

THE UNEXPECTEDLY UNDERWHELMING ROLE OF ETHNICITY IN RUSSIAN POLITICS, 1991-2011

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Abstract: The authors explain why ethnicity briefly played a role in Russian politics in the early 1990s and then faded away. They reject explanations that focus on demographic, economic, and other single variables. Instead they explain the early ethnic mobilization by emphasizing the importance of ethnic and cultural institutions at the regional level and whether ethnic entrepreneurs were able to make appeals that resonated with the masses by focusing on perceived ethnic-based labor discrimination. They then show that ethnic appeals ultimately became less important because of Russia's shift to a market economy and the transition of power at the regional level from legislatures to executives.

In the twenty years of Russia's existence, one of its most notable yet under-appreciated achievements is the fact that ethnicity has played a very minor and non-divisive role in Russian politics. The Russian Federation is a multi-ethnic, culturally diverse state in which officially-recognized ethnic minorities form 20 percent of the population. Yet political parties are not organized by nationality, voting has not occurred according to

ethnic affiliation, and ethno-national separatism among the republics has dissipated. All of this is perhaps not very remarkable in the increasingly centralized and authoritarian system that Putin has established. But even before Putin's federal reforms chipped away at the autonomy that certain Russian regions had gained during the 1990s, ethnicity failed to emerge as a relevant cleavage around which politics in the Russian Federation was organized. Why?

This outcome may seem puzzling, given that Russia inherited from the USSR over 100 officially recognized ethnic minorities, and over twenty ethnically-defined sub-federal territories with boundaries drawn around putative "homelands" of certain minorities. Moreover, serious campaigns for ethnic separatism developed among several ethnic republics in the early 1990s, at the same time that communities throughout Eastern Europe were asserting their right to nation-states. In fact, the threat of ethno-national secession was so substantial that many Russian leaders and Western observers at the time feared that Russia would follow the disintegration of the Soviet Union along ethnic lines. Yet support for ethno-national separatism in Russia's republics faded after only a few years, with the important exception of Chechnya. And it did not recur in the late 1990s, despite the acute financial crisis and a very weak central state made even weaker by the violent, senseless war with Chechnya.

How can we make sense of the transient politicization of ethnic identity in Russian politics, especially when we know that ethnic identities continue to be deeply felt by members of Russia's ethnic minorities and that sub-state ethnic administrative territories (i.e., republics) continue to exist? This article examines why ethno-national separatism among Russia's republics developed and then dissipated in the early 1990s, as well as why it did not re-emerge in the late 1990s as a viable threat to Russia's integrity. It also briefly considers the role that ethnicity plays in the more recent political mobilizations in the North Caucasus, especially Dagestan.

Analysis of the post-Soviet politics literature on ethnic mobilization in both the Soviet Union and Russia suggests several key points for understanding why the politicization of ethnicity is not an enduring feature of Russian politics. First, it is critical to understand the fundamental nature of the relationship between ethnic identity and political mobilization. Work by many post-Soviet politics scholars has made much progress in this regard, putting to rest essentialist explanations that view ethnic group mobilization as based on cultural differences and thus inevitable. Second, it is important to recognize the existence of variation in ethnic mobilization at the mass level across Russia's republics. Only some of the republics had popular, mass-based nationalist opposition movements; in others, nationalist leaders were never able to win popular support. Making sense of these facts provides insight into the weakness of ethnic mobilization in Russia

more generally, as well as prospects for mobilization in the future.

This leads to a second point: the most powerful explanation for nationalist mobilization across the Soviet space concerns the effects of ethno-federal institutions. Ground-breaking work by scholars such as Roeder, Bunce, Brubaker, and Suny shows how the pseudo-federal structure of the Soviet Union—its ethnic “homelands” with official languages and cultures for certain nationalities; its use of the nationality entry on internal passports; and its *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) policies that granted preferences to titular nationalities within the republics—served to nurture and institutionalize ethnicity within the republics, creating both national elites and masses prepared to support nationalism when the opportunity arose during glasnost.¹

Institutionalists make a convincing case that state institutions and policies exert a powerful or even deterministic effect on peoples’ identity and thus their political behavior. Yet this suggests that ethnic minorities with territorial republics should have remained mobilized, and that Russia should have broken up into its constituent ethnic republics. Institutionalist explanations have difficulty explaining variation among Russia’s republics: if similar ethno-federal institutions were present across all 16 republics, why did some republics have more popular nationalist movements and stronger separatist campaigns than others? And they cannot explain why ethnicity did not become politicized during the period of central state weakness in the late 1990s.

Scholars have taken diverse approaches in addressing these questions. We argue that analyses that focus on relations among all actors *within* the republics rather than only on relations between republican leaders and Moscow provide considerable analytical leverage in explaining ethnic mobilization. While many scholarly accounts have increased our knowledge by devoting attention to the key role played by republican leaders, a focus on individual-level motivations and behavior of both ordinary people and political actors in the republics explains a greater degree of the variance in republican ethnic separatism in the early 1990s.

Next, we argue that the most persuasive arguments explaining why separatism did not re-emerge in the late 1990s focus on Russia’s changing macro-level political context. More specifically, policies enacted by Yeltsin’s government after 1994 affected both political actors and individual attitudes *within* the republics, which profoundly changed

¹ Philip Roeder. 1991 “Soviet Federalism and Ethnic Mobilization.” *World Politics* 43 (January); Roeder. 2007. *Where Nation-States Come From: Institutional Change in the Age of Nationalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Valerie Bunce. 1999. *Subversive Institutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Rogers Brubaker. 1996. *Nationalism Reframed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Ronald Suny. 1993. *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

center-republic relations. These policies shifted the balance of power at the regional level away from the legislature and toward the executive, altering the relationship between the opposition and republic leaders, as well as between republican leaders and Moscow. Second, Yeltsin's decision to fight a war with Chechnya transformed attitudes among both individuals and politicians within the republics. Thus, attention to both *macro-level* political context and change, as well as *individual-level* factors that motivate support for nationalism are critical to understanding the emergence and ultimate absence of ethnic politics in Russia.

The Rapid Rise and Decline of Ethnic Mobilization in the Early Post-Soviet Era

In the early 1990s, just about every ethnic minority in Russia with a designated sub-state territory had an organized movement with demands ranging from cultural rights to greater autonomy within the Russian Federation to outright independence. However, there was enormous variation across republics in terms of popular support for these opposition nationalist movements. In some places—Tatarstan, Chechnya, Tuva and Sakha-Yakutia—the titular population of the republic enthusiastically threw their support behind the nationalists. In other cases, popular support for nationalism was limited to a small minority of the population. In most cases, minority ethnic mobilization remained non-violent, with some exceptions. Chechnya is, of course, the most well-known case of ethnic mobilization leading to violence, but sporadic inter-ethnic violence also occurred in Tuva and, to a very limited extent, in Tatarstan.

Ethnic mobilization in Russia in the early 1990s may be considered as two separate forms of mobilization. The first form involves popular mobilization, including mass protests and electoral activity aimed at achieving minority nationalist goals that ranged from increased language rights to independent statehood. The second form involves campaigns for greater autonomy from Moscow waged by the leaders of Russia's ethnic republics. While these campaigns were intimately connected to mass ethnic movements, they should be conceptualized as different phenomena since different actors were involved. Regional leaders were playing a two-level game in which they used the threat of popular ethnic mobilization on a local level to wrest concessions from the central state. Negotiations between Tatarstani leaders and the center in 1993-94, for example, often revolved around the implicit threat that Moscow's failure to provide concessions would result in a burst of popular nationalism in the republic that the regional authorities might not be able to contain. This logic can partially explain the correlation between variation in popular support for minority nationalism within the republics and the strength of

the secessionist campaigns mounted vis-à-vis Moscow in the early 1990s. The correlation is not complete, however, because of the role played by the individual preferences of republic-level political leaders. Some republican leaders sought to tamp down nationalist feelings among the population instead of use them to increase their personal power,² while others attempted to increase their power despite a relatively low level of popular support for nationalism.³ Nevertheless, the overall correlation between regional separatism and popular support for nationalism was quite strong.

The surge of minority ethno-nationalism throughout the Soviet Union and Russia provoked a great deal of anxiety among Russian political leaders in the early 1990s. Yet it did not last long. After 1993, ethnic mobilization began to decline throughout the Russian Federation. By the mid-1990s, nationalist leaders in republics such as Tatarstan, who had once been able to attract tens of thousands of protesters to demonstrations, were fortunate to get several hundred participants. By the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s, ethnicity played a fairly small role in Russia's politics in general and in center-regional relations in particular. Moreover, the level of ethnic violence has been quite low throughout the post-Soviet period. Even regions that had high ethnic mobilization in the early 1990s remained almost completely non-violent.

While violence exploded in the Northern Caucasus in the last decade, it had little to do with nationalist separatism and in most cases was religious in nature, rather than ethnic.⁴ Common religion has in fact played a key role in overcoming ethnic differences in the North Caucasus. As Emil Suleimanov notes in a recent article, "membership in Jihadist groups (jamaats) has helped individual insurgents overcome ethnic, sectarian (tariqa-based) and clan-based loyalties, forging an unprecedented sense of social solidarity based on shared religion."⁵ The insurgency that spread through much of the North Caucasus in the last decade was organized and carried out by groups with mixed ethnic membership. Group members were united in their opposition to the Russian state by religious belief rather than ethnic identity. To the extent that ethno-nationalism still played a role in the Caucasus, it was aimed against other local ethnic groups, rather than against the central government in Moscow or against ethnic Russians.

² For example, the leaders of Chuvashia were threatened by high popular support for nationalist demands and sought to dispel them, rather than exploiting them in order to increase their personal authority.

³ This was most visible among leaders of non-ethnic regions, such as Sverdlovsk Oblast – which was for a time transformed by its governor into the Urals Republic.

⁴ For a list of assassinations and bombings by Islamist groups just in Dagestan, see Robert Bruce Ware and Enver Kisriev. 2010. *Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus*. M.E. Sharpe: 185-8.

⁵ Emil Suleimanov. 2011. "The Republic of Dagestan: The epicenter of Islamist insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus." *IPRIS Occasional Paper #4*, December: 3.

The grievances had to do with conflicts over control of resources and/or territory at the local level and did not lead to secessionist campaigns.⁶

Chechnya was the one exception to these trends. A republic with some of the highest levels of mass mobilization, Chechnya experienced horrific violence as a result of the war begun by President Yeltsin in 1994, the post-war political instability in the region and the second war launched by then-Prime Minister Putin in 1999. Nevertheless, by the second half of the last decade, even Chechnya had become largely free of ethnic violence—though this turn of events can in large part be ascribed to the brutal rule of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov.

This series of events presents a puzzle for scholars of Russian ethnic politics. We must explain not only the rapid but uneven emergence of ethno-nationalist mobilization at the regional level in the late 1980s, but its equally rapid disappearance just a few years later. We must also explain the subsequent absence of minority ethno-nationalism, despite a period of extreme state weakness in the late 1990s and a subsequent period of central state mobilization against minority rights and regional power in the 2000s.

Why Ethnic Separatism Developed and Declined in the Early Post-Soviet Period

The debate among social scientists concerning ethnic nationalism in Russia has been a rich and fruitful one. We briefly review several kinds of explanations addressing the emergence of nationalist separatism in the early 1990s and why Russia was able to avoid state collapse.

All of the accounts provide plausible logics illustrating that nationalist separatism was not as inevitable as it initially seemed. We argue, however, that by paying attention to variation across republics, certain kinds of explanations are better able to account for empirical outcomes and also shed light on the conditions under which ethnic identities become politicized.

First, we analyze two hypotheses focusing on structural factors of demography and economic wealth.⁷ Demographic hypotheses maintain that nationalist separatism develops when ethnic groups form a majority of a region's total population. Because titular nationalities were a minority in most of Russia's republics (being outnumbered by ethnic Russians) the republics did not imitate the secessionism of the USSR's Union republics.⁸

⁶ Andrew C. Kuchins, Matthew Malarkey, and Sergei Markedonov. 2011. "The North Caucasus: Russia's Volatile Frontier." *CSIS Report*. March: 5.

⁷ Parts of this section are adapted from Elise Giuliano. 2011. *Constructing Grievance: Ethnic Nationalism in Russia's Republics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

⁸ While these analysts do not necessarily maintain that demography alone accounts for the emergence of nationalist separatism, they see relative ethnic percentages as one of several key factors. Gail Lapidus and Edward W. Walker, 1995. "Nationalism, Regionalism, and

While a critical mass of people supporting the project of establishing a nation-state may be necessary for successful separatism, empirical evidence from Russia does not support the predictions of the hypothesis. Republics where titulars formed demographic majorities (as of 1989) did not witness strong mass nationalism in all cases (e.g. Chuvashia and North Ossetia). Likewise, some republics where titulars formed distinct demographic minorities (Yakutia and Bashkortostan), were among the most nationalist. In general, the demographic hypothesis predicts nationalist mobilization in republics where little occurred and fails to predict it in several republics where it did develop.

The logic of this hypothesis assumes that ethnic groups engage in politics as cohesive political blocs. However, we observe that many titulars in even the most nationalist republics opposed nationalist programs or remained indifferent to them. And ethnic Russians often supported nationalist projects, as for example, in Tatarstan, where 47% of Russians voted for sovereignty in a 1992 referendum, and in the Baltics and Ukraine prior to independence.

Economic wealth hypotheses focus on macro-economic conditions within Russia's republics to explain variation in nationalist separatism. In this approach, associated with work by Emizet and Hesli, Hale, and Treisman, economic resources are the critical variable that structured the incentives of leaders in the republics: leaders of resource-rich, economically developed republics made strong separatist demands on Moscow while leaders of comparatively poor republics did not.⁹ Moreover, according to Solnick, economic wealth can also explain why the Russian Federation survived as an ethno-federal state. In response to separatism, the federal government granted the richer republics tax breaks, credits, subsidies, and political autonomy. In appeasing the wealthy republics at the expense of both the poorer ones and the non-ethnic regions, Moscow

Federalism: Center-Periphery Relations in Post-Communist Russia." In Gail Lapidus. ed. *The New Russia: Troubled Transformation*. Boulder: Westview Press: 79-113; Gail Lapidus. 1999. "Asymmetrical Federalism and State Breakdown in Russia." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 15 (1): 74-82; Also see Monica Duffy Toft. 2003. *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests and the Indivisibility of Territory*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press; James Hughes. 1998. "From Federalism to Recentralization." *Developments in Russian Politics* 5, ed. Stephen White, Alex Pravda, and Zvi Gitelman. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 131, 134.

⁹ Kathryn Stoner-Weiss. 1997. "Federalism and Regionalism." in *Developments in Russian Politics* 4, ed. Stephen White, Alex Pravda, and Zvi Gitelman. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Kisangani Emizet and Vicki Hesli. 1995 "The Disposition to Secede: An Analysis of the Soviet Case." *Comparative Political Studies* 27 (January): 493-536; Daniel Treisman. 1997. "Russia's 'Ethnic Revival': The Separatist Activism of Regional Leaders in a Postcommunist Order." *World Politics* 49 (January): 212-49; Henry Hale. 2000. "The Parade of Sovereignties: Testing Theories of Secession in the Soviet Setting." *British Journal of Political Science* 30: 31-56; Henry Hale. 2002. Rein Taagepera. "Russia: Consolidation or Collapse?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 54 (7): 1101-25.

created an asymmetric federation and avoided state collapse.¹⁰ The wealth hypothesis has practically become conventional wisdom despite the fact that empirically, it cannot account for separatism in Russia's poor republics, nor its absence in the rich ones. The fact of separatism in Tuva—a tiny, poor republic whose economy centered on livestock herding—flatly contradicts the wealth hypothesis. The same is true of Chechnya. Though Chechen territory contained some crude oil and an oil pipeline connecting Russia with refineries in Baku, its reserves made up a miniscule 1% of Russia's total output in 1992 and its pipeline was threatened with redundancy by new pipeline projects bypassing the republic that were already underway when nationalist mobilization began. Moreover, an advanced economy did not spur separatism in Komi—a highly industrialized republic that contained enormous coal deposits and significant oil and gas fields. Similarly, nationalism was lower in the republic of Khakassia than in Chuvashia, despite the fact that the former was more economically developed than the latter.¹¹ Therefore, though we observe that the republics of Tatarstan, Yakutia and Bashkiria were relatively resource-rich and experienced significant separatism, the fact remains that the wealth hypothesis cannot explain variation in separatism across Russia.

This is not to say that the presence of economic wealth in Russia's republics was inconsequential; it unquestionably informed the strategies of some republican leaders in their relations with Moscow. But accounts that focus on economic wealth draw a direct link between regional wealth and the desire and ability of republican leaders to make separatist demands on Moscow. Because they do not conceive of the republic population outside the political elite as independent actors, they do not feel the need to consider the extent to which ethnic populations mobilized when republican leaders told them to. Accounts that take local politics into consideration, on the other hand, show that communist-era leaders of republics with strong mass nationalist mobilization and popular opposition nationalist movements were pressured to demand greater autonomy from Moscow. In other cases, the lack of popular support for nationalism among members of titular ethnic groups gave leaders no incentive to advance separatist campaigns vis-à-vis the central government. Though it is clear that republican leaders strategically took advantage of nationalist mobilization

¹⁰ Steven Solnick. 1998. "Will Russia Survive? Center and Periphery in the Russian Federation." In Barnett R. Rubin and Jack Snyder, eds. *Post-Soviet Political Order: Conflict and State-Building*. NY: Routledge: 58-80; Also see: Daniel Treisman. 1999. *After the Deluge: Regional Crises and Political Consolidation in Russia*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press; Mikhail Alexseev. 2002. "Decentralization Versus State Collapse: Explaining Russia's Endurance." *Journal of Peace Research* 38 (1): 101-6; Hale, Taagepera, "Russia: Consolidation or Collapse?" 2002.

¹¹ Dmitry Gorenburg. 2003. *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 165-66.

within the republics to strengthen their negotiating position with the center, republican wealth in and of itself cannot explain why ethnic populations in certain republics responded to nationalist leaders.

Other kinds of explanations focus on a single, constitutive aspect of Russia's political system to explain the low level of ethnic mobilization there. For example, Stephen Hanson argues that the ideological shift from Marxism-Leninism to democracy as the Russian Federation formed made it harder for people in Russia's republics to oppose Moscow than during the Soviet era. He also claims that secessionism in Russia was hampered by a lack of support from international actors, especially the U.S.¹² Several scholars, including Lapidus, Hale, Treisman and Alexseev, find that the administrative status of Russia's republics was a significant factor in explaining why Russia cohered while the Soviet Union imploded. Russia's lower-status autonomous republics (ARs) had fewer privileges, rights, and ethnic institutions than the Soviet Union's Union republics making them less likely to identify as independent states.¹³

Henry Hale shifts attention to the central state in arguing that the Russian Federation did not crack apart because it lacked a *core ethnic region*, i.e. a single ethnofederal region that contains a majority of the state's population. The existence of a core ethnic region can lead to the breakup of ethnofederal states, as with the Russian Republic (RSFSR) in the Soviet Union. The RSFSR contributed to the Soviet collapse by "... facilitating dual sovereignty, exacerbating the security fears of Soviet minority regions, and by promoting the "imagining" of a Russia independent of the larger Soviet state."¹⁴ Conversely, because Russia did not contain a core ethnic region, the central state could employ various strategies to deal with centrifugal pressures emanating from its regions, thus ensuring Russia's survival. Hale shows how bi-lateral treaties placated certain republics and oblasts during the 1990s and that the absence of a core ethnic region made it difficult for non-ethnic oblasts to coordinate against the center, which ultimately allowed Putin to recentralize the asymmetric federation.

These various accounts describe important factors and delineate convincing logics driving the various outcomes they seek to explain. We

¹² Stephen Hanson. 1999. "Ideology, Interests, and Identity: Comparing the Soviet and Russian Secession Crises," in Mikhail Alexseev, ed. *Center-Periphery Conflict in Post-Soviet Russia*. New York: St. Martin's Press: 15-46.

¹³ Lapidus and Walker. 1995. "Nationalism, Regionalism, Federalism..."; Lapidus. 1999. "Asymmetrical Federalism..."; Hale. 2000. "The Parade of Sovereignties..."; Treisman. 1997. "Russia's 'Ethnic Revival'..."; and Alexseev. 1999. "Asymmetric Russia: Promises and Dangers" in Alexseev, ed. 1999. *Center-Periphery Conflict in Post-Soviet Russia: A Federation Imperiled*. New York: St. Martin's Press/London: Macmillan, 247-79.

¹⁴ Henry Hale. 2005. "The Makeup and Breakup of Ethnofederal States: Why Russia Survives Where the USSR Fell." *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (1): 55-70.

argue, however, that because they do not directly address why separatism emerged in some places but not others, they tell us only part of the story of the emergence and failure of nationalist separatism in Russia. In focusing on a single, constitutive aspect of Russia's system, they cannot explain why certain ethnic minorities chose to support nationalism while others did not. In some instances, then, these types of accounts actually under-predict nationalist separatism in Russia's republics.

Moving to two accounts that address variation in the level of ethnic mobilization among Russia's ethnic minorities, Dmitry Gorenburg focuses on meso-level institutional factors within the republics including the extent to which the Soviet state allowed ethnic and cultural institutions to develop. Ethnic institutions shaped the identities and beliefs of potential followers; they provided the resources necessary for mobilization and they helped to establish social networks that allowed nationalist leaders to connect with potential followers.¹⁵ The contribution of this approach is that it describes the mechanisms through which national leaders in some republics were able to connect with members of titular ethnic groups and mobilize them against central authority. Variation in the density and autonomy of local ethnic institutions across Russia's republics can explain why nationalist leaders were able to attract mass popular support in some republics but not in others.

Elise Giuliano examines another aspect of the variation in ethno-nationalist mobilization on a local level: the development of group grievances as a source for mass support for ethno-nationalist mobilization. She focuses on explaining both variation in mass support for nationalist movements among ethnic minorities and reasons for the decline in mobilization in republics where it had developed. Grievances did not simply reflect structural conditions within the republics such as economic hardship or ethnic demography, but developed out of the interaction between peoples' experiences in local labor markets, and the messages that nationalist entrepreneurs put forward concerning ethnic group disadvantage. Ethnic grievances developed rapidly in Tatarstan, Tuva, Chechnya, Bashkortostan and Yakutia when messages articulated by nationalist leaders about ethnic inequality in local labor markets resonated with people's experience of growing job insecurity in a contracting economy. Nationalist leaders advocated establishing a nation-state as the only way to redress ethnic group victimization. In other republics, however, where nationalist leaders focused on articulating other issues, such as cultural and language problems facing the ethnic group, group grievances failed to develop, and popular support for nationalism stalled.

Ultimately however, in most republics, the group grievances that

¹⁵ Dmitry Gorenburg. 2003. *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*. New York, Cambridge University Press.

produced a sense of nationhood did not endure. As Russia moved away from central economic planning and toward economic liberalization, the state's monopoly over job distribution ended and greater numbers of people began to work outside the state sector. The supposedly subordinate status of the ethnic group mattered less to people in a changing economy in which the state did not have the sole power to determine socioeconomic mobility. These developments diminished the relevance of the nationalists' message about the need to rectify ethnic economic inequality by capturing the state in the name of the ethnic nation. As a result, popular support for nationalism declined in most of Russia's republics as the 1990s progressed.

Social science seeks parsimonious explanations of political phenomena. Yet this brief review of nationalist separatism in Russia and the literature addressing it suggests that parsimony often can only offer partial explanations of complicated, multifaceted phenomena. A full picture of the variation in support for ethno-nationalism among ethnic minorities in the early 1990s and the rapid dissipation of ethnic mobilization after the break-up of the Soviet Union can be gained by combining several of the approaches discussed in this paper which we view as complementary. A focus on macro-political developments and institutions (such as Hale describes), with macro-level ideational factors (Hanson), in conjunction with local-level institutional variation (Gorenburg) and the construction of ethnically-framed economic grievances against the central government (Giuliano) can best account for the behavior of ordinary people, opposition nationalist elites, republican leaders and the central state.

Why No Ethnic Mobilization in the Late 1990s

In the late 1990s, as a result of the 1998 financial crisis, the war with Chechnya, and an increasingly infirm Yeltsin presidency, Russia once again experienced a period of severe central state weakness. With a highly unstable system of asymmetric federalism brought about by bi-lateral treaties that had empowered certain republics, the threat of ethno-federal separatism re-emerged. In the words of Nikolai Petrov, Russian federalism at this time was in danger of being replaced by "...a disintegrating confederal system."¹⁶ Yet this period did not witness a repeat of ethnic mobilization or campaigns for republican autonomy that marked the first several years of Russian statehood. Why?

We argue that despite the weakness at the center and regional decentralization, nationalist separatism did not develop because the entire political institutional environment in the republics had shifted by the end

¹⁶ Nikolai Petrov. 2004. "Federalism." In Michael McFaul, et. al, eds., *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform*. Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March: 228.

of Russia's first decade. This shift was due to key central state policies that moved the locus of political power within the republics from the legislative to the executive branch, effectively shutting out political opposition, including nationalist groups. Since executives in most republics were communist-era leaders who had reinvented themselves as presidents, they did not hesitate in attempting to obliterate all forms of political opposition in order to strengthen their own power. How did Moscow's policies produce this move to executive dominance? First, beginning in 1994, Yeltsin signed bi-lateral treaties with the most separatist ethnic republics, beginning with Tatarstan. These treaties were both substantive and symbolic, devolving greater economic and political autonomy to the republics.¹⁷ As a result, presidents, rather than opposition nationalist groups, came to be seen as the defenders of republican interest and autonomy, raising their *legitimacy* among the general population.

Also, the growing power of republic presidents brought *elections* within the republics under greater control of the executive branch. Whereas relatively competitive elections to local parliaments (soviets) in the Soviet Union in 1990 and early 1990s Russia had provided incentives for opposition politicians to organize, win political office, engage in heated parliamentary debate, and formulate new policies that put pressure on executives, by the mid-1990s republican presidents were reducing the competitiveness of elections and draining legislatures of political opposition.¹⁸ Some of their techniques specifically aimed at eliminating nationalist candidates included gerrymandering local electoral districts, co-opting national congresses, and physically harassing individual leaders into submission.

Another major political institution established under Yeltsin—the Federation Council, or upper house of the federal parliament—also strengthened the power of leaders in the republic vis-à-vis local actors. Rules governing the eligibility of candidates to the Federation Council allowed only members of the executive and legislative branches in the regions to run for office. As a result, republic presidents (and regional governors) and heads of republic parliaments won seats in the Federation Council, which, as Kathryn Stoner-Weiss argues, was Moscow's intention.

Representation in national level politics raised the status and strengthened the authority of leaders within the republic, and arguably, increased their commitment to the integrity of the Federation.¹⁹ These developments

¹⁷ Nikolai Petrov and Darrell Slider. 2010. "The Regions under Putin and After." In Stephen K. Wegren, Dale R. Herspring, eds., *After Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 59-82.

¹⁸ Petrov. 2004. "Federalism."

¹⁹ Kathryn Stoner-Weiss. 1997. "Federalism and Regionalism." In Stephen White, Alex Pravda, and Zvi Gitelman, eds. *Developments in Russian Politics 4*. London: MacMillan

made it more difficult for the political opposition to play an influential role in republican politics.

Finally, Moscow's decision to attack Chechnya, Russia's most separatist republic, in late 1994 fundamentally changed the way many ordinary ethnic citizens in the republics viewed the goal of national sovereignty. Intended in part to forestall the secession of the other ethnic republics, the war successfully intimidated those who had supported opposition nationalist movements in other republics. As one respondent in Tatarstan explained in 1997, "Tatarstan does not have Chechnya's successful result (read: independence), but on the other hand, Tatarstan has avoided violence and suffering."²⁰ Political leaders in Tatarstan were also quick to point out that their republic's more moderate behavior compared to Chechnya allowed them to avoid Moscow's violent reaction. Only a few Tatar nationalist leaders seemed to yearn for the steadfast commitment to sovereignty at any cost that Chechnya seemed to have achieved as of the late 1990s. This is not to say that Moscow's decision to use violence strengthened the central state. The war weakened Yeltsin's government in many ways, including perhaps, as Petrov argues, by "...forc[ing] Moscow to seek compromise with other regions to avoid another crisis that could lead to two simultaneous civil wars."²¹ While central state policies toward the ethnic regions in the 1990s did not succeed in strengthening the center vis-à-vis the regions, they unintentionally brought about a fundamental change in political institutions and relations among political actors within the republics, making the re-emergence of nationalist separatism less likely at the end of the 1990s.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that ethnicity has played a relatively minor role in post-Soviet Russian politics. The initial surge of ethno-nationalist mobilization that accompanied perestroika died away quite quickly after independence and did not re-emerge despite continued state weakness throughout the 1990s. This was caused by changes in the political environment at both the national and regional levels. Specifically, the transition to a market economy made ethnic grievances tied to job discrimination irrelevant to the lives of members of minority ethnic groups. At the same time, a shift in the locus of power at the regional level from the legislative to the executive branch created an environment where political opposition and societal forces had relatively little power vis-à-vis regional rulers, making mobilization much more difficult to accomplish. In fact, several of Russia's

Press.

²⁰ Field notes. Elise Giuliano. Tatarstan. 1997.

²¹ Petrov. 2004. "Federalism." 221.

ethnic republics unexpectedly ended up serving as testing grounds for authoritarian techniques that were adopted by the Putin administration in the following decade. For this reason, even if the Russian political system undergoes a partial liberalization during Putin's next term in office, a new round of nationalist mobilization is highly unlikely unless a more equitable distribution of power is enacted in Russia's ethnic republics as well.