# Self-Determination Issues in Central Eurasia

## By Robert M. Cutler



A map of the areas discussed in this report.

Central Eurasia, which is what specialists have taken to calling most of the geographic area once covered by the Soviet Union, has a long history of ethnopolitical complications and related struggles focused on collective identities. Tsarist Russia had moderate success in keeping these within bounds, partly because it was willing to tolerate such collective identities as social constructions autonomous of its own political rule.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had a more insistently penetrative ideology that left little room for cultural, ethnic, or religious autonomy. The Soviet regime tapped the mass communications technologies of the twentieth century to pursue its control over all populations and to implement its program of political socialization. All ethnically based opposition to Moscow's rule was driven underground. The all-pervasive nature of the

Soviet political and security apparatus made calls for any significant sort of self-determination extremely difficult to sustain. When Gorbachev combined economic reform (leading to economic disruption and attendant problems of supply) with political empowerment (permitting Soviet citizens to voice complaints publicly without the fear of repression), he unwittingly unleashed two elements necessary for a political explosion. Long discussed (but little understood) in Soviet political writings, the so-called "national question" became the fuse igniting the internal conflicts that burst forth across the Soviet regions in the late 1980s, as the USSR collapsed, and into the 1990s.

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# Empire to Socialist Union

The Empire of all the Russias, the formal name for the Russian Empire, was a vast territory comprising dozens of ethnic and religious groups. The bureaucracy and the tsar's armies kept this imperium together with strong support from ethnic Russians spread throughout the empire. Ethnopolitical conflicts within the empire itself were relatively rare.

As the Principality of Muscovy expanded to become the Empire of all the Russias, it encountered non-Russian ethnic groups living across the whole territory of Central Eurasia. At the same time, ethnic Russians were spreading outward across this vast region, stretching from the Baltics to what is now the Chinese border. In large part, this migration was the flight of peasants seeking to escape the conditions of Russian serfdom imposed by local governors, which were much more difficult to bear than those in Western Europe. By the mid-1800s, a multiethnic empire had emerged, with St. Petersburg and the tsar exercising political and military control from the East Slav territories to the South Caucasus (then called, from the Muscovite perspective, Transcaucasus).

Not content with this vast expanse, the tsar called for new military drives into the territories ruled by the Central Asian khans. These incursions into Central Asia spearheaded a new flow of ethnic Russians into a region where there was already an intermingling of ethnicities, who for the most part lived relatively tranquilly side by side.

The USSR filled the vacuum created by the tsarist regime's collapse during the First World War, and after the Russian Civil War, which lasted until 1922, the Soviets extended their sway throughout the whole territory of the empire. New mass media and other communications technologies permitted Soviet bureaucratic, military, and internal security controls to consolidate their reach more effectively in the early twentieth century than had been possible for the tsar, and new territories were incorporated on the periphery of the USSR. Although armed resistance to Soviet rule existed and persisted in some regions into the late 1940s, it was not until the late 1980s, under conditions of Gorbachev's glasnost, that self-determination struggles and conflicts between ethnic groups became a major form of political resistance.

Stalin's demographic engineering rendered Eurasia's ethnic map—a combination of mosaic and melting pot that varied according to subregion—still more varied than under tsarist rule. The brutal social engineering under Stalin included the starvation of the Ukrainian peasantry for political reasons and the deportation of entire ethnic groups, notably from the South Caucasus, into Central Asia. The Stalinist social experiment also included the relocation of vast numbers of Russians eastward across the Ural Mountains in the combined wake of industrialization, gulag exile, and flight from Hitler's armies.

Despite the imposition of Soviet control exercised by ethnic Russians and often through "Russified" minority elites, it was impossible to Russify all members of all minority peoples and groups. Under the empire, Russian philologists "gave" alphabets to peoples

whose only language was spoken, thus helping to create a new literary and cultural basis for old ethnic identities. Under Soviet rule, the government's academies of sciences and the major universities in the USSR were established in many of what are now the newly independent states. This new sense of unity was fostered to a large degree by a genuine ideology of fraternity and mutual aid that the Russians propagated throughout the Soviet Union and among the Soviet nationalities.

In the Soviet period, outbreaks of nationalist separatism were relatively rare, although not always far below the surface. Very often the sentiment was channeled into such matters as arguing over which republics would get the greater shares of capital investment under the next five-year plan. Separatism was present among the various movements of political dissidents and took the form of demands for independence, as in Georgia and the Baltic states. However, by and large the Soviet authorities coopted the ethnic elites by bringing them into the fringes of the Soviet establishment (the inner sanctum long remained overwhelmingly Russian) in exchange for assuring the quiescence of the non-Russians through material development and maintaining an increasing quality of life.

It was Moscow's appointment of an ethnic Russian to take over the leadership of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan that triggered, in 1986, the first widespread and widely reported ethnic clashes: four days of street fighting in the center of the capital, Almaty. Subsequently, in the late 1980s, the complicated Nagorno-Karabakh conflict broke out, and it was not long before bloody interethnic conflicts in the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia hit the front pages of Western newspapers as well.

# Self-Determination After the Soviet Collapse

Given the extreme variety of self-determination situations in the former Soviet area, it is helpful to delineate five geographical regions and to discuss them one by one. Within the former Soviet area we may distinguish: the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Russia itself, the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), the non-Russian Slavic states (Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine), and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan).

## Baltic States

In the Baltics there are some significant self-determination issues regarding various non-Baltic minorities, but the most important ones have been more or less resolved. The most notable issue concerns the Russian community in Estonia around the city of Narva (and the transborder region) and the rights of Slavophone communities in the Baltics generally, especially in Latvia. The Narva situation was settled in the 1990s with the assistance of international European organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which advised Estonia on language legislation, although the recent revocation of the no-visa regime between Russia and the Baltic countries has entailed some problems for the Russian community there. The question of the Polish and Belarusian communities in south and southeast Lithuania has generally not received attention, because these communities have been unable to mobilize to make significant political demands, due to relatively low levels of urbanization and income. For various other reasons, the Russians in Latvia have also garnered less attention.

## Russian Federation

In Russia itself, one found in the 1990s a plethora of self-determination situations usually focused on the desire of local elites in economically well-endowed regions to continue the autonomous and profitable pursuit of foreign trade relations that Gorbachev's reforms in the mid- and late 1980s had permitted. (The diamond industry in Sakha/Yakutia, for example, received a fair amount of Western press attention.) The definition of relations between the political center in Moscow and the "subjects of the Russian federation" (i.e., the regions) became a sort of cottage industry consuming the talents of a whole range of Russian and Western constitutional experts. With the well-known exception of Chechnya, none of these self-determination situations involved overtly, or even covertly, a demand for anything like political independence. The politi-

cal concessions granted to the leadership in petroleum-rich Tatarstan regarding autonomy of economic policy stand as canonical counterpoint to the economic devastation visited upon Chechnya.

In the North Caucasus region itself, Chechnya is the best-known case of a demand for self-determination by a majority ethnic population. Elsewhere in the Russian Federation, numerous minority ethnic groups find themselves in disadvantageous positions vis-à-vis the titular nationality or majority ethnic group. Such issues include, for example, questions about the transfer of part of North Ossetia, including the town of Mozdok, to Kabardino-Balkaria; the creation of a Cossack autonomous area in the Sunzhenskii district of Checheno-Ingushetia; the creation of a united Cherkessia to include Cherkessia, Kabarda, Adygeya, and coastal districts of the Krasnodar region; the restoration of a Cossack republic on the territory of the former Terek oblast; the creation of a Nogai republic in the eastern districts of the Stavropol region and northern Dagestan; and the creation of an Avar republic in the central and western parts of mountainous Dagestan, to name but a few. In other parts of the Russian Federation, there are numerous cases in which self-determination demands are driven by a combination of ethnic and economically motivated claims. Among these, the best-known are Bashkortostan, Sakha/Yakutia, and the special situation of the Kalinigrad oblast, sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania on the Baltic Sea.

## Non-Russian Slavic States

The non-Russian Slavic states are also characterized by ethnic conflicts having economic and political overtones. For example, Ukraine is subject to ethnoterritorial claims by minorities seeking autonomy within the unitary state, including the Russians and Russified Ukrainians in the Donbass as well as the Transcarpathian Hungarians in the west of the country, in addition to the special Crimean situation. The Transdnistrian situation in Moldova has been the subject of international preoccupation for nearly a decade, and even Belarus would be subject to ethnoterritorial claims and boundary issues, were it not for the dictatorial hand of President Lukashenka. On the positive side, OSCE involvement during the mid-1990s in the delicate situation of the Gagauz minority in Moldova led to a very significant positive resolution that remains a model for relations between a titular nationality and an ethnic minority in which the latter has gained a degree of self-determination.

## South Caucasus

The South Caucasus area is, like the North Caucasus, replete with self-determination issues and situations. The best-known are in Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Nakhichevan. The last of these exists today as an ethnic Azeri exclave and enjoys some autonomy within the Azerbaijan state structure, although it is also claimed as historical Armenian land by some Armenians in diaspora as well as by certain political parties in Armenia proper. In Georgia, disputes include the well-known Abkhazia conflict in the country's northwest; the lesser-known, and federally resolved, conflict with Ajaria in the southwest; the internationally mediated Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) conflict along the border with Russia; the increasingly conspicuous situation in Javakhetia, an ethnic Armenian region in the south of the country; and the internationally recognized situation of the Meskhetian Turks, a nationality deported by Stalin from Javakhetia and its neighboring region that has attracted a great deal of publicity in the West and whose return to its original territory has been mandated to Georgia by the Council of Europe.

## Central Asia

Central Asia is also riddled with self-determination issues. In Kazakhstan, the most significant issues are claims by the Russophones in the East Kazakhstan province and by the Cossacks in the west of the country. However, demands by Russians in the north of the country, bordering Siberia, are also significant, and this case needs to be distinguished from the East Kazakhstan situation. Due to the political geography of Kazakhstan, there are issues of regional self-determination even among those of Kazakh ethnicity. The oil-rich western provinces are alienated from the political center and seek a greater share of the energy revenues as well as greater latitude in determining what to do with these revenues. The regional prefects appointed by the political center are more loyal to the center than to the region, exacerbating the regional discontent.

In addition to Kazakhstan, self-determination issues arise in neighboring areas: in the existing autonomous region of Karakalpakstan and in likely claims for autonomy by Andijan, both in Uzbekistan; in the Gorny Badakhshan region of Tajikistan; and within both Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Central Asia is characterized also by ethnoterritorial and boundary issues that are at least partly self-determination issues. To give only a few examples, these include Uzbekistan's claims on the middle Amu Darya oasis, now in Turkmenistan, and its claims on Kazakhstan's lands between the Syr Darya and Arys rivers. Despite general agreement concerning state boundaries among the Central Asian countries, definitive demarcation of such boundaries has in general not been accomplished, and protests of vio-

lation of sovereignty by outside military forces (for example, in cross-border pursuit of rebel groups) have increased in recent years.

Nor can Islamic militancy or Muslim fundamentalism be excluded from considerations of self-determination. Their manifestations vary from country to country and are frequently a cover for (or combine with or rely partly upon) ethnically or regionally related subnational grievances, often with an economic basis. Such considerations shed light on the unrest among ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan (including Kyrgyzstan's military confrontation with Uzbekistan over the Sokh region as well as the ethnic Uzbek claims on southern Turkmenistan related to the allocation of scarce water resources), the ethnic-related civil war in Tajikistan (intertwined with the Afghanistan conflict), and ethnic conflicts that flow back and forth across the convoluted borders among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in the Ferghana Valley.

# Laboratory for Self-Determination Conflict Resolution

The above survey only touches the surface of self-determination issues in Central Eurasia. Nevertheless, it clearly emerges that in Central Eurasia, self-determination conflicts are high on the political agenda. This region saw some of the world's most widespread bloodshed throughout the 1990s, due to a series of acute issues that repeatedly reached even the front pages of Western newspapers.

Worst-case scenarios circulating at the time have, however, not been borne out, even if a few of the situations remain without definitive resolution. What is remarkable is how many of the self-determination conflicts have reached a modus vivendi, and how many feared conflicts did not break out.

Sheer exhaustion and destitution have played a role in attenuating some conflicts. Though such developments justify a certain grim-faced optimism, other more recent events—most notably the possibly destabilizing effects of the international response to Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia, particularly since the World Trade Center disaster—may give rise to a cautious pessimism.

Throughout Central Eurasia in the 1990s, regional international subgroupings emerged that could have helped to mollify self-determination conflicts. In fact, there is evidence that Western and global international organizations (the OSCE and European Union, for example) played important roles in resolving the most acute potential crises. Also, it is undeniable that international nongovernmental organizations are involved in many different ways in self-determination regions throughout the former Soviet area, helping to promote dialogue and delivering humanitarian assistance.

Domestic political reform is key to settling self-determination issues in many of the countries concerned, especially in Central Asia. To say this, however, inevitably glosses over the sometimes fascinating intricacies of individual situations. To give but one example, an excellent study from the mid-1990s concerning prospects for one of the potentially most destabilizing issues at the time—relations between ethnic Russians and Kazakhs in Kazakhstan—delineated no fewer than ten possible future scenarios: three separate types of administrative-territorial change, three different evolutionary paths for political-cultural relations between the two ethnic groups, civil war, Russian assimilation, continued Russian emigration, or a continuation of the erstwhile status quo.

Thus, different solutions may be attempted in different places, whether to solve existing conflicts or to prevent others from breaking out into the open. A new amendment to the Russian Federation's constitution permits the absorption of borderland areas such as Abkhazia, currently part of Georgia. A major European think tank has proposed a Caucasus Stability Pact with various types of legal-administrative arrangements to govern the relations of Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan and the relations of separatist regions of Georgia with the main body of the country. These ideas include the creation of new subregional groupings and a plethora of governance solutions involving pluralism and semi-autonomy, from classical federalism (as distinct from federacy and asymmetric state relations) to such unfamiliar or untested alternatives as associated states or common states.

The only thing that seems certain is that a rash of factors today will guarantee the continuation of ethnic-based

conflict in the former Soviet areas, with self-determination issues either in the forefront or lurking in the background. Deserving special mention is a set of factors more related to power and politics, which more immediately affect self-determination, and which cries for the latter directly invoke: the administrative status of the disputed region, the general political regime and its doctrine (for example, federalism vs. unitarism and the regime's response to demands for local self-government),

ethnic representation, center-periphery relations, individual and group human rights, and institutional public order and control (for example, ethnic composition of the local police and judiciary).

This list of proposed, actual, and possible resolutions to ethnic conflicts is in principle applicable as a framework for trying to understand self-determination struggles throughout the world. When examining Central Eurasia (the former Soviet areas), it is evident that this region is not only one

of the broadest geographical regions afflicted by such multiple and acute conflicts but also a genuine laboratory for the development of techniques to promote their resolution. Looking back on the emergence and evolution of self-determination conflicts in the 1990s, the international community has learned much about the causes and resolution of such conflicts by studying this region. The renewed international attention to the region since September 2001 gives new ground for optimism.

## Other Self-Determination Information from FPIF

Overview of Self-Determination Issues in Latin America, By Melina Selverston-Scher (April 2002)
Overview of Self-Determination Issues in Africa, By Thomas Turner (September 2001)
Overview of Self-Determination Issues in the Middle East, By Stephen Zunes (June 2001)

Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, By Sean L. Yom (December 2001)
Tskhinvali (South Ossetia), Georgia Conflict Profile, By Robert M. Cutler (November 2001)
Georgia/Abkhazia Conflict Profile, By Robert Cutler (October 2001)
Moldova/Transdnistria, By Robert Cutler (October 2001)
Uzbekistan, By Jim Lobe (October 2001)
Afghanistan, By Jim Lobe & Abid Aslam (September 2001)
Chechnya, By Robert M. Cutler (September 2001)

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