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Group Proposes an 'Ethnic Russian' Republic

By Paul Goble

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Staunton ◙ In a move that a Russian commentator has suggested is something between a provocation by Russian regionalists and an effort by a federal district to gain more autonomy, a group called the Civic Initiative for the Establishment of the Zalesskaya Rus Republic has proposed transforming the Central Federal District into an ethnic Russian republic.

While it is unlikely that Moscow would ever approve such a measure, it is intriguing on a couple of grounds. For one, this draft measure calls attention to the growth and increasing sophistication of regionalist groups among ethnic Russians, at least some of which appear ready to piggyback on federal districts to promote their agendas.

About The Columnist

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Second, it suggests, one commentator has written, that some federal district officials may be prepared to cooperate, or at least to exploit these regionalist groups in hopes this will give them greater freedom than they current enjoy vis-à-vis the center.

And third, in the longer term, this draft measure is yet another indication of something critics of the federal district system set up by then-President Vladimir Putin in 2000 had pointed out early on: Countries divided into a relatively small number of political units face a far greater risk of disintegrating than those with 50 (the United States) or 83 (the Russian Federation, at present).

The Civic Initiative's proposal takes the form of a 1200-word draft law that has been published on the portal of the Russian National Democratic Alliance. Under its terms, the new federal subject would unite 19 current subjects of the Russian Federation into a Zalesskaya Rus Republic.

The purpose of uniting them, the draft says, is "the creation of an ethnic Russian national state formation within the Russian Federation and the acceleration of social-economic development of a region having key importance for the Russian Federation and also the raising of the standard of living of the population of the subjects indicated."

As its name implies, the new unit would have the status of a republic, something Russian nationalists and regionalists have long complained that Moscow never has given to ethnic Russians.

That is in light of the facts that ethnic Russians make up roughly 80 percent of the Russian Federation's population, and their culture and religion receive tactic and indirect support from the federal government.

Most of the provisions of the proposed law deal with the transition from the existing federal subjects to this new one and the coordination of laws and practices.

But these legal details are far less significant &mdash given the improbable prospect that any of them would be adopted &mdash than the political calculations behind them, calculations that may link federal district officials together with Russian regionalist and nationalist activists.

And that highlights why this idea is so dangerous. It would create a Russian republic within the Russian Federation, something that in turn would exacerbate tensions between Russians and non-Russians and promote the disintegration of the Russian Federation in much

the same way that the rise of Russia within the Soviet Union helped destroy that country.

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