

The Meltdown of the Russian Federation in the Early 1990s

Nationalist Myth-Building and the Urals Republic Project

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Abstract: In the early 1990s after the collapse of the USSR, the new Russian state faced strong nationalist claims for sovereignty and increased autonomy from the side of regional elites. These nationalist challenges at the sub-national level were seriously considered by many experts to be a potential cause for the further breakup of Russia into a number of new independent states. The nationalist movements in ethnic republics like Chechnya, Tatarstan and Sakha-Yakutia, and their contribution to possible scenario of the disintegration of the Russian Federation, have been researched frequently in post-Soviet-studies literature. However, the examination of the impact of nationalistic ideas in ethnically Russian regions (oblasts) at the beginning of the 1990s has not received the same level of attention from political scientists. The Sverdlovsk oblast is a case study for this research. In the early 1990s, the creation of the Urals republic began in this region. This paper argues that the Sverdlovsk oblast's claims for increased autonomy included elements of myth-construction within a sub-state nationalist ideology. The first section of this paper briefly contextualizes the events that occurred during the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s that led to the growth of strong sub-nationalist movements in post-Communist Russia. The second section gives details of the Urals republic project, launched in the Sverdlovsk oblast in 1993, and defines the presence of nationalist myth-making elements in this regional movement. In the conclusion of the paper, I evaluate the impact of the project on the development of federalism and democracy in post-Soviet Russia, and discuss whether its centrifugal tendencies could reemerge in present Russia.

Keywords: federalism, nationalism, post-Soviet Russia, Sverdlovsk oblast, Urals republic

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union and until the end of the 1990s, there existed a point of view among a number of political scientists that the Russian Federation, as a new state, would not survive for long, and that—as had happened with the USSR—Russia could break into a number of new sovereign nations or be regularly faced with the threat of succession-based crises.¹ These expectations of the Russian meltdown were not merely the product of some Russophobes' speculations, but had a set of objective reasons based on the problems of nation-building that became vividly present during the development of Russian statehood in the 1990s. The analytical glance cast upon 1990s Russia gives us ideas about a number of key factors that challenged the country's territorial integrity throughout its democratic transition, specifically under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin. These factors are, indeed, highly debated as generally disputable in the analysis of 1990s Russia.² However, among the most central factors that could have led to the breakup of Russia was the flourishing of various sub-state nationalist projects in the different parts of the country.³

The phenomenon of sub-state nationalist movements emerged simultaneously with the democratic transition in the end of Perestroika; in many ways, it determined the political and socioeconomic development of the Russian statehood in the early 1990s. The most noted and popular examples of sub-state nationalist movements are represented in the academic literature by the case studies of ethnic republics like Tatarstan⁴, Chechnya,⁵ and Sakha-Yakutia.⁶ The research interest in the above-mentioned constituent entities seems absolutely expected, as the nationalist projects in these ethnic republics took the most intense form. Moreover, the nationalistic aspiration in Chechnya received additional analytic attention due to the escalation of violent armed conflict between the central government and Chechen nationalists.⁷

The regions populated by ethnic Russians (oblasts and krais) have also been the subjects of scholarly interest. However, unlike the ethnic republics, oblasts and krais were not considered, by default, as significant research cases for the examination of emerging nationalistic tendencies. The majority of inquiries on Russian oblasts' development in the post-Soviet era are predominantly focused on the issues related to the infancy of the regional political and business elites and their relations with federal authorities; the peculiarities of the formation of electoral and political party systems on the subnational level have also been studied.⁸ Although the absence of significant research endeavors on subnational nationalism in oblasts could be interpreted as the indication of the nonexistence of this phenomenon, the present paper would like to challenge this common perception. The goal of this article is to highlight some evidence of, and explanation for, the emergence of elements of ethno-nationalism construction in a region with a population that overwhelmingly ethnically self-identified as Russian. For my argumentation, I tackle the case of the Sverdlovsk oblast, which witnessed the creation of the Urals republic project in the early 1990s.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the case of Sverdlovsk oblast—in particular the information related to the regional self-declaration of the Urals republic—received academic coverage in a number of works by authors who specialize in Russian regional development after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Due to its complexity, the topic of the post-Soviet development of Russia from a subnational perspective has been presented via various angles, and the case of the Sverdlovsk oblast is no exception. For instance, Steven Solnick discusses the case of the Sverdlovsk oblast as an example of a Russian ethnic

region's response to federal asymmetry during the early Yeltsin era, and generally depicts the nature of bargaining between federal center and regional elites as a crucial factor in shaping post-Soviet Russian statehood.⁹ Robert Moser looks at the impact of the Urals republic project on the choice of Sverdlovsk voters in the 1993 national parliamentary elections.¹⁰ Matthew Crosston assumes that in order to understand those processes that took place in the Sverdlovsk oblast, it is necessary to take into account the personal ambitions of the subnational elite—particularly the intentions of regional leader Eduard Rossel to become a kind of “prince” of a local kingdom within the Russian Federation.¹¹ Yoshiko Herrera states the idea that economics can be considered an imagined entity based on perceptions and experiences that are socially constructed by actors, and studies the case of the Sverdlovsk oblast and Urals republic project as exemplifications of an economic-based sovereignty movement.¹² All of the aforementioned authors present their outlooks through different dimensions; together, they provide a quite precise historical narrative of the main landmarks of the Urals republic movement, and make generalizations that contribute a great deal to clarifying the whole of Russian politics at the time. However, the story of the creation of the Urals republic still has its blank spots, both in its theoretical comprehension and its historical description; many interesting details, it seems, have slipped past scholarly attention. For example, practically no one has examined the case of the Urals republic through the lens of nationalism. That is why, in this article, I endeavor to fill this research gap and show that the Sverdlovsk oblast's claims for increased autonomy in the early 1990s included elements of nationalist myth-construction.

Preconditions for Sub-State Nationalism in Post-Soviet Russia

One of the major forces that accelerated the collapse of the USSR in 1991 was the high tension between Soviet central authorities and the national elites in the Soviet republics.¹³ Since the end of the 1980s, in almost all republics of the Soviet Union, strong nationalist movements have emerged that have struggled for sovereignty in different forms. The importance and peculiarity of these movements, as vividly mentioned by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, consist in the fact that nationalism in the Soviet Union's republics represented a “manifestation of the liberation.”¹⁴ In other words, the nationalism that bloomed at the end of the Soviet era became a kind of political expression for all who no longer wanted to live under the Communist regime.

In August 1991, when the *coup d'état* organized by conservative forces within the Soviet ruling elite failed, it became obvious that the president of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, did not have any real authority to control the situation in the country and maintain its unity. The national elites in the Soviet republics very rapidly reacted to this power vacuum; beginning on August 24, 1991, Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan all declared their independence. Even before this date, a declaration of independence had already been announced by the Baltic republics and Georgia. The Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR), led by Boris Yeltsin, was also actively involved in the struggle for republican independence. Since the end of the 1980s, Yeltsin had been in conflict with Gorbachev for power in the RSFSR and, therefore, the support and recognition of sovereign movements in other Soviet republics was naturally in accordance with the interests of Yeltsin as the head of RSFSR—still formally the constituent unit subordinated to the Soviet central government.¹⁵ After the defeat of the conservative group of the Soviet nomenclature, headed by Soviet vice-president Gennady Yanaev, in August 1991,¹⁶

the Soviet Union disappeared as a *de facto* political entity, and Russia, as well as all other former Soviet republics, began its new independent history. The nationalist movements succeed in transforming the Soviet republics into sovereign nations.

One of the first political dilemmas for the Russian Federation as a new sovereign state was how not to repeat the disintegration scenario of the USSR. The so-called “parade of sovereignties” of the Soviet republics inspired Russian regional elites in their own struggle for independence.¹⁷ As Kathryn Stoner-Weiss vividly notes, regional leaders became very active in declaring themselves as masters of their own domains, and the ethnic republics were especially aggressive in pursuing increased political and economic authority.¹⁸ For example, in March 1992 Tatarstan held a referendum on its statehood status. The question of Tatar’s plebiscite was very sophisticated: “Do you agree that the republic of Tatarstan is a sovereign state and a subject of international law whose relations with the Russian Federation, the other republics and other states are governed by treaties based on equality of rights?” Almost 62 percent voters responded “yes.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Tatarstan authorities declared sovereignty of the republic within Russia, the authorities of the republic of Tuva reserved, in a regional constitution, the right not only to secede but also included in the competence of subnational parliament (*verkhovny hural*) the ability to appeal to the federal authorities on decisions related to matters of war and peace.²⁰ These examples are just a small portion of the separatist challenges the federal government faced in the early 1990s. Amid the meltdown of the Russian state, Yeltsin had to bargain with regional elites on the issue of power division. The simplest strategy employed by the Kremlin to stave off breaking the country into many parts consisted in bilateral negotiations and the delegation of considerable preferences, both in economic and political fields, to subnational authorities. Such kind of power delegation was mainly consolidated in the Federal treaty of March 1992, as well as in separate treaties signed between the federal center and some ethnic republics.²¹ Separate agreements with Tatarstan, Bashkiria and some other ethnic-based entities provided special privileges for the latter, and converted Russia into a state with *de facto* foralistic federalism.

The asymmetry in power competences naturally provoked the protest of leaders from regions with an overwhelming Russian population (oblasts and krais), who wanted to exercise the same level of authority as their counterparts in the ethnic republics. This inequality created a situation that allowed Russia to be the witness of the phenomenon of “republicanization” (*respublicanizatsiya*), when some oblasts like Sverdlovsk, Irkutskia, Voronezhskaya or Krasnoiarsky krai claimed to update their status to the level of republic.²² Nevertheless, because the main reason for the status-change lay predominantly in the economic domain, we can assume that the issues of nationalism had a specific impact on the trend of republicanization. The plain fact is that the RSFSR territorial system of division was constructed on the basis of national-territorial principle. The status of autonomous republics (ASSRs) was granted only to sixteen constituent entities populated by so-called “titular nations,” such as Tatars, Bashkirs, and so on. Other subnational units, like the Sverdlovsk oblast and the Chelyabinsk oblast, were mainly populated by ethnic Russians and did not attribute any particular ethnic character.²³

During the Soviet stage of Russian history, a strong linkage was shaped between the republican status of the constituent entity and the predominance within regional borders of some ethnic group other than Russians. The existence of the “titular nation” was

considered by default as an essential precondition for obtaining the republican rank in territorial and administrative state hierarchy. In other words, the dominated maxim stood firm: No predominant ethnicity meant no republic status. Due to this circumstance, we can conclude that practically speaking, the nationalist factor became the only determinate that was accepted by the central government as a significant cause for the constituent units' promotion to republican status. By following this approach during the early 1990s, the federal center recognized the transformation of Adygeiskaiy, Altaiskay, Karachaevo–Cherskaya and Khakasskaia from autonomous oblasts to autonomous republics; it also supported the division of the Chechen–Ingush ASSR into two republican entities.²⁴

No doubt, the leaders of the Russian ethnic oblasts realized this moment, so it is no surprise that in the transformation of the Sverdlovsk oblast into the Urals republic, the attempts of the regional elites to construct the elements of a regional nationalism-mythology can be detected.

What kind of nationalism can be labeled as “artificial”? First of all, it is necessary to mention that generally, the term “nationalism” does not have a fixed meaning in social science because there are various approaches to this phenomenon, and therefore no single concept can be perceived as absolutely dominant. However, it is generally possible to define two principal views on the essence of nationalism. The first is based on the perennialist point of view, which identifies the nation as a historically objective cultural community with some irreplaceable points listed, for example, by Miroslav Hroch as “(1) a “memory” of some common past, treated as a “destiny” of the group—or at least of its core constituents; (2) a density of linguistic or cultural ties enabling a higher degree of social communication within the group than beyond it; (3) a conception of the equality of all members of the group organized as a civil society.”²⁵ The second formula is based on the idea of constructivists, who argue that nationalism is not something ancient and objective, but is rather the intellectual and rational product of elites. Hence, the nation, according to Benedict Anderson, is an imagined community, not a historically determined group.²⁶

As I will show below, the nationalistic constructions that emerged in the Sverdlovsk oblast do not fit either of the above theoretical perspectives. The idea of the “Urals people” as a unique nation had no “force of nature” to which perennialists can appeal, and the phenomenon of the “Urals people” is not based on a theory of imagined community in Anderson’s understanding. The artificial nature of nationalism in the Sverdlovsk oblast was expressed primarily in the fact that it was a purely “top-down,” elites-driven movement that constructed the notion of “Urals people” not as a stable, traditional community, but as a disposable entity. In other words, artificial nationalism can be understood not as the product of history or social imagination, but as the creation of a concrete elite for a concrete purpose in a concrete historical situation.

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I believe that if one among those three variables is changed, artificial nationalism as a driver for the construction of a national identity disappears.

The Birth and Death of the Urals Republic and its Nationalistic Myths

The idea of the Urals republic officially was born in the fall of 1992, when the members of the Sverdlovsk oblast legislative council (*oblsovnet*) decided to raise the question of promoting the region from “oblast” to “republic” within the Russian Federation.²⁷ The main reason for the proposal of this initiative, as we have already mentioned, lay in the crisis of relations between the central authorities and the ethnic republics; the latter demanded increasingly more rights and, at the same time, denied to pay taxes to the federal budget while claiming subsidies from it.²⁸ The federal government was weak, thus having to accept the claims of the ethnic republic elites and put the main burden of taxes on the shoulders of the Russian oblasts. This was especially devastating to the most developed regions, like the Sverdlovsk oblast, which had to send to the center a significant part of their profit and became a “milch cow” for the whole country. The Sverdlovsk *oblsovnet* threatened to cut half of its payments to the federal budget and refute the decisions coming from central governmental institutes, but these threats were largely ignored by federal authorities.²⁹ Unlike oblasts and kraia, the ethnic republics’ demands for more autonomy and power received feedback from the federal government due to two important criteria. First, there was the strong nationalist “trump card” in the hands of the republican elites, and secondly, the system of election of the executive power by the people was already in place in the republics—and therefore, the leaders of the republics could not be dismissed by the federal government. The heads of all other subnational units of the Russian Federation were still appointed and dismissed by the president of the state, and hence were dependent on the will of the central authorities.

We can assume that there were two general plans and one partial plan to solve the unfairness in relations between Moscow and the regions. The first general solution consisted in shifting Russia from the national-territorial principle of division based on ethnic republics and oblasts to pure territorial division based on *guberniya*—i.e. to restore in Russia the territorial-administrative system similar to the one that existed before the Bolshevik revolution. The initiative of *guberniya* division was led by the extravagant boss of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who not only propagandized the idea of the dissolution of all ethnic constituents but also insisted on the necessity to appoint rather than elect the governors.³⁰ The heads of non-ethnic regions, such as Aman Tuleev (Kemerovskaya oblast), Viktor Kress (Tomskaya oblast), and others, made a stand for the Zhirinovskiy concept of territorial state division on *guberniya*.³¹

The second general solution to the problem involved the idea that the national-territorial division should not be changed, but that the text of the new constitution must equalize the rights of all constituent units. The third solution consisted in the process of “republicanization”. This approach did not have universal appeal because it endeavored to overcome the inequality problem only for particular oblasts and kraia that were able to update their status to republic. Thus, actually the heads of non-ethnic regions had three principal choices: (1) to lobby for a pure territorial system of division of the state; (2) to support the constitutional equality of both ethnic and territorial units of the

federation; and (3) to promote the transformation from oblast to republic. In an opposite view, the ethnic republics' elites, and some representatives of the central government, declared the sheer impossibility of granting the same competences for all constituent entities. For example, the deputy chief of the Russian State Committee on Federation and Nationalities Affairs, Ramazan Abdulatipov, clearly stated that those who demanded equality between ethnic and non-ethnic units ignored the historical experience of the statehood that many ethnic republics possessed before joining Russia. That is why, according to Abdulatipov, it was necessary to keep in mind a dangerous correlation in the consideration of Russian statehood: "the more kraies and oblasts will resemble republics in their form, the further republics will get from Russia."³²

The head of the Sverdlovsk oblast administration, Eduard Rossel, along with his followers in their struggle for increased preferences for the region, pragmatically choose to work on a few directions simultaneously. Firstly, Rossel actively argued for *guberniya* as the best territorial arrangement for post-soviet Russia.³³ Thus, for instance, in May 1993 in Ekaterinburg (the capital city of the Sverdlovsk oblast), he moderated the meeting of the heads of neighboring Tumen, Kurgan, Chelyabinsk and Perm oblasts, who unanimously struck a blow for the reapplication, in Russia, of the territorial-administrative model of multiethnic *guberniyas* with governors appointed by a president.³⁴ Secondly, in parallel to supporting the movement for the pure territorial organization of Russia, Rossel started to prepare the grounds for promoting the Sverdlovsk oblast to the level of a "republic." It is reasonable to suppose that the second direction would prevail, as apparently Rossel had doubts in the success of the "guberniya project" due to the reluctance of the federal center to aggravate the situation of the national "parade of sovereignties."

In accordance with Articles 115/8 and 116 of the 1978 constitution of the RSFSR, which was valid with minor editions until the adoption of the December 12, 1993 constitution, the federated units of Russia could change their status by the approval of the national parliament (Verkhovny Sovet RSFSR). In order to have the consent of Verkhovny Sovet, Rossel needed to legitimize the idea of the Urals republic as much as possible by gaining the public support of the population of the region.³⁵ On April 25, 1993, the national referendum, with four questions about the attitude to the Russian president and Verkhovny Sovet, took place. The voters in the Sverdlovsk oblast received an additional fifth question: "Do you agree that the Sverdlovsk oblast in its status should stand at the same level in its power as the republics within the Russian Federation?" Almost 84 percent of the voters responded positively on this question.³⁶ On July 1, 1993, the second important step was made towards the legitimization of the Urals republic—the Sverdlovsk *oblsoret*, motivated by the results of the people's plebiscite of April, voted by a swinging majority for change of the status of the Sverdlovsk oblast and proclaimed the region as a new republic within the Russian Federation.³⁷ After that decision, the process of the preparation of the normative acts of the new republican entity was launched. Ideally, Rossel wished to involve in the process of the creation of the republic five neighboring oblasts from the whole geographical area of the "big Urals": Orenburg, Kurgan, Chelyabinsk, Perm and Tumen. He calculated that the Urals republic, consisting of six oblasts, would be the leading Russian industrial region, with the potential to produce up to 45 percent nation's ironworks and about 12 percent of the nation's mechanical engineering projects.³⁸ On September 14, 1993, the heads of the Chelyabinsk, Orenburg, Kurgan and Perm oblasts signed a declaration on their willingness to join the Urals republic.³⁹

Therefore, by September 1993 mostly all preparations has been made in order to appeal to the Verkhovny Sovet on the question of the creation of the new federal constituent: the Urals republic. However, on September 21, 1993, President Yeltsin signed his famous Presidential Decree 1400 on the dismissal of the Verkhovny Sovet, which escalated the tension between the two branches of power and culminated with the shooting down by panzer fire of the Russian parliament on October 3–4, 1993.⁴⁰ Obviously, the situation with the dismissal of the Verkhovny Sovet garbled the plans of Urals republic ideologists to promote regions to the status of republic via a decree of the national parliament. From a legal point of view, the situation seemed close to deadlock: there was

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no parliament, and therefore no institutional body to appeal for the change of the constituent’s status. On October 15, 1993, Yeltsin proposed December 12 as the date for an all-Russian referendum on a new constitution, which meant that the chance of the Sverdlovsk oblast to be represented in a major legal act of the nation as a republic that was already vanishing. Under these circumstances, Eduard Rossel and his team had to run the risk of acting unilaterally, and on October 27, 1993, the Sverdlovsk *oblsovet*

adopted the constitution of the Urals republic.⁴¹ The elections of the new head of the republic (governor) and the new regional parliament were appointed on December 12—the same day as the Russian national referendum for the new constitution.⁴² On the evening of October 31, the local television broadcasts were interrupted for a special address by Rossel on the new regional status. He introduced himself not as the head of the Sverdlovsk administration, but as the governor of the Urals republic.⁴³

Herein, it seems essential to say a few words about the constitution of the Urals republic that distinguished the regional power and its relation to the central authorities. The constitution was written by the scholars of the Institute of Philosophy and Law, the Urals branch of the Russian Academy of Science in Ekaterinburg, and in many ways can be considered as the most advanced enactment of that time. Article 16 of the republican constitution stipulated the state sovereignty of the Russian Federation over the territory of the republic, the absence of the pretensions to secession from the federation, and the absence of the republican official currency and military subunits. On the other hand, the republican authorities declared the natural recourses on its territory as a property of the peoples of the republic (Article 112), reserved their right to have their own financial and tax politics (Articles 120-121) and independent external activities in the economic sphere (Article 119).⁴⁴ Thus, it is noticeable that in comparison with the constitutions of some ethnic republics like Tatarstan or Tuva, the change of status of the Sverdlovsk oblast to a republic did not assume the right for secession, but was mostly oriented to obtain as much autonomy in economic issues as possible.

From the beginning, the “republicanization” tendency, and particularly the Urals republic project, did not receive a favorable response from the majority of the

federal center representatives. For example, President Yeltsin called the initiative of the Sverdlovsk oblast an ill-judged and hurried one, and the prime minister of the Russian government Viktor Chernomyrdin was even tougher in his judgment:⁴⁵ “The volitional and spontaneous actions that declare new republics or aspirations to get unreasonably more privileges in comparison with other units of federation are in contradiction with our reforms to safeguard the territorial integrity of Russia. I say it especially to the head of the Sverdlovsk oblast administration Rossel and some other leaders. Analysis shows that not one region in Russia will be able to survive independently.”⁴⁶ Despite these attitudes among the central elite, the initial reaction to the creation of the Urals republic was surprisingly positive. On November 2, 1993, Yeltsin held a meeting with regional leaders during which he quite explicitly expressed his understanding of the desire of oblasts and krajs to get the republican status; thereafter, many participants of the event complimented Rossel on the successes of his project. But on November 9, Yeltsin issued the order regarding the dismissal of the Urals republic legislature and governor of the region.⁴⁷ Presidential Decree 1874 stated that the declarations on the new status of the Sverdlovsk oblast as well as its constitution were normative acts without any legal force.⁴⁸ To the position of head of executive powers in the region, the president appointed loyal to center vice-mayor of Ekaterinburg Alexei Strakhov. This was the end of the short history of the Urals republic.

This narrative of the creation of the Urals republic in various degrees is presented in a number of works on democratization and federalization processes in 1990s Russia. The majority of these researchers consider the case of the creation the Urals republic as an illustrative example of a regional sovereignty movement, based on the economic and political motivations of the local elite, without any nationalistic claims.⁴⁹ Indeed, the Sverdlovsk oblast is a territorial unit that in the ethnic sense is a highly homogeneous region—about 88 percent of the population is of Russian ethnicity.⁵⁰ Also, it is difficult to disagree with the statement that the dominant force for the creation of the Urals republic was, first of all, driven by the economic claims of the regional elite. However, it seems a mistake to totally ignore the presence of an artificial nationalist ingredient in this project. There is evidence of artificial nationalism in the project of the Urals republic that is possible to clearly identify from sources written by local political scientists. For example, Natalia Komleva, a professor at the Ural State University in Ekaterinburg, asserts that a myth about special Ural ethnos was shaping during the elaboration of the idea of the Urals republic. In the regional electronic mass media, according to Komleva, some scientists of the Urals branch of the Russian Academy of Science—as well as the head of the Sverdlovsk oblast, Rossel—began to address the thought that those who lived in the Ural Mountains were different from other Russians in anthropological character, physiological character and competency.⁵¹ Allegedly, the skeletons and the skulls of the Urals people, without dependence on their original ethnicity (Russian, Tatar, Jewish, etc.), were stronger and dissimilar to general “Russian standards.” This fact was partly explained by a legend about the Aryans, who could live in the ancient times on the territory of the modern South Ural in the city Arkaim. This very ancient people gave the modern Urals area a particular type of energy, according to Komleva, making its people more talented and hard-working in comparison with the average Russian in the European part of the country.⁵² The perception of the Urals republic as a project with some nationalistic implication was also shared among regional leaders of the ethnic territories of Russia. Thus, for instance, Murtaza Rakhimov, president

of the neighboring oblast Bashkortostan, furiously stated the following: “Who gave them the right to call themselves the Urals republic? The Bashkirs, Tatars, Chuvash, Maris, Mordvins and Udmurts lived in the Urals long before the coming of the Russians.”⁵³

The above sources allow for the assumption that via discursive practices, there was an attempt from the regional elites to construct the myth of the “Urals people” as a special nation. However, the idea of “Urals people” as a special ethnos that differs from other Russians in historical and anthropological terms seems an absolute pretense, and therefore can be labeled as “artificial” nationalism, rather than nationalism in both its perennialist and constructivist understanding. The “Urals people” as a nation have no memory of a common past, nor do they have linguistic ties; therefore it is not even an imagined community, pure “manipulative community.” We can observe all three features of “artificial” nationalism: (1) There was the presence of the regional elite (Rossel and his close circle of policymakers and intellectuals) that was interested in articulating some myth about the Urals nation, and thus launched its circulation through open and “subliminal” messages to the public. (2) There was a concrete purpose for the creation of a nationalistic flavor into the design of the Urals republic in order to get a supplementary advantage in bargaining with the authorities in Moscow, who, in the early 1990s, vividly demonstrated its vulnerability towards the national question in their relations with Tatarstan, Chechnya, Sakha-Yakutia, and other ethnic republics. (3) It was an ideal historical situation for the emergence of an artificial nationalism in Russia in the beginning of 1990s—there was the collapse of the political system of communism with the destruction of the whole set of its values and the bankruptcy of the idea of the unified Soviet identity for people with different nationalities. Although the idea of “Urals people” as a special nation has an artificial nature, it holds a track in local folklore and jokes. For example, in 1999, the popular Ekaterinburg newspaper *Nasha Gazeta* published an article that kindly mocked the “peculiarities” of the “Urals people” by naming them as lineal descendants of crusaders who in 1246 missed the route to Palestine and landed in the Ural Mountains by mistake.⁵⁴

Implications of the Urals Republic for the Study of Contemporary Russian History

The emergence of the Urals republic movement is an expected output of 1990s Russia, wherein the weak central authority was lenient and flexible in its relation and attitude toward the ethnic republics but ignored the interests of the oblasts and krais. In this historical context, the appearance of some nationalistic myths in the substance of the Urals republic project seems quite anticipated, as it potentially could have been used by the oblast administration as an additional bargaining argument for republican status.

Despite the failure of the Urals republic, it seems that this regional project had a few important impacts on the development of federalism and statehood in contemporary Russia. First of all, the initiative of the Sverdlovsk elite demonstrated to the central authorities that accepting the model of asymmetric federalism can bring separatist risks, even in the regions where there were never such threats. As a result, in 1993 an updated version of the Russian constitution was proposed, according to which all constituent units were named equal in their economic and political rights. So, in fact, Rossel reached his goal of placing the Sverdlovsk oblast on the same level with republics—at least all *de jure* territories within Russia received the same status. Obviously, *de facto* asymmetry was maintained between regions

and was legislatively fixated in the bilateral treaties on the “distinction of competences” that particular constituents continued to sign with the federal center during most of the 1990s. Those agreements often bring additional preferences above constitutional limits for signatory regions.⁵⁵ Here, it is necessary to emphasize that if originally such treaties were just a prerogative of ethnic republics, since 1996 non-ethnic federated entities like the Kaliningrad oblast, the Orenburg oblast, the Krasnodar krai and others began executing the bilateral agreements. The Sverdlovsk oblast became the first non-ethnic constituent unit to sign such an agreement with the federal government on January 12, 1996.

Secondly, the Urals republic project can be labeled as a sample of a movement which is democratic in its essence. The regional elites bargained with the federal government in a convenient, nonviolent manner. After the dismissal of the Urals republic, none of the Sverdlovsk elite called out to rebel against the federal center. Eduard Rossel lost his position as the head of the oblast administration, but just two years later he returned to the political scene as a governor who was democratically elected by the population of the territory; he remained in office until November 2009. The Sverdlovsk oblast became the first non-ethnic region where the executive branch of power was elected by the people but not appointed by the president. Rossel, by the manner of his reign in the region, became a vivid example of a “local hero”—the label coined by Katherine Stoner-Weiss for marking high-performance Russian regional leaders.⁵⁶

Paradoxically, the idea of a territorial-administrative configuration based on *guberniya* with president-appointed governors that was promoted by many Russian oblast leaders in the beginning of the 1990s, was in some ways realized with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in 2000. Under the new president, the configuration of the Russian federalism, and generally the whole political system, significantly changed. A number of Putin’s federal reforms—such as the setting up of the seven federal districts with presidential plenipotentiary offices, the editing of ethnic republics constitutions in accordance with the federal one, and the cancellation of the direct elections of regional heads—embedded the subnational units within a strict vertical power structure. The most advanced “local heroes” of the 1990s, like Rossel, president of Tatarstan Mintimir Shaimiev, president of Bashkiria Murtaza Rakhimov, mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov, and some others, were able to make adjustments and keep their positions for the whole decade. Only recently, in 2009 and 2010, were all these regional leaders replaced by a decision of the incumbent political tandem of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin; their exit from regional politics signals the end of the epoch of the intergovernmental competitiveness between modern Russia’s central and the subnational powers. The symbolic final accord for this epoch was the federal statute, already approved in its first edition by the national parliament, regarding the name of the heads of the republics. According to this law, the status of the “president” is given only for the head of the Russian Federation; therefore, it is forbidden for republican leaders to use term “president” to describe their position.⁵⁷

Is it possible to believe that the decentralization and disintegration tendencies can re-emerge in Russia? Here, I think we can follow Ivo Duchacek, who states that federalism is simply a territorial twin of democracy.⁵⁸ Neither the single-party dominance nor the rule of the Medvedev-Putin tandem can provide a large enough degree of decisional autonomy in contemporary Russia, and high centralization is inevitable.

The “parade of sovereignties,” the nationalist and regionalist movements in the USSR of the late 1980s, took hold due to political pluralization caused by Perestroika and glasnost launched by Gorbachev. In fact, the reemergence of decentralization in Russia is tightly linked to the process of democratization, and hence the appearance of the cases similar to the Urals republic project is possible only with the considerable transformation or extenuation of the current political regime.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Jessica Stern, “Moscow meltdown: Can Russia survive?,” *International Security* 18, no. 4 (1994): 40-65; and Michael McFaul, “Russian democracy: still not a lost cause,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2000: 169.

2. See Lila Shevtsova, *Russia: Lost in Transition*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie, 2007); and Roy Medvedev and George Shriver, *Post-Soviet Russia: A Journey Through the Yeltsin Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

3. Stern, “Moscow meltdown,” 40-65.

4. See Sergei Kondrashov, *Nationalism and the Drive for Sovereignty in Tatarstan, 1988-1992*, (New York: MacMillan Press, 2000); Pauline Luong, “Tatarstan: elite bargaining and ethnic separatism” in *Growing Pains: Russian Democracy and the Elections of 1993* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 1998): 637-668.

5. John Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Ann Robertson, “Yeltsin, Shaimiev and Dudaev: Negotiating Autonomy for Tatarstan and Chechnya,” in *Unity or Separation: Center-Periphery Relations in the Former Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 2002): 99-142

6. See for example, Marjorie Balzer and Irina Vinokurova, “Nationalism, Interethnic Relations and Federalism: The Case of Sakha Republic (Yakutia),” *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 1 (1996): 101-120; and Daniel Kempton, “The Case of Sakha: Bargaining with Moscow,” in *Unity or Separation: Center-Periphery Relations in the Former Soviet Union*.

7. I would like to note that academic discourse on Chechnya for the last two decades (especially after 9/11 events) moved considerably from the angle of separatist and nation-building problem to the perception of the Chechnya case by many researchers through the lenses of war against international terrorism. The rebellions were accused in obtaining financial and moral support from centers of international terrorist networks, and therefore the Chechen case witnessed a change in meaning from separatism to terrorism. See, for example, James Hughes, *Chechnya: from Nationalism to Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

8. See for example, Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, *Local Heroes: The Political Economy of Russian Regional Governance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Nicholson M. *Towards a Russia of the Regions* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Peter Kirkow, *Russia's Provinces: Authoritarian Transformation Versus Local Autonomy?*, (New York: MacMillan Press, 1998); Yoshiko Herrera, *Imagined Economies: The Sources of Russian Regionalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Robert Moser, “Sverdlovsk: Mixed Results in a Hotbed of Regional Autonomy,” in *Growing Pains: Russian Democracy and Elections 1993*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998; and Regina Smyth, “Political Ambition, Elite Competition and Electoral Success in Saratov Oblast,” in *Growing Pains: Russian Democracy and Elections 1993*.

9. Steven Solnick, “Will Russia Survive?,” in *Post-Soviet Political Order: Conflict and State-Building* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998): 54-74

10. Robert Moser, “Sverdlovsk: Mixed Results in a Hotbed of Regional Autonomy,” 397-430.

11. See Matthew Crosston, *Shadow Separatism. Implications for Democratic Consolidation* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004).

12. Yoshiko Herrera, “Imagined Economies: Constructivist Political Economy, National-

ism and Economic-Based Sovereignty Movement in Russia,” in *Constructing the International Economy* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010): 114–133.

13. Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, “Domestic and international influences on the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) and Russia’s initial transition to democracy (1993),” CDDRL Working paper # 108, March 2009, 8.

14. Juan Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996): 389.

15. See, for example, Archie Brown, “Transformational Leaders Compared: Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin,” in *Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin: Political Leadership in Russia’s Transition* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2001): 24-25.

16. Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia’s Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2001): 200.

17. For more information on “parade of sovereignties,” please see, Jeffrey Kahn, “The parade of sovereignties: establishing the vocabulary of the new Russian Federalism,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 16, no. 1, (2000): 58-89.

18. Kathryn Stoner-Weiss. “Federalism and Regionalism,” in *Development in Russian Politics* 4, (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 1997): 234.

19. See official server of Tatarstan: http://www.tatar.ru/index.php?DNSID=5e435644e8b8df760c0374db56d13d61&node_id=210 and http://www.tatar.ru/?DNSID=79a75c963b0794f87aad05616e82a6d1&node_id=78 (accessed November 30, 2010).

20. See Article 1 and Article 63/11 of the Tuva constitution, adopted in 1993. Available at <http://www.humanities.edu.ru/db/msg/62277> (accessed November 21, 2010).

21. Steven Solnik, “Federal Bargaining in Russia,” *East European Constitutional Review* 52, no. 4 (1995): 52-58.

22. V. Pogorelii, “Boris Yeltsin okazalsia zalozhnikom regionalnoi politiki,” *Kommersant* no. 376 (August 13, 1993); and I. Sidorov, “Irkutsk i Krasnoiarsk uravnivaut sebja s respublikami,” *Kommersant* no. 345, January 7, 1993.

23. Stoner-Weiss, *Local Heroes*, 62.

24. Stoner-Weiss, *Local Heroes*, 81.

25. Miroslav Hroch, “From National Movement to the Fully-Formed Nation: The Nation-Building Process in Europe,” in *Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 1996): 79.

26. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991): 5.

27. A. Ryabov, “Uralskaia respublika: mifi and reali,” *Svobodnaia misl’* no. 6 (2007): 149.

28. Natalia Komleva, “Ideia Uralskoi respubliki kak virazhenie foralisticheskogo haraktera Rossiiskoi Federacii,” in *Rossiiskii federalism: problemi I perspective dalneishego razvitiia* (Ekaterinburg, 2001): 19-20.

29. Valeria Ochianin, “Sverdlovskiy oblsoviet protiv Verkhovnogo Soveta,” *Kommersant* no. 199, November 27, 1992; and E. Kotlov, “RF dolzhna Sverdlovskoi Oblasti den’gi,” *Kommersant* no. 122, January 6, 1992.

30. See Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, *Kakim bit’ gosudarstvu Rossiskomu* (Areal+AM Press, 1995).

31. A. Andreev and E. Pluchevskaya, “K voprosu o reformirovanii administrativno-territorialnogo delenia Rossii,” *Izvestia Tomskogo Politechnicheskogo Universiteta* 308, no. 1(2005) 185.

32. O. Medvedev, “Ramazan Abdulatipov otstaivaet osobennosti respUBLIC,” *Kommersant* no. 211, November 3, 1993.

33. Eduard Rossel, “Ural’skaya respublika- put’ k territorial’nomu ustroistvu i upravleniu Rossiiskim gosudarstvom,” in *Ural’skaiaya respublika i problemi stanovlenia novoi Rossiiskoi gosudarstvennosti* (Ekaterinburg, 1993): 12.

34. V. Pogorelii, “Spori o konstitucii usugubliaut raskol mezhdu regionami,” *Kommersant* no. 92, May 19, 1993.

35. See *Konstitucia RSFSR 1978* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1978).

36. A. Ryabov, “Uralskaia respublika: mifi and reali,” *Svobodnaia misl’* no. 6 (2007): 150.

37. V. Smirnov, “Sozdaetsia Uralskaia respublika,” *Kommersant* no. 125, July 6, 1993.

38. Eduard Rossel, “Ural’skaya respublika- put’ k territorial’nomu ustroistvu i upravleniu

Rossiiskim gosudarstvom,” in *Ural'skaiaya respublika i problemi stanovlenia novoi Rossiiskoi gosudarstvennosti* (Ekaterinburg, 1993): 13.

39. Valeria Ochianin, “Oblsover mozhet priniat ural'skuyu konstituciu,” *Kommersant* no. 184, September 25, 1993.

40. For more information on constitutional crisis in 1993, please see Josephine Andrews, *When Majorities Fail: The Russian Parliament, 1990-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

41. V Dorofeev and A. Ochianin, “Gubernator Ural'skoi respubliki pristupil k rabote,” *Kommersant* no. 210, November 2, 1993.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. “Konstitutsia Ural'skoi respubliki,” *Oblastnaia gazeta*, October 30, 1993.

45. Rossel, 6–16.

46 Ibid.

47. Dorofeev and Ochianin, “Ural'skaya respublika poluchila podderzhku Borisa Yeltsina,” *Kommersant* no. 212, November 4, 1993.

48. Ukaz prezidenta RF 1874, *Oblastnaya gazeta*, November 12, 1993.

49. See for example, Yoshiko Herrera, *Imagined Economies: The Sources of Russian Regionalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Robert Moser, “Sverdlovsk: Mixed Results in a Hotbed of Regional Autonomy,” in *Growing Pains: Russian Democracy and Elections 1993* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998); and Matthew Crosston, *Shadow Separatism: Implications for Democratic Consolidation* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2004).

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51. Natalia Komleva, “Ideia Uralskoi respubliki kak virazhenie foralisticheskogo haraktera Rossiiskoi Federacii,” in *Rossiiskii federalism: problemi i perspective dalneishego razvitiia* (Ekaterinburg, 2001): 20–21.

52. Ibid., 20-2.1

53. Solnik, “Is the center too weak or too strong in the Russian Federation?,” in *Building the Russian State: Institutional Crisis and the Quest for Democratic Governance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000): 148.

54. Komleva, 21.

55. A. Torshenko, “O konstitucionnosti dogovorov o razgranichenii predmetov vedenia polnomochi mezhdu organami gosudarstvennoi vlasti RF i organami gosudarstvennoi vlasti subektov RF,” *Chinovnik* no. 3, 1998.

56. Stoner-Weiss, *Local Heroes*.

57. D. Mal'kov D., V. Bespalov and N. Gorodeckaya, “President v Rossii budet odin,” *Kommersant* no. 4505, November 3, 2010.

58. Ivo Duchacek, “Perforated Sovereignties: Toward a Typology of New Actors in International Relations,” in *Federalism and International Relations: The Role of Subnational Units* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990): 3.