

Breaking Up is Hard to Do: Applying Lessons from Soviet Disintegration to the Russian Federation

Henry E. Hale

November 1998

PONARS Policy Memo 54

Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

The economic meltdown of 1998 has renewed fears that Russia is doomed to disintegrate like the star-crossed union from which it sprang in 1991. The history of the Soviet collapse and secession movements worldwide suggests several lessons for policymakers monitoring the stability of Russia. If Russia is to break up, the process is likely to be led by those ethnic regions at the highest levels of economic development, least assimilated into Russian culture, with a history of independence and with a foreign border. Analysts should thus be tracking Karelia, Tuva and Khakassia as the most promising bellwethers of any future Russian collapse. The economic situation will have to get much worse, however, for Russia to fall apart like the Soviet Union did.

The Russian Federation contains 89 constituent units, or "members of the federation." Of these, 32 are officially designated for a particular ethnic minority group. Together, these ethnic regions cover 53% of Russian territory. The ethnic regions fall into three categories (republics, autonomous regions and autonomous districts), with the republics enjoying the highest levels of autonomy. The remaining 57 regions, lacking a particular designation, include oblasts and okrugs. The Soviet Union contained another administrative level of territorial division, consisting of 15 union republics, of which Russia itself was one. Each union republic was the official homeland to a specific ethnic group, even though several union republics (most importantly Russia) themselves contained republics and autonomous regions and districts designated for other ethnic groups.

As politicians in Moscow have failed to overcome Russia's financial crisis, leaders in the republics, oblasts and krais alike have sought to take control of their own economies, raising fears that the federation will collapse. Since the West has a clear interest in preventing the emergence of 89 unpredictable nuclear mini-states in place of Russia, we must answer two related questions: (1) How likely is Russia to break up; and (2) Which regions are likely to lead such a breakup? Since the answer to the former depends on our answer to the latter, I begin with the latter question.

Identifying Russia's Flashpoints

If Russia is going to collapse, where should we expect the first signs of trouble to arise? This memo identifies factors that a close examination of the Soviet collapse and other historical examples suggests are important determinants of secessionism. These include the following.

1. *Cultural distinctness.* Regions with the most culturally distinct ethnic groups tend to be the most eager seceders. Cultural distinctions are so potent because they often involve barriers to understanding and make it easier for politicians to convince desired followers that they are threatened by other groups. The most important cultural distinctions are language and religion. One reason Belarus has clung so closely to Russia is that fewer Belorussians claim their "own" language as their native one than in any of the USSR's other 14 union republics. Similarly, differences in religious tradition have clearly helped Islamic Chechnya rally domestic support for its opposition to historically Christian Russian rule. The republics in the Russian Federation with both a non-Christian religious tradition and low rates of linguistic assimilation (10 percent or under) are: Adygeya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Chechnya. Strikingly, comparative analysis shows that the size of the Russian population in a given republic matters little. Once they gain power in a republic, post-Soviet ethnic groups from Bashkortostan to the Baltics have proven very adept at either buying off or excluding from power even very large Russian populations. This is evident in the fact that Latvia and Estonia spearheaded the collapse of the USSR despite the fact that they constituted only bare majorities in their own republics.
2. *A history of independence.* The Baltic drive to bring down the USSR clearly demonstrates the power of this factor in driving secessionism. In Russia, the only republic to have had an independent political existence in the 20th century is Tuva, a state between the first and second world wars. Republics with weaker histories of national existence apart from Russia include Tatarstan (a kingdom of its own before the Russian conquest in the distant 16th century) and Karelia, part of Finland before World War II.
3. *Regional wealth and proximity to lucrative foreign markets.* The wealthiest regions tend to have the most to lose and the least to gain in a union state, making them the leading separatists in both the Soviet Union (the Baltic union republics) and Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia). Much depends on the alternatives to the existing union, of course; if seceding means possibly joining the European Union, then even a poor region may decide to forsake Russia. The only Russian republic with a European border is Karelia. The only Russian republics with an average wage higher than the Federation average are: Karelia, Komi, Khakassia, and Sakha (Yakutia).
4. *Violent victimization by Moscow.* In every case where the USSR or Russia has brought in the troops and shed blood to quell a separatist uprising, it has

succeeded only in galvanizing local support around the separatists. This proved true for Soviet military action in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Latvia and Lithuania. The only republic to suffer violent victimization at the hands of Russia has been Chechnya.

Two factors may be necessary preconditions for a Russian region to succeed in seceding.

1. *A foreign border.* No ethnic region without a foreign border has ever actually seceded. The republics in Russia with a foreign border or ready sea access to a foreign country are Buryatia, Gorno-Altai, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Karelia, North Ossetia, Tuva, Khakassia, and Chechnya.
2. *Full-fledged republican status.* When both the USSR and Yugoslavia collapsed, they disintegrated into their largest constituent units. If Russia dissolves, this is especially likely to be the case since Moscow granted full "republic" status to any autonomous region or district that demanded it after the USSR collapsed. This memo, therefore, only names Russian republics in the above paragraphs.

Summing Up.

In order to assess the likelihood of a secessionist avalanche bringing down the Russian Federation, we should track events particularly closely in regions where multiple secession-inducing factors are concentrated since they can serve as bellwethers. Chechnya and Karelia are the only two Russian republics to rank high on as many as three indices of likely secessionism, although Tuva, Khakassia and most of the Northern Caucasus republics (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia) are also probable troublespots. Since Chechnya has already de facto seceded, and since the North Caucasus is riven with internal and intraregional strife, they are not so useful as indicators of future trends. The most useful republics to follow, therefore, are Karelia, Tuva and Khakassia. If these republics start to move in a separatist direction in response to a deepening economic crisis, the Russian Federation is in trouble.

Will the Russian Federation Collapse?

In 1991, Russia faced the same socioeconomic and political crisis that confronted the USSR, and both were federal states with ethnically defined regions, yet the Russian Federation managed to survive as a single entity while the Soviet Union disintegrated around it. To determine whether Russia is likely to collapse, it is illuminating to examine why it survived in 1991 and whether these stabilizing factors are likely to give way in the future.

Why did the process of disintegration along ethnic regional lines not continue from the USSR into Russia itself? The difference takes us back to the key factors examine above.

1. The Soviet union republics tended to be much less linguistically assimilated than were the republics of the Russian Federation. While only Belarus and Ukraine had linguistic assimilation rates higher than 10 percent among the 15 Soviet union republics, over two-thirds Russia's ethnic regions had assimilation rates higher than this.
2. The Soviet Union contained three union republics (the Baltic ones) with strong independent histories, while Russia included only one such republic (Tuva).
3. The Russian republics were not nearly as wealthy and were far more distant from European markets than were the leading Soviet separatists--i.e. the Baltic union republics, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia.
4. The Soviet government had employed violence against nationalists in four of its union republics (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Lithuania and Latvia) while Russia has victimized only one of its republics (Chechnya).
5. All of the USSR's union republics had foreign borders, while many of Russia's most important ethnic regions had no such border.
6. In 1991, Russia's republics were not the highest-ranking ethnoterritorial units in Russia, since they were all subordinate to the Russian union republic, which was, in turn, subordinate to the central USSR government. Russia's republics, therefore, would have had to cut through two layers of state structure in order to achieve independence instead of just one.

Equally importantly, unlike the Soviet Union with its Baltic union republics, Russia did not possess a core group of states where virtually all of the most important secession-inducing factors were present. Instead, as seen above, the various secession-inducing factors tend to cross-cut each other in different Russian republics, never converging to produce a separatist mix potent enough to get the separatist ball rolling.

What conditions might galvanize Russia's republics to secede, overcoming the significant obstacles that held Russia together in 1991? For one thing, the Russian economy could plunge even further, perhaps with the onset of hyperinflation, driving republics to more desperate solutions than were seriously considered in 1991. This may inspire a series of "ethnic" revivals in Russia's republics, with those named above leading the way.

Equally dangerous for Russian territorial integrity, however, are governmental attempts to coerce, perhaps preemptively, the republics into remaining in the Federation. Russia's military is incapable of occupying a rebellious republic, as its debacle in Chechnya vividly demonstrated. Given this, any coercive intervention is likely to fall short of complete victory. This means that attempts to use force in the ethnic regions are likely

simply to reinforce local popular support for the separatists at the same time that they demonstrate Russia's military impotence. This proved to be a disaster for the USSR in August 1991, and the consequences could be equally serious for Russia in the months and years ahead. Russia would be well advised, therefore, to abandon notions of subsuming the republics into larger, non-ethnic regions that would then be given local supremacy. Russia simply could not enforce such a move in the face of significant republic resistance, and this may provoke the very kind of separatist activity that it is intended to prevent.

Conclusion

History suggests that Russia is unlikely to follow the Soviet path of disintegration. There are no Lithuanias or Ukraines within the Russia Federation. As a result, only extreme traumas are likely to drive Russian republics actually to secede. Chechnya may seem to be an exception, but it in fact only strengthens the point. Impoverished Chechnya never counted among the most separatist republics until 1991, when former Soviet General Djokhar Dudaev seized power and declared independence. Even then, it took a botched Russian military attempt to intimidate him in 1991 to consolidate his local support, and he still faced formidable domestic opposition until Russia actually invaded in 1994. Thus, while Russia is likely to remain stable if its economic crisis does not worsen, prolonged hyperinflation or ill-advised governmental attempts to restructure the federation by effectively eliminating the republics may be enough to provoke dangerous levels of separatism.

While the West has correctly noted that the North Caucasian republics are likely to be at the forefront of events, they are not the best indicators of Russian secessionist trends since they are already quite troubled in ways that may not mean secession. The most important bellwether republic to watch is Karelia, although we should also monitor events in Tuva and Khakassia. By following events in these republics more carefully, we will be in a better position to assess the likelihood of any imminent Russian collapse, no matter how unlikely it is to happen. Indeed, a century of Russian history has taught us never to rule out the unexpected.