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Existing Federal System Said a Threat to Rights of All Russia's Citizens

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

The existing system of ethnic autonomies in the Russian Federation &mdash including both republics, such as Tatarstan, and autonomous districts, such as Chukotka &mdash "violates the civil rights" of all Russian citizens and should be replaced with a system of autonomies at the district and settlement level, according to a Moscow commentator.

On the one hand, Yevgeny Trifonov argues, the current system means that the rights of non-titular nationalities, such as ethnic Russians, are violated on the territories of these structures, and on the other, it means that the rights of the titular nationalities are violated beyond their borders, such as in the case of Tatars.

And both because of such violations and because of the "ethnocratic" approach of governments in both places, not only are the rights of all Russian citizens violated but many of them are increasingly influenced by nationalist and religious extremism, a development that threatens the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.

This is not an entirely new argument: many Russian officials in recent years have called for the elimination of the national republics and districts, and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin certainly appeared to have that as a goal when he was president with his now stalled program of amalgamating smaller non-Russian federal subjects with larger and predominantly ethnic Russian ones.

But three aspects of Trifonov's presentation are innovative and may set the stage for a new debate about how the Russian state should be organized in the future, especially because his proposals are likely to appear, at least to some, as offering something for almost all sides rather than being a clear tilt toward only one of them.

First, unlike most critics of the existing system, the Gazeta.ru commentator does not focus on the violation of the rights of ethnic Russians alone but also on the problems non-Russians have either because many of them live outside the borders of their titular area or because they do not have one.

Second, again in contrast to most other writers, he suggests that regions with ethnic Russian majorities are often promoting a Russian nationalist agenda in exactly the same way that he and other authors routinely assert that the leaders of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan or the republics of the North Caucasus are doing.

And third, instead of doing as most others do and simply calling for the suppression of all national autonomies, Trifonov argues that the Russian Federation should, via constitutional change, shift to a system of smaller but ethnically-based districts that would protect the rights of all groups, minority and majority alike, without creating the basis for ethnocratic elites.

The Gazeta.ru commentator begins his argument by saying that "the ethnocratic regimes in Russia's autonomies began to be formed under Stalin, grew in strength during 'stagnation,' and after the collapse of the USSR assumed their final form, having strengthened with the help of their own constitutions the rights not of nations but of the ruling clans."

In many ways, he suggests, the system of Russian autonomies "recalls the reservation sin of the U.S., Canada and Brazil, who preserve the backwardness of Indian tribes, subordinate them to the arbitrary actions of traditional leaders, and isolate the indigenous population from the remaining residents of these countries by limiting their civil rights."

Trifonov continues with a point few other make, stating that, "The rights of a citizen of the U.S. or Brazil on the territories of [these] reservations are also limited. [That individual] cannot acquire property, live or even conduct business there without the permission of the powers that be."

The same situation exists in the Russian Federation now, he says, because titular nationalities are "deprived of the chance to develop their languages and cultures" for those of their members who live outside the borders of the republics bearing their name; while at the same time, "the rights of the non-titular nationalities are limited on the territories of the autonomies."

Within these autonomies, members of the titular nationality invariably insist on a disproportionate share of positions in the government and then use them to promote a nationalist vision. The situation in Tatarstan is typical of what goes on in all such autonomies and even more generally.

"Like any nationalist version of history, [the Tatar one] is simple: we (Russians, Tatars, Germans, Jews, or Papuans, it is necessary to stress) are a good, honest, hard-working and cultured people." And all would be well, "if only the neighbors" who do not share these qualities "did not interfere."

Not surprisingly, the members of other nations respond in kind, creating a vicious cycle. Thus, no one should be shocked that "in new Russian history textbooks there is now almost no comment about the enormous role the Tatars, Bashkirs, Kalmyks, Germans and Ossetians played in the creation, development and defense of Russia."

"A multi-national country, if it wants to preserve itself, must know and respect its peoples, regardless of their number, and preserve their culture, languages, and traditions," Trifonov continues. But autonomous formations of the kind the Russian Federation now has do not do that: they promote the "power of the local nomenklatura," but not the nations themselves.

Indeed, he says, "the establishment of autonomies in Soviet times was a crime: the majority of peoples of Russia lived in a dispersed fashion, in separate villages and groups of villages among other peoples" rather than in compact quasi-nation states as the Soviet system of federalism presupposed.

That arrangement, he continues, meant that many members of titular nationalities found themselves beyond the borders of the autonomies bearing their names and thus subject either to assimilatory pressures or the appeals of nationalists, and that many peoples who were never given autonomy were deprived of a chance to defend their cultures.

There is a way out of this often tragic situation: the creation of a large number of smaller national districts. The Soviet system operated in part in that way until the early 1930s when such districts were generally suppressed, and there are a few national districts still in existence to show the way.

These include the Anabar national (Dolgan-Evenk) *ulus* in Sakha, the Nanay district in Khabarovsk kray, Tofalariya in Irkutsk oblast, and the Wepsy national district in Karelia, but all of these are regulated by regional legislation. Trifonov urges a national law and even constitutional change to provide such districts for all groups.

Such a law, he suggests, would allow for the creation of such a national district whenever the members of a particular nation constituted a certain share of the population, perhaps as small as 25 percent &mdash and then provide for schools, media and other institutions in the language of that group but not impose them on others.

Trifonov is almost certainly right that such arrangements would provide expanded protection to many smaller peoples &mdash but his ideas are certain to be opposed not only by larger

nationalities that would see them as reducing their current status but also by those who would object to its cost and the way in which this plan would change the face of Russia.

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