
Why Ethnic Politics in Russia Will Return

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Guzel Yusupova¹
Durham University

Setting aside debates over how ethnocentric Russia's contemporary nation-building strategy is and whether this strategy began before or after Putin, it is important to consider the effects of this strategy on Russian society.² How is the increasingly ethnicized, Russian-centric form of official nationalism changing perceptions of what Russia is? I argue that the current social mobilization around language and border issues in Russia's [ethnic republics](#) results, to a large extent, from ambiguity in how people understand Russia's national identity. Most likely, problems stemming from this lack of clarity will only deepen, and ethnic politics will again become an important arena for most ethnic regions of the Russian Federation to bargain with the central government. In part, this is because both the majority and minority groups are politicizing ethnicity today: ethnic minorities are promoting ethnic symbolism from the bottom up while the representatives of the dominant Russian ethnicity work [top down](#) through legislation, symbolic politics, and other nation-building practices.

Hierarchies of Meaning

The principal ambiguity of Russia's nation-building debates is the confusion between two dichotomies in thinking of how to formulate the country's identity. The first dichotomy involves the question of whether Russia is a state of ethnic Russians or a multi-ethnic nation. Importantly, this debate is not about civic versus ethnic understandings of nationhood or exclusive or inclusive citizenship (immigrants are not taken into account in the debate), but rather whether the country is defined by one or many different ethnic groups. The second dichotomy involves whether Russia, a federative state on paper, is

¹ Guzel Yusupova is a Junior Research Fellow in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University, UK.

² See: Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Eds.), [The New Russian Nationalism Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-2015](#), Oxford University Press, 2016; Marlene Laruelle, "[Misinterpreting Nationalism: Why Russkii is Not a Sign of Ethnonationalism](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 416, January 2016; Andrey Shcherbak and Kristina Sych, "[Trends in Russian Nationalities Policy](#)," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 64:6, 2017, pp. 311-328; and J Paul Goode, "[Russia's Ministry of Ambivalence: The Failure of Civic Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Russia](#)," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35:2, 2019, pp. 140-160.

still an ethnofederation in practice. Those living in ethnic republics are much more likely to experience the presence of federal symbolism and are more likely to be aware of ethnic hierarchies both on the regional and country level than those living in non-ethnic regions.

Which of these definitions is prioritized by the federal authorities, regional authorities, and different elite groups? For those who benefit from the promotion of Russian culture, it is obviously the first dichotomy. Russia, as a state of ethnic Russians, makes the most sense, as seen by the numerous current policies aimed at strengthening the “spiritual bonds” of the Russian state based on Russian-centric cultural references. For those who benefit (or lose out) from the redistribution of resources between the federal center and the regions, it is the second dichotomy, that of an ethnofederation, that is the most important.

These two definitions of Russia are usually ordered hierarchically, in the sense that both opponents and proponents of contemporary nation-building policies base their argumentation prioritizing one or the other dichotomy and their choice within this dichotomy. Can Tatars force ethnic Russians to learn the Tatar language in Tatarstan? The answer may be “no” because Russia is a classic nation-state based on the culture and values of the core Russian ethnicity. Or the answer may be “yes” because Russia is an ethnofederation in which ethnic republics have rights allowing them to impose identity elements on their residents. It is a classic chicken or egg dilemma, despite the fact that both sides discuss two closely related questions but which differ in essence.

Why can we not equate the idea of Russia as an ethnic Russian state with a unitary, non-federal, state, or a multi-ethnic nation with an ethnofederation? The answer lies in the fear of arising ethnic conflicts. It is not safe for the federal elite to equate the state with a single ethnic group while there are important cultural and linguistic differences within the population; Vladimir Putin’s regime regularly mentions the risk that an imposed Russian nationalism would destroy the country’s multinational harmony. Conversely, it is not safe for regional elites to equate their region with a single ethno-nation since there are only a few homogeneous ethnic regions in Russia – namely Tyva, Ingushetia, and Chechnya – while in many cases, the titular group is an ethnic minority, such as in Khakassia (12 percent), Karelia (7 percent), and Komi (24 percent).

In the 1990s, strong regions used nationalist movements to scare the federal center with potential secession in order to [gain](#) more autonomy. However, since Putin’s arrival to power, both regions and ethnic minorities have become much weaker from the perspective of legal power. As Wesleyan University professor Peter Rutland [noted](#), Putin “tried to restructure state institutions to limit any possibility of using ethnicity to challenge Moscow’s political power.” Nonetheless, this does not mean that it is secure for the Kremlin to openly articulate its nationalizing agenda. Rather, the regime forwards new assimilationist policies through gradual, tentative implementations in order to test the reactions of ethnic minorities. Until recently, ethnic regions were tacitly accepting such

policies because each was only a modest step toward cultural homogenization. They knew they could adapt to slight changes by other means while looking to benefit from their silence.

The Logic of Bargaining

In Putin's speeches, the importance of Russian culture and language has been highlighted more and more as part of his strategy of legitimizing his power by appealing to patriotism endowed with ethno-cultural content. The populations in non-ethnic regions and Russians in ethnic regions perceive this policy as commonsensical and typical of a nation-state. In the meantime, the adult populations in ethnic regions have experienced a gradual transformation from being titular minorities with privileged rights within their territories toward a step-by-step abolition of these rights without any top-down articulation of these policies, and for the most part without public debate. Why did they not oppose this silent reduction of an ethnic-federative system that privileges their rights and instead merely support Moscow's positions? Is it possible that Chechens and Tatars support Putin even more than ethnic Russians?

Researchers have suggested that backing Putin has helped some regions gain more benefits from the federal center based on the argument that high support for the regime during election time is better secured in regions with local autocratic measures, which is often—but not systematically (e.g., Republic of Sakha/Yakutia)—the case for ethnic republics. In many cases, these regions are ethnic republics. But the question is, why? The explanation goes back to the institutionalized logic of bargaining between the federal center and regions dating from the 1990s, when nationalist movements were bargaining chips for greater autonomy.³ Only now, the whole regional electorate has become this chip. Back then, the politics of this bargaining were well articulated in public discourses. The “benefits” logic of this bargain is still relevant for some ethnic republics (this includes the “Kadyrovism” phenomenon, which my fieldwork has upheld⁴). However, will this kind of support for Putin be as strong as it is now if the center fails to provide financial benefits to the republics (considering the current economic crisis)? And what happens if there is a rise in popular resistance to assimilative politics in ethnic republics as we see happening now in Tatarstan over language and identity issues?⁵

³ See: Elise Giuliano, “[Secessionism from the Bottom Up: Democracy, Nationalism, and Local Accountability in the Russian Transition](#),” *World Politics*, 58, 2010, pp. 276-310; J. Paul Goode, “[The Fall and Rise of Regionalism?](#)” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 26:2, 2010, pp. 233-56; Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, “[Chechnya Versus Tatarstan. Understanding Ethnopolitics in Post-Communist Russia](#),” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 47:2, 2016, pp. 13-22.

⁴ According to interviews and focus groups in Tatarstan for the project “Patriotism in Contemporary Russia” (2016–2017) that was supported by the Foundation for Support of Liberal Education at the Center for Historical Research at the St. Petersburg branch of the Higher School of Economics (HSE).

⁵ See: Guzel Yusupova, “[Making Ethnic Boundaries in the Society of Religious Renaissance: Islam and Everyday Ethnicity in Post-Soviet Tatarstan](#),” *National Identities*, 20:4, June 2018.

The Politicization of Ethnicity

In recent years, ethnicity in Russia has been politicized from both sides. The dominant Russian ethnicity is being highlighted from the [top down](#) in legislation, symbolic politics, and in nation-building policies in general, while ethnic minorities are creating their ethnic symbolism from the bottom up. The [reason for the latter](#) is that an identification as an ethnic minority becomes a highly valued social resource to resist authoritarianism as well as an economic resource in neoliberal settings. Ethnic minorities in Russia develop new, and adjust old, practices of ethnic reproduction in the context of a plexus of nationalizing authoritarianism, incipient market economy, and globalization.

The contemporary everyday life of Russia's ethnic minorities consists of various ethnically labeled activities in the social sphere, the Internet, and local economy. Ethnic minority culture today is not just folk dancing in traditional costumes (as often presented on Russian television) but very usable, daily, rooted practices first introduced by ethnic entrepreneurs and then picked up by ordinary people. The revitalization of minority languages, ethnic symbolism in fashion, and the spread of small enterprises aimed at ethnically oriented customers and tourists are [gaining](#) momentum toward their tipping points when ethnicity [becomes](#) an essential source for self-identification. These mundane practices and ethnicity commodifications result in a politicization of ethnicity in the ethnic regions.

Ethnicity also becomes one of the few possible areas to build horizontal ties of trust and support in a situation of state/society alienation, or, to put it slightly differently, to create social networks that facilitate social mobilization despite [covert](#) repressions. Ethnic culture on this front [serves](#) as a crucial, and sometimes only, basis for such cohesion. The peaceful protests in Ingushetia against new border delimitations with Chechnya are the best example of this.

In a deeper analysis, two questions should be addressed. Why has ethnicity suddenly become an important source of self-identification for ethnic minorities? Why have policies of [gradual assimilation](#) not created the opposite trend of cultural homogenization and the adoption of a Russian ethnic identity instead? On the one hand, ethnic minority identification was an [important factor](#) of administrative mobility in regional power structures in many ethnic regions at least until the early 2010s. On the other hand, the generation that grew up in the 1990s, when almost every national republic experienced a renaissance, had a distinctive pattern of socialization because they were surrounded by ethnic and regional symbols that are absent nowadays. The 1990s, therefore, created a new generation of ethnic entrepreneurs.

Moreover, the importance of the preservation of ethnic culture is tied to globalization and glocalization trends, the importance of local politics, and growing internal tourism. In Tatarstan, the tradition of considering minority language speakers to be of rural

origination has been replaced by a language ideology that considers knowing the Tatar language well as having gained one's education at a prestigious school. Of course, related processes of a revival of interest in, or the prestige of, ethnic minority culture does not happen everywhere on equal terms and in the same condition. It develops at a higher scale in ethnically homogeneous regions like Ingushetia and Chechnya or regions where the titular ethnicity has been historically powerful like Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Such processes are happening simultaneously, though in different degrees, in many of the ethnic republics of the Russian Federation.

Conclusion

Today, ethnicity as a source of social cohesion and symbolic power is used not just by Kremlin policymakers for the consolidation of Russians around the regime but also by those who aim to resist top down trends of homogenization and centralization. This latter aspect is relatively new in Putin's Russia, even if it was common in late Soviet times and in the 1990s. It is a trend that will probably grow again considering that ethnicity is operationalised in Russia simultaneously from the top down and the bottom up—regardless of the current invisibility of ethnic issues in Russian media and academia.

Misunderstandings that come from the ambiguity of Russia's nationalizing project and the prioritization of the ethnic approach in nation-building in a multi-ethnic country may lead to social cleavages. Due to this ambiguity, ethnic Russians genuinely believe that they live in a nation-state where the dominance of Russian ethnicity is to be taken for granted, while at the very same time, ethnic minorities see themselves as living in an ethno-federal system that prompts them to claim special rights on their territories. Although it seems that these two beliefs do not contradict each other since they address different issues, they do, and this mutually exclusive interpretation could exacerbate domestic cleavages.

In the years to come, the Russian leadership could be pushed to make revisions to its domestic diversity management and nation-building schemes. By then, researchers should not be misled by the lack of media coverage and public conversations about ethnic issues in Russia's regions and continue scrutinizing the embeddedness of ethnicity into everyday social interactions and politics.