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## **ETHNICITY, NATIONALISM AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION**

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### **SUMMARY**

An ethnic nationalism fraught with tension and conflicts will remain one of the major political forces in the former Soviet Union. It is impossible to avoid all interethnic conflicts in the country, however it is possible to alleviate some of them, at least to give them more or less civilized forms.

At the same time, it seems unlikely that the Commonwealth of Independent States alone is capable of working out efficient means and mechanisms to solve already existing and forthcoming ethnic conflicts. It would also be unrealistic to expect that an improvement in the economic situation, for which at present there is little hope, will solve the problem. Under the circumstances, the need for a direct or indirect involvement of the Western countries in preventing and alleviating these conflicts will inevitably increase. To be able to act the Western governments will need as clear an understanding of the current ethnic situation in the CIS as possible, especially as some future conflicts are quite predictable.

This paper reviews the various sources and forms of tension in the former Soviet Union and identifies many of the groups involved.

**ETHNICITY, NATIONALISM AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONS  
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(Preliminary Report)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Just at the time when some scholars were reiterating their claims that ethnic nationalism played an insignificant and secondary role in Soviet Central Asia and that a common Turkistan and/or Muslim identity prevailed there (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983; Bennigsen and Wimbush, 1985) various Muslim ethnic groups in the area began to clash with each other. There were pogroms of Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan, clashes between Kyrgyz and Tadjiks over a border land dispute, riots in Novyi Uzen' and Mangyshlak in Kazakhstan directed against the Muslim workers from the North Caucasus, and bloody fights between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh oblast' of Kyrgyzstan. Relations between Tadjiks and Uzbeks remain tense, and relations between Uzbeks and Turkmen, and between Tadjiks and Kyrgyz are deteriorating.

A similar situation is emerging in the North Caucasus. While some scholars in the recent past stressed a common cultural heritage and identity of different ethnic groups there (Wixman, 1980; Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983), relations between Ingush and Ossets, Ingush and Chechen, Chechen and Avar, Balkar and Kabardinians, Karachay and Circassians, Nogay and Dargin, Kumyk, Lezgin and other ethnic groups in Daghestan are becoming more and more tense.

A situation in many other non-Russian parts of the former Soviet Union is not much better. However, while tense relations between Russians and non-Russians in the country drew much attention in the West, similar relations between different non-Russian ethnic groups for a long time remained essentially unnoticed and unexplained, apparently because of the lack of information. Now it becomes clear that ethnic conflicts in the Commonwealth of

Independent States threaten not only the very survival of this formation, but also the territorial integrity of many of its constituent republics.

## II. THE SOVIET NATIONALITIES POLICY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES\*\*

The nationalities policy which the Soviet leadership pursued during the last decades was inconsistent and fraught with conflicts. While the process of creating national states and even the formation of modern nations on the territory of the USSR was artificially interrupted and diverted after the Bolshevik Revolution, the processes of modernization remained incomplete in many of the non-Russian regions of the country. While the goal was a homogeneity and unification of all the Soviet peoples on the basis of the Soviet Russian culture, the ethnic structure of the supranational Soviet state remained extremely rigid. Its characteristic features were: ethnic stratification, arbitrary criteria for ethnicity selected by the state, and an inflexible ethno-administrative division of the country. By directly connecting ethnicity with language and territory, linking ethnic status with the degree of ethno-territorial autonomy, and making cultural autonomy dependent on the latter, Soviet policy has not helped to break down barriers between ethnicity and nation. Instead, it created regional elites whose recruitment was based on their ethnic affiliations. By purely administrative measures, it also created a political hierarchy of ethnic groups based on pseudo-scientific arguments, and subdivided all the peoples of the USSR into nations (the most developed and consolidated peoples), natsionalnosties (underdeveloped nations), and narodnosties (ethnic groups of an even lower order). It is noteworthy that in the Russian language, the word nation ("natsia") means a people and not the aggregate of all the citizens of a given state.

A situation in the North Caucasus is quite illustrative in this respect. There, various Adyge groups were artificially separated by the creation of several separate autonomous formations. The same happened to Karachay and Balkar, while Ingush were denied an

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\*\* For more details, see Allworth, 1971; Azrael, 1978; Carrere d'Encausse, 1979; Olcott and Hajda, 1987; Conquest, 1986; Khazanov, 1988.

autonomy of their own. Instead, the Checheno-Ingushskaia autonomous republic was formed in which Ingush, as a minority, could not successfully compete with Chechen. Nogay and Shapsugs were denied any kind of autonomy whatsoever. A recruitment to local elites in the North Caucasus was based not only on ethnic affiliation but also on loyalties that a given ethnic group had demonstrated to the Soviet regime and to the Russian people. Thus, Ossetinians occupied better position than their neighbors, while Balkar did not have access to privileged positions at all.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable because of the growth in nationalism and ethnic competition as a concomitant phenomenon of interrelations between the core area (Russia) and its peripheral domains, and of uneven modernization of the latter. During the last years of its existence the Soviet regime faced the same "colonial ingratitude" that other colonial powers had faced in the past. The growing competition between central (Russian) and regional (non-Russian) political elites that persisted despite their vested interest in the permanence of the Soviet political system can be explained by the differences in their power base (Khazanov, 1986). The main promoters of nationalism in non-Russian parts of the country, however, became the educated middle strata. In spite of the fact that these strata to a large extent are a product of the Soviet nationalities policy and of modernization processes conducted by the state, they not only strive for sovereignty and independence for their political formations but also incline towards ethnic nationalism as the best guarantee and of an improvement in their own positions in society.

Cultural differences in times of rapid change and conflicts serve not only psychological needs, but political goals as well, particularly in a situation in which ethnicity is not a fluid and pragmatic identity but, on the contrary, acquires an ascriptive character.

In the Soviet conditions ethnicity became a conscious collectivity, which, in response to the supranational Soviet state and competition between ethnic groups, strives to develop and maintain a separate cultural and political identity within larger heterogeneous society. Apparently, this situation will continue in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

### III. THE ETHNIC SITUATION IN THE SOVIET UNION UNDER THE GORBACHEV LEADERSHIP\*\*\*

What happened to interethnic relations in the Soviet Union during the Perestroika period in many regards resembled corresponding developments in several countries of the Third World. In brief, unlike modern Western democratic nations which emerged from a lengthy process of nation-state formation, the Soviet Union remained underdeveloped in terms of her ethnic composition and nation structure. Now it has to pay the price for this.

Frustrated nation-building was putting immense strains on relations between ethnic groups. The fate of economic reforms, political reconstruction of the USSR and the recent power struggle were all connected with the ethnic situation in the country.

At the same time, there are remarkable differences between ethnic movements and nationalism in the Baltics, Ukraine, Moldavia, Transcaucasia, the Middle Volga region, and other parts of the former USSR. These differences are related not only to the different histories of the ethnic groups involved and their relations with each other, but to the differences in the processes of modernization in various ethnic regions of the country and to a specificity of ethnic competition there. For example, it is hardly by chance that more developed and modern forms of ethnic nationalism are felt strongest of all in those republics, like the Baltics, which have large urban strata educated in the native languages and interested in the promotion of their languages and cultures in order to secure their own positions in society. On the other hand, the comparatively small strata of this kind among the Finnish peoples of the Volga region explain the relative weakness of national movements there. The growing nationalism in various parts of the North Caucasian region in many respects is still premodern and is very much influenced by local tribal, clanal and parochial divisions. Recent disturbances in Chechnia are almost bloodless only because people there are afraid of vendetta that would inevitably follow if blood were shed. Ethnic competition in the North Caucasus often takes pure tribalist forms, while territorial disputes and demands are connected more with primordial feelings ("sacred land of ancestors," etc.) than with economic and linguistic considerations.

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\*\*\* For more details see Smith, 1990; Khazanov, 1991.



A similar situation exists in Central Asia. An ethnic consciousness there in some aspects still has a hierarchical character. An individual considers himself to belong to a given ethnic group vis-a vis other ones, but in the internal relations his parochial and/or kin-based tribal and clanal affiliations still have significant meaning and play an important role in his loyalties. Parochial divisions are particularly conspicuous in Tadjikistan and Uzbekistan, while in other Central Asian republics one meets with rather pure forms of tribalism.

Turkmenistan can be taken as an example. Before the revolution, the Turkmen consisted of many tribes: Yomud, Teke, Göklen, Ersari, and others. In the Soviet period, the war on tribalism was declared victorious more than once. But tribalism, in fact, continues to play a very important role in Turkmen politics, social consciousness, and everyday life. A tribal affiliation is always taken into account in personal relations, marriage arrangements, career promotion and in-fighting inside the ruling elite. It became a common practice for the First Secretary of the Communist party of Turkmenistan to put his tribesmen into the prominent and important positions in the government, administration, and even in scientific and cultural establishment, while regional party organizations sometimes resembled tribal fiefdoms.

The Gorbachev leadership did not have any consistent policy on interethnic relations, except that it wished to prevent the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It tried different approaches, and all of them failed. Soviet ethnic policy under Gorbachev passed through several stages:

- (1) Continuation of the previous nationalities policy connected with linguistic Russification and suppression of nationalism (1985-1986).
- (2) A policy that stepped up the fight against nationalism among non-Russian ethnic groups (the late 1986-mid 1987).
- (3) Attempts to reduce tension in ethnic relations with small and inconsistent concessions to non-Russian ethnic groups in the USSR (1988-end of 1989).
- (4) Admission of the necessity to transform the Soviet Union into a federative state, but at the same time confrontation with the union republics and postponing and watering down urgent reforms (late 1989-late 1990).

- (5) A struggle over the Union Treaty, an open conflict with the republics and renewed attempts to reach a compromise with some of them (late 1990-August 1991).
- (6) Attempts to preserve the Union in a form of confederation or as a single economic space in which central government would still retain important political and other means of control (August 1991-December 1991).

Meanwhile, the ethnic situation in the Soviet Union was getting out of Moscow's control. In many non-Russian parts of the country not so much political, but national (in fact ethnic) mass movements emerged. Some of these movements having undergone a rapid process of radicalization and becoming more and more anticommunist, came to power in several republics (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Armenia, Georgia), thus adding an ideological aspect to their conflict with Moscow. In other non-Russian republics and autonomies the growing discontent resulted in alliance between different social strata, in which nationalism became a rally point. One could also observe a political struggle and split in the non-Russian political elites between national communists, who tended to ally with the corresponding national movements and national nomenklaturas, who before August 1991 sought agreement with the Moscow center. However, in 1990-1991 even the national nomenklaturas in growing numbers began to play the nationalist card.

As a result, a base of support for the central Soviet leadership was constantly diminishing. However, Gorbachev even after the August putsch, still wished to preserve de facto the bankrupt venture called the USSR. In this belated and futile attempt he lost his sense of reality and without ceremony was shown the door by the leaders of constituent republics.

#### IV. INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE CIS

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States did not and could not solve a problem of relations between the constituent states, and even more so, interethnic relations in the country.

In the Soviet Union the ruling Communist party-based structures had collapsed before alternative forces with a firm support from specific strata of society became strong enough to compete for power. No wonder that at present all politically active elements, including former Communists, are striving to exploit the "national idea". Given the demise of central

power, ethno-politics will be a long-term phenomenon in the CIS. To acquire, or to strengthen their prestige many leaders are appealing to ethnic nationalism and populism. Today such leaders are opposed by even more radical nationalists.

In a situation in which ethnicity remains the only common political language for millions of the former Soviet people, all kinds of tension between different republics and autonomies, be it political, economic, or any other, are easily translated into ethnic ones. Nationalistic demands remain the means for political mobilization of the masses, and an overt or covert goal of various political movements is very simple: to provide the best conditions to members of their own ethnic groups, if necessary at the expense of all others. In many non-Russian parts of the country these ideas turned out to be more attractive to ordinary people, political elites, and even to educated middle strata than abstract ideas of pluralistic liberal democracy.

No wonder some republics, like Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaidzan, and to a significant extent even the Baltics, have adopted "nationalism by blood" as their new ideology. Others, like Ukraine, Kazakhstan, or Kyrgyzstan, have declared for various reasons their allegiance to "nationalism by soil" and wish to achieve national state consolidation. However, ethnic nationalism also plays a growing role in their political life, and an ethnic peace there is in fact very fragile. Suffice it to say that all political organizations, parties, and movements in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (with the exception of the former Communist Party) have been organized or have split along ethnic lines.

Until recently, the situation in Russia in many respects was different from the situation in non-Russian parts of the country. Contrary to the latter, in Russia the popular idea of sovereignty had not so much an ethnic, as primarily an economic and social orientation. In other republics, at first mass national movements emerged, then either they achieved a victory in elections, or forced their national communists and national nomenklaturas to make a declaration of sovereignty and independence. In Russia, it all started with a similar declaration, but the proclaimed sovereignty did not so much concern the ethnicity as the nation. However, it is still difficult for many ethnic Russians to free themselves from a certain empire-oriented psyche and from identifying the Soviet Union with Russia. Only a few years ago national movements in Russia were mainly represented by people pursuing far-

right and chauvinistic positions. Now, many representatives of the Russian liberal and democratic movement, like Travkin, Popov, Sobchak, and others have begun to play with nationalistic slogans and to oppose the sovereignty of the autonomies of the Russian Federation. The Eltsin government and particularly the Russian parliament are also gravitating toward more hard-line policy in interrepublican and interethnic relations. There is a growing alarm in many non-Russian republics that Russia will take the positions of the former all-Union Moscow center and will try to dictate her will to other states of the Commonwealth.

At present tensions in interethnic relations in the CIS are felt simultaneously along several lines:

(1) Relations between Russians and non-Russians. The relations of Russians with other ethnic groups in the USSR were defined by the political domination of the former. As a result of the Soviet government's long and purposeful migration policy, Russians make up a significant minority in many of the constituent and autonomous republics; in many of the autonomous formations of the Russian Federation they make up even a majority of the population. Many Russians have a negligent attitude towards the culture and traditions of the native population and refuse to learn the local languages. All of this provokes serious friction, day to day.

Another source of friction is the difference in the social structure of the Russians and native populations. The majority of the former in non-Russian republics occupy specific socioeconomic niches, in which the native population is underrepresented. As a result, a tense situation is created in which class differences take on ethnic colors, and social mobility strikes ethnic boundaries. For example, complaints are often heard in Central Asia and the North Caucasus that the movement of the rural population to the cities is made more difficult due to the number of Russians settled there. In turn, the Russian population in the non-Russian republics complains about discrimination because a significant number of privileged positions in the local leadership apparatus, as well as in science, education, etc., are reserved for representatives of the native population. An elevation of the status of native languages also puts Russians at a disadvantage. In addition, the citizenship laws adopted in the Baltic republics discriminate against the Russian minorities. A call to defend them, which is becoming popular in Russia, and secessionist tendencies by Russian minorities in several

republics (Moldova, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Estonia) further aggravate both the relations of Russians with indigenous populations, and the relations of the Russian Federation with the other states of the CIS and the Baltic republics.

(2) Relations between non-Russian ethnic groups. Relations between many non-Russian ethnic groups of the former Soviet Union, especially those bordering each other or living in the same area, are also often tense. It is sufficient to cite examples of the Azerbaidjanians and Armenians, the Georgians and Armenians, the Georgians and Azerbaidjanians, the Uzbeks and Tadjiks, the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, the Kyrgyz and Tadjiks, the Moldavians and Ukrainians, the Ingush and Ossetinians, the Tatars and Bashkirs. This list can be substantially extended. Several conflicts go back many centuries. However, the territorial delimitation and the borders redrawn in the Soviet period have been far from well-thought out. Sometimes (as in the case of Karabakh, in Central Asia, and in the North Caucasus) they intentionally ignored the ethnic composition of the territories, a condition that was further aggravated by subsequent changes in ethnic composition that have occurred for a variety of reasons. This often gives new facets to old conflicts.

For many historical reasons, social stratification frequently corresponded with ethnicity in many territories of the Tsarist Russian empire, and to a certain extent, of the Soviet Union as well. The consolidation of non-Russian ethnic groups into modern or modernizing nations during the Soviet period has been accompanied by serious changes in their social composition and by growing ethnic competition, and consequent tension.

Besides, the ethnic composition of the majority of non-Russian republics is very complicated. Many of them have numerous ethnic minorities living fairly compactly on their territory. Some of them have autonomous formations, others not. In both circumstances, their relations with the dominant ethnic group of a given republic and its elites are usually rather tense. Ethnic competition for economic resources and capital investments, attempts to homogenize and broaden the ethnic territory by the dominant ethnic groups, and sometimes even their cultural-linguistic chauvinism in relations with minorities -- all of this makes the position of the latter quite vulnerable. Ethnic minorities often view this situation as discrimination and strive to achieve, or to elevate, their autonomous status. This, in turn, involves accusation of separatism and betrayal of republican interests by members of the ethnic

majorities in corresponding republics. The Gagauz--Moldavian, or Abkhaz--and Ossetinian--Georgian conflicts, or the desire of Lezgin and Kumyks to secede from Daghestan, are only some examples of this type of conflict.

(3) The problem of dispersed and exiled ethnic groups. Not just the nationalistic policies of the political elites, but also real cultural, religious and other differences, as well as ethnic competition, fuel prejudices, ill-will and discrimination against dispersed and/or exiled ethnic groups. Jews, Germans, Greeks, Crimean Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, Kurds, Gypsies and several others, suffer at the hands of ethnic majorities.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND PROGNOSSES

Contrary to some other, more homogeneous communist countries of East Europe, like Poland and Hungary, an economic and political crisis in the Soviet Union is accompanied by a crisis in ethnic relations. With respect to interethnic relations many ethnic groups in the Soviet Union have practically missed the XXth century. They are only entering now a stage in development that modernized nations in Western Europe have already left behind.

Although political predictions with respect to the post-Soviet Union are to a certain extent speculative, some prognoses for the country's ethnic situation in the near future are appropriate.

Among the ethnic tensions and conflicts that will continue to influence developments in the post-Soviet Union one can point to:

### (1) Ethnic competition in economic, political, and linguistic spheres.

This exists in almost all multi-ethnic states, and many of the republics of the former USSR remain multi-ethnic. Economic difficulties, which are impossible to overcome quickly, will only make the situation worse and increase the struggle for control over natural resources, industrial enterprises and key export commodities within individual republics and autonomies (like Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Yakutia), and between them. Thus, in Central Asia land and water disputes in which members of different ethnic groups are directly involved, will aggravate relations in the region.

The desire to achieve higher political status and to reserve preferential treatment, privileged positions and high level jobs for members of one's own ethnic group can also

intensify ethnic tension. The struggle for expansion of an ethnic group's language use in administrative practice, education and culture is connected not only with the growth of ethnic awareness and a desire to prevent acculturation, but also with more mundane purposes: to place members of one's own ethnic group in more advantageous positions vis-a-vis competing members of other ethnic groups.

As a result, many ethnic groups, like Tuvinians, Bashkirs, or Buryats, following the example of the Chechens and Tatars, will try to achieve more independence and/or to raise the status of their political formations, while those who lack them will try to create something similar. Such a desire has already been expressed by the Poles, Kumyks, Lezgin, Balkars, Karachay, Nogay, Shapsug, and others. In many cases, this effort can threaten the existing political formations and offend the interests of other ethnic groups. The territorial integrity of Moldova and Georgia are already threatened, as well as of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Checheno-Ingushetia, and even Daghestan and Tadjikistan. In the future, other republics and autonomies could also be threatened.

(2) Territorial disputes and conflicts. A conflict over Karabakh is only one, and the best known, conflict of this sort. At present not only the Armenians and Azerbaidjanians, but also the Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Moldavians, Gagauz, Bashkirs, Volga Tatars, Kalmyks, Georgians, Ossetians, Avar, Chechen Ingush, Balkar, Karachay, Kabardinians, Uzbeks, Tadjiks, Kyrgyz, Buryat, and many other ethnic groups are already involved in territorial disputes and conflicts, and their number is growing.

Thus in Central Asia territorial claims and counter-claims are already laid by Tadjiks and Uzbeks (on Bukhara, Samarkand, the Zerafshan oasis, parts of the Fergana Valley, and some other territories), Uzbeks and Kyrgyz (on the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley), Uzbeks and Kazakhs (on some territories along the Syr-Daria and Arys' Rivers), Kyrgyz and Tadjiks (on the Northern Pamirs, the alpine pastures in the Alay and Transalay ranges, and some other territories), Turkmen and Kazakhs (on the Mangyshlak peninsula).

(3) The problem of people living outside their constituent states and autonomies. At present, in the Commonwealth of Independent States there are about 60 million such people; about 25 million of them are Russians. Events of the last several years have demonstrated that their situation and relations with the predominant ethnic groups in the corresponding

republics and autonomies are often the source of conflict. Attempts to lessen this problem via bilateral treaties between individual republics of the CIS which guarantee the rights of ethnic minorities so far have not brought positive results.

(4) The problem of dispersed and exiled ethnic groups. This includes such ethnic groups as the Jews, Germans, Greeks, Crimean Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, Kurds, and several others. Their situation in the circumstances of growing inter-ethnic conflicts could get even worse because they are often put in the role of the scapegoat. The first three groups have the alternative to emigrate, but the other groups have nowhere to go. At the same time, as the example of the Meskhetian Turks shows, their return to their homeland will almost certainly meet with opposition from nationalistic forces in the corresponding regions of the CIS.

(5) The problem of refugees from ethnic conflicts. By September 1991, there were already about 710,000 of them, or 1,000,000-1,200,000, if the number of those who were forced to abandon their homes due to unstable circumstances, pressure from other ethnic groups, or a lowered ethnic status is added to the number of refugees. So far only a comparatively small number of Russians have left the Baltic republics and Moldova, but their exodus from Central Asia and Azerbaidjan has increased significantly. Yeltsin has stated several times that Russians living outside Russia will have to be granted not only the right but the possibility of returning to Russia should they so desire. However, in the conditions of the economic crisis it is not so easy to move. Moreover, the influx into Russia of a large number of refugees and migrants could complicate the political situation because these people tend to ally with anti-democratic and chauvinistic movements.

In all probability, in the near future, ethnic nationalism fraught with tension and conflicts will remain one of the major political forces in the former Soviet Union. However, if the development of the country happens along the lines of political and economic pluralism and a civil society emerges at least in some of its constituent states, then it will be possible to avoid some of the interethnic conflicts and to alleviate others, or at least to give them more or less civilized forms.

Still, it seems unlikely that the CIS alone is capable of working out efficient means and mechanisms to solve already existing and forthcoming ethnic conflicts. It would be also



unrealistic to hope that an improvement in the economic situation, for which in any case there is at present little hope, will solve the problem. Under the circumstances, the need for a direct or indirect involvement of the Western countries to prevent and alleviate these conflicts will inevitably increase. To be able to do it the Western governments should not be taken unawares, particularly because a clear understanding of the current ethnic situation in the CIS is feasible and some future conflicts are quite predictable.

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