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DP 50

**NATIONALITIES AND
CONFLICTING ETHNICITY
IN POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA**

by Valery Tishkov

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PREFACE

In 1989, UNRISD launched a major research project on Ethnic Conflict and Development. Since then 14 case studies have been carried out in countries experiencing ethnic conflicts in different regions of the world. The research has sought to examine:

- the conditions under which ethnic conflicts arise and sustain themselves;
- the roles of economic, cultural, social and political factors in shaping ethnic consciousness and claims;
- the effects of development processes, state policies and international politics on the dynamics of ethnic conflicts;
- the interests and goals of ethnic movements, and what kinds of strategies and ideologies they pursue;
- the reasons why some ethnic conflicts become violent while others are regulated within existing political and constitutional structures; and
- the mechanisms which can be developed to prevent, contain or resolve such conflicts.

This paper forms part of the author's larger study on ethnic conflict and development in Russia. It opens with a discussion of methodological approaches to understanding the phenomenon of ethnicity in the contemporary world, focusing on post-Soviet theory and social practice. The author argues that the Soviet régime deliberately constructed ethno-national identities in order to build a state based on ethnic principles. Its "success" in producing powerful ethnic élites and nationalist ideology ultimately played an important role in the disintegration of the Soviet Union, as ethnicity and nationalism became an accessible and easily understandable basis for collective mobilization when central power and ideology collapsed.

Thus the immediate post-Soviet period saw the formation of ethnically-based political entities within the former Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. However, these new entities are themselves multi-ethnic in character: in order for the new states to survive, and to avoid ethnic unrest and possible renewed fracturing along ethnic lines, they must sooner or later abandon the conception of ethno-national state systems and build new nations based on common citizenship.

The paper argues that this is the dilemma of ethnic self-determination: although the creation of new states may in some cases be essential or inevitable, the search for "natural" or "just" borders, especially along ethnic lines, "is both absurd and extremely dangerous". The author advocates instead that cultural pluralism form the basis of a political formula for addressing the national question within the current borders of the states of the former Soviet Union, and he argues that the "*de-étatisation* of ethnicity and the de-ethnicization of the state" is necessary to weaken the importance of exclusive ethnic loyalty in favour of multiple identity.

Finally, the paper offers suggestions for political strategies and mechanisms to address the ethnic tensions and conflicts in the region. Federalism and local self-government will alleviate some problems, while government support for non-territorial cultural autonomy, including for the use of minority languages, will address

other concerns. At the same time, the process of democratization in multi-ethnic states requires creativity: a system based simply on the principle of one person, one vote is likely to result in the under-representation of minorities. More complex electoral formulas which encourage inter-ethnic coalitions and co-operation must be sought.

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March 1994
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Director

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I. ON THE PHENOMENON OF ETHNICITY

Rising nationalism and ongoing conflicts in post-Communist countries have exposed a quite common tendency: many societal institutions, in the midst of deep social change and radical reform, develop a manifestly ethnic form. In spite of significant intellectual efforts to understand why this is so, the results are disheartening. The dynamics and forms of conflicting ethnicity have become one of the dominant themes of discussion for modern social scientists and political practitioners (Stavenhagen, 1990; Rupersinghe et al., 1992; Moynihan, 1993). In Russia, this topic is at the centre of academic and public discourse. Society, its policy makers and its governors increasingly seek — instead of ideological invocations — “objective” analysis as the basis for adopting decisions, as well as “practical advice” for designing policy and carrying out public administration. On the other hand, scholars, though liberated from ideological dictates, continue to demonstrate a “detachment from life”, disseminating mutually exclusive opinions with weak prognostic power.

In spite of the lack of scholarly accord on the issue, it should be possible to avoid relativistic inertia in discussing the question of ethnicity and conflict governance. At least general mechanisms and rules can be traced from the efforts of policy makers, public forces, military personnel, and international agencies which have faced this challenge in recent decades. This is not a novel idea in many respects, yet concrete principles and approaches have rarely been formulated in the literature or in public statements.

Scholars, experts and politicians dealing with contemporary nationalism and conflicts express growing concerns about the destructive effects of complex discussions between intellectuals, political entrepreneurs and the lay public around ethnic myths, sentiments and demands. We can observe more and more attempts to avoid the raising (in Bakhtin’s term) of everyday dogmatism and irrational mythmaking to a level of political language and legal norms. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, nevertheless declared in **An Agenda for Peace** that as “fierce new assertions of nationalism and sovereignty spring up...the cohesion of states is threatened by brutal ethnic, religious or linguistic strife”. He made the important conclusion that “the time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty, however, has passed; its theory was never matched by reality”, and “if every ethnic, religious or linguistic group claimed statehood, there would be no limit to fragmentation, and peace, security and economic well-being for all would become ever more difficult to achieve” (Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

1. Approaches to understanding ethnicity

Among the basic approaches to interpreting the ethnic phenomenon, three can be highlighted: the primordial, the instrumentalist, and the constructivist. The first of these scholarly traditions can be traced to the ideas of nineteenth century German romanticism and to the positivist tradition of social science. Its adherents see ethnicity as an objective given, a sort of primordial characteristic of humanity. For primordialists there exist objective entities with inherent characteristics such as territory, language, recognizable membership and even common mentality. In its

extreme form, this approach sees ethnicity in socio-biological categories as a “comprehensive form of natural selection and kinship connections”, as a primordial instinctive impulse (van den Berghe, 1981). Some take the point of view that a recognition of group affiliation is included in the genetic code and is the product of early human evolution, when the ability to recognize the members of one’s family group was necessary for survival (Shaw and Wong, 1989). Among the major Russian students of ethnicity, L.N. Gumilev believed in the existence of ethnos as a “bio-social organism” and tried to formulate a theory of “ethnogenesis”, albeit in an obviously superficial form (Gumilev, 1990). Y.V. Bromley and most other Soviet social scientists still adhere to deeply primordial positions. For them, ethnicity is natural, innate and inescapable; “ethnos” and “ethno-social organism” are the basic category and archetype, their highest manifestation being the nation (Bromley, 1983). On the whole, however, this approach remains marginal and is the subject of serious criticism in world ethnology and social and cultural anthropology (Skalnik, 1990; Plotkin, 1990).

With the emergence of the phenomenon of ethnic revival and the growth of ethnic nationalism and separatism in the world during recent decades, scholars have begun to focus more attention on ethnicity as a means for collective striving to material advantage in the socio-political arena. Instrumentalists see a collectivity’s claims to ethnicity as based on a political myth created, propagated and often manipulated by élites that are seeking power. Ethnicity began to be seen as a part of the repertoire that is calculated and chosen consciously by an individual or a group to satisfy certain interests and achieve certain goals.

The constructivist approach, which has special significance for the Russian reality, is unique for two reasons: first, it remains absolutely alien to domestic — Russian — social science and has never been seriously tested. Second, the social practice — specifically of the post-Communist world — contains a plethora of examples of constructed and mobilized ethnicity (Tishkov, 1992). What is the essence of the constructivist approach? It views ethnicity as a modern phenomenon, but posits a process of identity formation in which cultural élites play a significant, but not necessarily manipulative, role. Ethnic identities frequently develop out of recognition and articulation of a shared experience of discrimination and subordination. Adherents of the instrumentalist and constructivist approaches tend to see ethnic boundaries as constantly appropriating and eliminating elements, that is, as permeable and relatively fluid (Barth, 1969).

The constructivist approach views ethnic sentiment, which is engendered

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