the local languages. And in some cases, they have shown signs of being unwilling to accept minority status within a non-Russian republic. The predominantly Russian population on the east bank of the Dniester River, for example, has announced its secession from Moldova and formation of the "Dniester Republic." There are movements in eastern Ukraine and northern Kazakhstan, where Russians form a large proportion of the population, to secede from these two republics and join the adjacent Russian Federation. A similar movement has sprung up among the predominantly Russian population of northeastern Estonia in reaction to the Estonian law granting citizenship only to ethnic Estonians and to those "others" (primarily Russians) who pass a proficiency examination in the Estonian language –something the Russians in Estonia are mainly not capable of doing.[12]

The ethnically exclusivist elements in the nationalisms of the newly independent non-Russian republics on the one hand and the Russian communities living in those republics on the other are mutually reinforcing. The assertion of non-Russian nationalism is highly threatening to the Russians living in the "near abroad," especially since moving back to Russia would mean destitution for most of them. But the response of the Russian communities – asserting Russian nationalism, especially in the form of secessionist movements – only serves to inflame non-Russian nationalism. The non-Russians see the prospect of Russian secessionism as not only weakening the newly independent states by detaching vital territory from them, but also as part of a larger

[12] Vladimir Socor, "Creeping Putsch in Eastern Moldova," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 17 January 1992, pp. 8-13; Philip S. Gillette, "Ethnic Balance and Imbalance in Kazakhstan's Regions," *Central Asia Monitor*, no. 3, 1993, pp. 17-23; Andrew Wilson, "The Growing Challenge to Kiev from the Donbas," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 20 August 1993, pp. 8-13; and Fred Hiatt, "Narva, Estonia: Spark in an Ethnic Tinderbox," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 1993.

Russian plan to reabsorb their republics altogether. Because each community sees concessions to the other as potentially leading to the loss of independence for the non-Russians or expulsion for the Russians, neither is willing to cooperate with the other. This, of course, only serves to harden non-Russian as well as Russian nationalist positions.

The Effect on non-Russian Nationalism of Rising Nationalism Emanating from Russia

Non-Russian nationalism is also being inflamed by rising nationalism emanating from Russia itself. Whereas the Russians living in the non-Russian republics may possess only a limited capability to bring about secession, their ability to do this with the help of the Russian government or armed forces is greatly enhanced. For example, it is Russian Army support for the "Dniester Republic" that has allowed the Russians living in that region to avoid being ruled by the Moldovan government.[13] Boris Yeltsin himself has threatened Estonia over the issue of Russians living in that republic.[14]

Russia, of course, has the capability of intervening not just to support Russians in the "near abroad," but others as well. Russian armed forces, for example, have intervened in Tajikistan in order to restore an old-line communist regime which had been ousted by a coalition of democratic and Islamic forces.[15] Yet despite Russia's purported concern about the spread of "Islamic fundamentalism" in Tajikistan, Russian forces assisted a Muslim minority in ousting Orthodox Christian Georgian forces from Abkhazia.

When the West European powers withdrew from their colonies in the Third World, they retained significant influence in some (notably the French in sub-Saharan Africa) and little or no influence in others. None of the former West European powers, however, attempted to rebuild their colonial empires after having given them up. Powerful forces in Russia, though, appear determined to do just this.[16]

The governments of the non-Russian republics have responded differently to Moscow's efforts to re-extend Russian influence. Estonia and Ukraine have unsuccessfully sought support from the West. The Georgian government finally joined the Commonwealth of Independent States after Russian forces expelled it from Abkhazia, but Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze at the same time denounced Russian "imperialism." The

[13] Vladimir Socor, “Russia’s Army in Moldova: There to Stay?” *RFE/RL Research Report*, 18 June 1993, pp. 42-9.

[14] Ann Sheehy, "The Estonian Law on Aliens," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 24 September 1993, p. 9.

[15] "The Empire Strikes Back," *The Economist*, August 7, 1993, p. 36.

[16] "The Threat That Was," *The Economist*, August 28, 1993, pp. 17-19.

Lithuanian government adopted an accommodating attitude toward the Russians present in that republic – it could afford to do so since there are relatively few there compared to Latvia or Estonia. Armenia and Azerbaijan have both sought Russian support in their ongoing struggle with each other (there are few Russians in either). The Central Asian governments have sought to accommodate Russian interests. But except for Kirgizstan, the governments here consist of old-line communists who fear their own people so much that they have turned to Russian forces to keep them in power.[17]

Whatever the response of their governments, however, non-Russian nationalists for the most part regard Russian actions with extreme alarm. Many are convinced that Russia intends to eliminate their independence and reabsorb them just as occurred with most of the non-Russian states which briefly asserted their independence at the end of World War I and with the Baltic states in 1940. Indeed, non-Russian nationalists see Russia behind all the disputes their nations face, whether it actually is or not. What they fear in particular is that Moscow is now taking advantage of the contentious borders which the Soviet regime drew in the past in order to divide and conquer them once more. This, of course, only serves to inflame non-Russian nationalists and make them less willing to compromise. There are, however, some non-Russian governments that have cooperated with Russia. These, however, tend to be regarded as suspect or even traitorous by non-Russian nationalists – a development which serves to undermine their legitimacy and hence their ability to remain in power.

Conclusion

Although the USSR no longer exists, its successor states have inherited a grim legacy of empire in terms of intractable border disputes, a variety of secessionist movements, and the other problems discussed here which have given rise to ethnically exclusivist forms of nationalism in the non-Russian republics as well as Russia itself. Nor is this a problem that is likely to be ameliorated by democratization, at least in the near future. This is because ethnically exclusive nationalism results in people, whether from the majority or a minority group within a particular country, identifying primarily with their ethnic group and only secondarily, if at all, as citizens who have interests in common with other citizens, despite ethnic differences, of the republic they live in. Democracy under these circumstances may only serve to ratify the "tyranny of the majority." It is this prospect which makes minorities in various non-Russian republics unwilling to be

[17] Bess Brown, "Central Asian States Seek Russian Help," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 18 June 1993, pp. 83-8; Saulius Girnius, "Lithuania's Foreign Policy," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 3 September 1993, pp. 23-29; and Serge Schmemann, "Around Russia's Rim, A Fear of Events at the Center, *" New York Times*, (Week in Review), October 3, 1993.

part of countries where they do not belong to the majority, but prefer instead to secede and either join a neighboring state and benefit from the tyranny of the majority there, or become an independent one where they can exercise their own tyranny of the majority.

What this implies is that as a result of the legacy of the Soviet empire which has pushed non-Russian nationalism in an ethnically exclusivist direction, the non-Russian republics are likely to have confrontational relations with minority groups within their borders, with each other, and with Russia for a long time to come. This, of course, is a recipe for continued and perhaps even increased tension and conflict.

If the experience of the states of Asia and Africa after the withdrawal of the European colonial empires is a guide, then it is likely that ethnic conflict in the non-Russian republics of the former USSR is likely to be bitter, protracted, and violent. Many of the conflicts which Third World states inherited as a result of the borders drawn by the West European powers have lasted for decades and appear to have little prospect for resolution.

The experience of other nations, though, does offer some hope. Real progress has been made recently toward resolving seemingly endless conflicts between blacks and whites and South Africa, between Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East, and between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. The good news from these conflicts is that progress is possible. The bad news is that it can take decades before any progress is made. What this implies is that the recent wave of nationalist conflict which has emerged in the new states of the former USSR is not likely to be short lived, but may well last for decades.