

Autonomy for Eastern Finno-Ugric Nations: A Test for Russian Democracy

REIN TAAGEPERA

The Hantis in northwestern Siberia number only 23,000, and Prokopi Sopachin looked like one of the most successful among them, before he was murdered. He was assistant director in charge of indigenous affairs at Noyabersk-Neftegaz, a Russian state-owned oil-production outfit. He was also elected to the local parliament of the Yamalo-Nenets national region. He was an outspoken advocate of the interests of indigenous peoples of western Siberia, a region where reckless and wasteful oil drilling and gas flaring threaten to produce an eco-disaster of worldwide scale. Most Hantis are forest people who depend on hunting and fishing; they feel helpless in the face of the Russian colonists (the Sopachin family, however, was seen as a dangerous uppity exception by the colonists).

On 27 March 1993 Prokopi Sopachin came to visit relatives in the village of Russinskoe. The next day, the local Russian militia lieutenant Alexei Rudiashko arrested him, in violation of his status as elected representative. The following morning, he was found dead near the village council building. Physician Raisa Alikova diagnosed death as a result of beating, which had produced three broken ribs and a crushed skull. His back showed he had been beaten with a nightstick. The police claimed they had released him during the night, but somehow they still had his wallet and internal passport. No one was allowed into the room at the police station where Prokopi had been held and where some thought they had glimpsed traces of blood. A foreign citizen happened to be in the village and reported the details.¹ The police later extracted a confession of murder in self-defense from a relative of Prokopi, and this ended the official inquiry.²

This tragedy is reminiscent of the murders of Amazon Indian activists, as occasionally reported in the Western press. How typical is it of the Russian treatment of the indigenous peoples and other minorities? Was it unusual that an indigenous activist met death? Or was this case exceptional only in that a foreign citizen happened to be on location to report the murder? Given the Russian authorities' Stalinist past and the dearth of foreign witnesses in the Russian provinces, one dare not be optimistic. The murder of Prokopi Sopachin may only be the tip of the iceberg.

Rein Taagepera is a professor at the University of California, Irvine, and Tartu University, Estonia. His works include (ed., with Romuald Misiunas) *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and, with Ott Kurs, *The Finno-Ugric Republics and the Russian State* (forthcoming). He also served as president of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies.

Among the former autonomies of the USSR within the present Russian Federation, one can distinguish four groups: (1) the east Siberian nations oriented toward the Pacific; (2) the northern Caucasus states, oriented toward the Black Sea; (3) the Bolgar nations (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Chuvashiya), also closer to the Black Sea; and (4) the Finno-Ugric states, which tend to be closer to the Baltic Sea and look in that direction. The present article deals with the latter group, meaning the republics of Karelia, Moksherzia (Mordovia), Mariel, Udmurtia, and Komimu. Also included are the Hanti-Mansi and Nenets national regions. Their common denominator is a northern location and distant linguistic ties. They are designated here as eastern Finno-Ugric states to distinguish them from the Finno-Ugric nations located west of the Russian Federation (mainly Finns, Estonians, and Hungarians).³

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The northern location of the eastern Finno-Ugric republics is shared by the Baltic nations. However, while identity under conditions of renewed independence presents new puzzles to the Baltic countries, identity under minimal autonomy is the challenge for the Finno-Ugric republics in the northeastern corner of Europe. These downtrodden peoples hold a mirror to the Baltic nations of what the Baltics could become under prolonged Russian dominance, be it political or economic. Conversely, the Baltic cultural successes tell the eastern Finno-Ugric nations what they could become when relieved of Moscow's colonialism. At present, the activists of the indigenous peoples of northeastern Europe and northwestern Asia still struggle against discrimination.

From the time that Baltic independence was reestablished, Russian government officials have frequently raised the issue of human and civil rights in the Baltics. It is only fair that Russia's own performance regarding speakers of other languages be scrutinized, too. The issue cannot be reduced merely to formal citizenship or residence rights. Sopachin had citizenship, yet he was denied the right to life when he began to promote indigenous interests—this is the highest degree of discrimination.

Could the struggle of the eastern Finno-Ugric states be in the world news ten years from now? Such a thought seems preposterous—as preposterous, indeed, as the same thought looked ten years ago regarding the Baltics. Of course, cultural identity was and is much stronger for the Balts, and demographic colonization has proceeded far in the eastern Finno-Ugric areas (but just in case these nations might catch the world's interest in the decade to come, Ott Kurs and this author are writing a book on them).⁴

First, the countries in question will be briefly characterized and then some more general concerns will be discussed. In all these cases, Russian colonization of the traditional eastern Finno-Ugric homelands began several centuries ago but accelerated under Soviet rule. The present populations of

the republic nations range from 130,000 for Karelians to a million for Moksherzians (Mordvins). A common feature is that only 10 to 43 percent of the republic population is indigenous, while one- to two-thirds of the native people are dispersed outside their own republic. Native language retention ranges from 50 to 80 percent; it is likely to be lower among the diaspora and higher within the republics. There is heavy discrimination against the native languages, with most public servants in the national republics unable and unwilling to give service in the indigenous language. Up to now, full native-language instruction has been limited to the three first grades for a small part of Moksherzian and Mari children, and none for the other nations. However, four-year native instruction will be introduced starting in 1994.

Karelia

Karelia is in many ways Finland's Orthodox twin, produced by Russian conquest 800 years ago, the time Sweden conquered western Finland. Most dialects of the Karelian language are mutually intelligible with Finnish.⁵ After some attempts to create a separate Karelian literary language, standard Finnish was adopted by Karelians.

The ethnic Karelians are by now only 10 percent of Karelia's population. The republic government is dominated by local Russians; yet it proclaimed Karelian sovereignty around 1991, spurred on by Moscow's neglect of outlying areas. Relations with Finland will be something Karelia will have to sort out, if and when it acquires durable, meaningful autonomy. The republic government is interested in Finnish investments and may be willing to accommodate Karelian-Finnish culture as part of the deal. If so, then the Orthodox Karelian identity at the margin of the Lutheran Finnish will face issues familiar to the Catholic Latgolans within the Lutheran Latvian framework. The self-esteem of ethnic Karelians has been kept low by the negligible status accorded to their language in the Orthodox Church and Russian/Soviet administration. On the other hand, it is boosted by awareness of the achievements of their Finnish cousins.

Moksherzia

Moksherzia, south of the Volga bend, is called Mordovia by the Russians. There are actually two distinct, though related, peoples: the Mokshans (close to 400,000) and the twice-as-numerous Erzians. They have no common name to designate them both, although Russians call them both Mordvins. Their languages have only limited mutual intelligibility.⁶ As an Erzian activist put it to this author: "Those who speak Erzian call themselves Erzians. Those who speak Mokshan call themselves Mokshans. Only those who no longer speak their native tongue call themselves Mordvins." The term "Moksherzians" has been proposed and is preferable to Mordvins.

Moksherzia occupies the unenviable position of being the non-Russian area closest to Moscow. Yet it took Muscovy 450 years to conquer the Moksherzian lands (1100-1550), partly because they were a buffer between the Kazan khanate and Muscovy during the latter part of the period. All the

Finno-Ugric peoples who lived equally close to Moscow have been absorbed (such as the Merians and Muromans), but the Moksherzians have proven exceptionally resistant. Closeness to Moscow may have been a factor in Moksherzia's being turned into a notorious conglomeration of Soviet slave-labor camps.

Within the official Mordovian Republic, the Mokshans and Erzians are only one-third (32 percent) of the population and have practically no input in the republic government. The Russian-dominated republic government is openly hostile to Mokshan and Erzian cultures. In contrast to many other republics in the Russian Federation, the Mordovian Russian leaders have not tried to achieve more autonomy for themselves by capitalizing on the non-Russian component. On the contrary, some of them would like to change the status of the republic into that of a standard Russian oblast. More than two-thirds of Mokshans and Erzians (73 percent) live outside the republic, in neighboring areas where they lack the least cultural autonomy. Establishing Mokshan and Erzian grade schools outside the Moksherzian republic is a high priority for the Moksherzian cultural leaders, who are organized around the Mastorava cultural society.

The identity issue for the Moksherzians is twofold. The first one affects the elites: Are they one nation with two literary languages (somewhat akin to Norway), or two separate nations? Divided they would fall, and an outsider might recommend gradual rapprochement of the Mokshan and Erzian literary languages by joint adoption of new cultural and technical terms—but this is easier said than done. The second identity issue concerns the low self-esteem of many Moksherzians, nurtured by centuries of humiliation by Russian institutions—including church, Communist Party, and school officials. The internationally best-known Moksherzians are the sculptor Erzia (S. Nefiodov, 1876-1959), who made a name for himself in Argentina and was visibly proud of being Erzian; and, unfortunately, Stalin's notorious foreign minister, Vyacheslav Scriabin Molotov.

Marjel

Marjel (meaning the Land of the Maris) north of the Volga bend stands out as one of the last outposts of animism in Europe. This traditional religion survives even now, despite onslaughts by Russian Orthodoxy and Russian Communism. Along with Moksherzia, Marjel is one of the few areas in the world where bee-keeping is a major part of the economy. Mari resistance to Russian conquest lasted 300 years (1300-1600) and was so fierce that the Russian expression for being between a rock and a hard place is "to be between an abyss and the Cheremis" (the old Russian name for the Maris). After the collapse of the Kazan Tatar state most peoples on the Volga stopped resisting Russian conquest, but the Maris continued the struggle. The Russians broke them by brutal genocidal tactics against villages, women, and children. In contrast to Moksherzia, which is almost surrounded by Russian oblasts, Marjel also borders Tatarstan and Chuvashiya, giving it some psycho-geographic backing.

The Maris (who number 670,000) are close to one-half of Marjel's

population (43 percent), though they make up only one-quarter of the members of the republic parliament. They do, however, have some input into the republic government and boast relatively good connections in Moscow. The major organization is Mari Ushem (Mari Union) which has considerable grass-roots support and organized a Mari National Congress in October, 1992.⁷ It demands that the Mari language be official in all schools in the republic and that all civil servants become bilingual.

Soviet collapse has removed the worst restrictions on cultural life. The apparently bilingual Mari National Theater sees competition by a new Mari Youth Theater where performances are in Mari only. A Mari-language high school is in the works, at a time when most eastern Finno-Ugric nations still struggle to secure native-language education in the first four grades.

National identity is split by the existence of a separate literary language for the 130,000 Mountain Maris, who are one-fifth of the nation. The two languages seem mutually intelligible to a high degree. However, a Mountain Mari professor told this author that, if given only the choice between Russian or the dominant Meadow Mari, the Mountain Mari speakers would surely choose Russian. Thus the continuance of two literary languages cannot be avoided. Once more, the best one could do is coordinate adoption of new words.

Mari self-esteem seems high compared to other eastern Finno-Ugric nations, yet their folklore supplies a striking example of a racial and economic inferiority complex, which has been nurtured for centuries by Russian discrimination:

Other folk were born by moonlight—
that is why they are blond and handsome;
we were born on a dark night—
that is why we are black and ugly.

...

Other folk were born when the shops were open—
that is why they have silk kerchiefs;
we were born when the shops were closed—
that is why we have none.⁸

The song was recorded in 1905. Yet, the Mari now seem to be the best organized among the eastern Finno-Ugric nations.

Udmurtia

Udmurtia, northeast of the great bend of the Volga, is called the Land of a Thousand Sources by the Udmurts, who compete with the Maris for the title of the last animists in Europe. What the world most notices about Udmurtia are the major truck and tank factories the Russians have built in Izhar (Izhevsk in Russian), the capital of Udmurtia. The resulting influx of non-Udmurt labor has reduced the Udmurts to one-third (31 percent) of

Udmurtia's population. The Russians conquered Udmurtia from 1400 to 1600. Under Soviet rule, nominal recognition of the native culture was accompanied by gradual ethnocide that reached the stage of book burning. An Udmurt scholar told this author that around 1970 all Udmurt-language school books were ordered destroyed. Fortunately, some copies survived outside Udmurtia (mainly at the Kazan University in Tatarstan), and are now being reproduced.

National identity is undivided. Indeed, the 750,000 Udmurts are the only eastern Finno-Ugric nation to have a single literary language and only minor dialectal differences. However, the ethnocide of the previous decades makes itself felt. The Society for Udmurt Culture is weak. One can only imagine the problems of national self-esteem among a young generation for whom all education is synonymous with Russian language, in view of the physical destruction of Udmurt textbooks. Discrimination against Udmurts continues unabated. While in Mariel street signs are bilingual, in Udmurtia they are in Russian only. Maybe more than in other Finno-Ugric republics, the Udmurt elite is split into former Communists, who pander to the local Russian establishment, and more radical nationalists who feel the official Udmurts are selling out the nation.

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Komimu

Komimu (meaning the Land of the Komis), further north, almost reaches the Arctic Ocean. It is administratively split into two: the Permian Komi national region and the much larger Komi Republic. The corresponding two literary languages are mutually fully intelligible. Indeed, even Komi and Udmurt seem mutually intelligible to a fair degree.

The Komis have the distinction of being the northernmost people who once had their own national alphabet, with characters mostly unrelated to Cyrillic. It was rooted out by Russian administrators around 1700. The Komis were the merchants of the European northeast a thousand years ago and were the only nation north of the Russians to adopt Christianity on a wide scale (starting around 1370) prior to Russian colonial subjugation a century later (in 1472). To social scientists, the most familiar contemporary example of Komi creativity is Pitrim Sorokin (1889-1968), a pioneer in theory of social stratification and mobility. It is little known that Sorokin was a leading young Komi activist before the Bolshevik counter-revolution forced him to settle in the United States.

The Komis (500,000, including 150,000 Permian Komis) form barely one-quarter of the population (27 percent) in the two parts into which Komimu is split (they are 60 percent in the Permian Komi N.R. and only 23 percent in the Komi Republic). The northeastern tip of Komimu, which is also the northeastern tip of geographical Europe, includes the Vorkuta coal mines, the endpoint of many Soviet deportees. Vorkuta accounts for much of non-Komi immigration. As in Karelia, the local Russian-dominated leadership

has declared republic sovereignty and seems relatively sympathetic to native culture. When Komi activists organized a World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples in December, 1992, they met cooperation by the republic government and also received financial support from the federal government in Moscow.⁹ This is a most hopeful development.

Hanti-Mansia and Nentsia

The Hanti-Mansi national region is the trans-Ural homeland of Hanti (23,000) and Mansi (9,000) hunters who are distant linguistic kin of the

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Hungarians. The Nenets (35,000) on the Arctic Ocean extend from Europe (the Nenets national region) to Asia (the Yamalo-Nenets and Dolgan-Nenets N.R.). These indigenous peoples now face a northern oil curse reminiscent of that of the Alaskan natives but much worse—in the form of rapacious and ecologically disastrous Russian colonial oil exploitation in

the Ob River basin. An excellent overview has been published by Nikolai Vakhtin.¹⁰

Russian Discrimination against the Finno-Ugric Peoples

Before the onslaught of modernization during the last two centuries, the Finno-Ugric lands on and north of the Volga were largely areas of traditional farming, with technology little different from that of the Russian or Baltic peasants, except for extensive fur hunting in the far north and the marked importance of bee-keeping among the Moksherzians and Maris. The Baltic peasants had access to influences other than Russian and developed into modern nations. The eastern Finno-Ugric nations have been deprived of these opportunities by all-enclosing Russian colonialism, and have been held back. The contrast highlights Moscow's “civilizing” mission in easternmost Europe. The Kazan Tatar state most likely would have done a better job of modernization and democratization.

The Soviet regime deserves credit for establishing national republics and districts, instead of tsarist provinces that ignored ethnic boundaries. Within these republics, most nations represented large majorities at the time of their creation. However, while paying lip service to minority rights, the Soviet regime actually choked them gradually. It encouraged outsiders, mainly Russians, to move into the Finno-Ugric autonomies and districts. At the same time, many indigenous persons were induced or forced to leave their historical homelands, traditional lifestyles were disrupted and suppressed, and modernization of national cultures was also blocked, often by arresting and killing cultural activists.

Schooling in Finno-Ugric languages was started but then was phased out, at times using ethnocidal methods such as destroying all textbooks. Russian

was made the key for all education and careers. Many members of the Finno-Ugric nations came to view their own language as primitive because the Soviet regime purposefully prevented these languages from developing. The result was forced assimilation. This has reduced the number of speakers of practically all eastern Finno-Ugric languages since 1970, despite birth rates higher than those of Russians.

In early post-Soviet Russia the worst ethnocidal practices were alleviated, but Soviet rule left the Finno-Ugric nations seriously weakened in the face of the double task of restoring traditions and modernizing their languages and cultures. There is a lack of terminology in social, political, and technical spheres. Nonetheless, the number of schools where the native languages are taught has been increasing, especially in Mariel. The number of Komis, Maris, and Udmurts (but not Moksherzians and Karelians) showed a marked spurt in the 1989 census, and one wonders what the 1999 census might bring.

Lack of adequate political representation in the legislative assemblies of "their" republics and regions is a serious problem for the Finno-Ugric peoples. These assemblies still consist predominantly of Russian settlers, most of whom do not understand or wish to understand the needs of the original inhabitants. Many local Russian powerholders are former Communist hardliners opposed to any democracy, not to mention the rights of indigenous peoples. The Finno-Ugric cultural organizations have drafted language laws that would give the republic languages an equal status with Russian and open the way to Finno-Ugric languages as effective media of instruction in schools. Such laws are strongly opposed by most Russian authorities, which has led to political action in the form of indigenous protest campaigns in some republics. The Finno-Ugric activists are further hampered by negative press because the media is still largely controlled by the Russians.

Another issue is the presence of Russian penal institutions. Major Soviet slave-labor camps were located in Komimu, Hanti-Mansia, and Moksherzia. The Finno-Ugric organizations argue that republic authorities must have the final word about maintaining or abolishing penal colonies in their republics and districts.

De-sovietization introduces new dangers, such as privatization of land—which represents both promise and threat. Slick deals may enable Russians to win legal claims to lands that belonged to the indigenous peoples before the Stalinist collectivization. Some Finno-Ugric organizations have argued that the natives of a given republic should have preferred status and that the land should be returned to them.

When Pawns Become Actors

The Finno-Ugric nations are in the transition between pawn and actor. The Soviet debacle has given them a breathing space to reprint textbooks, reestablish native-language schools, publish history free of colonialist slant, and generally restore the population's self-esteem as individuals and as members of a nation. A revival of native languages clearly is taking place.

New organizations such as the Moksherzian culture society Mastorava, Mari Ushem, and the Society for Udmurt Culture struggle for the rights of their

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respective nations in their supposedly autonomous areas. They have been able to establish contacts with more developed democratic nations. They also cooperate with each other, starting with the First Congress of Finno-Ugric Writers (May 1989, Yoshkar-Ola, Mariel), followed by the aforementioned

December 1992 Finno-Ugric congress in Syktyvkar, Komimu. Under the pre-perestroika Soviet regime, such initiatives would have been unthinkable, but today they are tolerated.

Presently, it is a race between opposite processes. The identity of the Finno-Ugric republics is becoming stronger, thanks to widened educational and cultural opportunities. At the same time, Russian imperialist moods are recovering from the Soviet debacle. New Russian pressures on the Baltic states became visible in 1994, and the same seems to be the case for the subject peoples within the Russian Federation. In 1993, Yeltsin began attempts to equalize the status of the provinces and republics, thus effectively abolishing the autonomy of the latter and turning the Russian Federation into a unitary state. At an October 1993 meeting in Izhevk (Izhevsk), the representatives of various Finno-Ugric nations sent a protest to Yeltsin and the framers of the Russian Constitution. Moscow still did not seem to know the meaning of autonomy or local control, be it for Russian provinces or for non-Russian republics.

Komimu and Karelia were among the nine republics in the Russian Federation who by early 1993 proclaimed sovereignty, meaning predominance of their laws over the Constitution and other laws of the Russian Federation. Komimu and Karelia both have a large majority of Russians in their population and leadership. The latter are taking advantage of an ethnic label which does not apply to them. Still, there are two positive implications:

- 1) These leaders could not play the games they do without having indigenous peoples as a fig leaf; hence they are more motivated than before to reinforce the indigenous appearances of the republics.
- 2) The new actions and visibility of the republics are bound to boost the self-consciousness of the indigenous population, possibly to a point the present republic leaders did not bargain for.

For the world at large, the issue boils down to whether indigenous peoples are merely a nuisance or also a resource, and whether the term applies to traditional agricultural populations who are still sufficiently numerous to be saved. It is deplorable when autonomy struggles by ethnically different republics within the Russian Federation are viewed by the Western press merely as an impediment to reforms by whoever has power in Moscow, rather than part and parcel of genuine reform. Indige-

nous peoples who remain in their ancestral areas tend to be more respectful of the environment because they cannot leave without undergoing cultural dislocation. People who take greater responsibility for an area's environmental future certainly deserve a special break.

In some places in the world, individual and group representation in parliaments are balanced by introducing a second chamber that gives smaller groups a relatively larger representation. This could make sense for outnumbered indigenous populations who have no other place in the world where their opinions count for anything, and who are the carriers of the territory's historical continuity and ecological conscience.

It is highly likely that the indigenous components will become more visible and active in the domestic politics of the Finno-Ugric republics and national regions, and these republics themselves may follow the lead of Tatarstan and become more active and visible in the politics of the Russian Federation. Even without any goodwill toward them, Western *realpolitik* will have to keep the eastern Finno-Ugric nations in mind as at least potential actors.

Touchstone of Russian Evolution Toward Tolerance and Rule of Law

Russia remains the major player in eastern Europe. Even if the ethnically Russian parts of the Russian Federation were to break up into several successor states, many of them would be more powerful than the post-Soviet ethnic republics, and within many of these republics the Russian component outweighs the native. In the oil-rich Hanti-Mansi and Yamalo-Nenets national regions the immigrants completely overwhelm the indigenous peoples. Will the preponderant attitude among the Russians be that of Sergeant Rudiashko, who sealed Prokopi Sopachin's fate, or will tolerance and rule of law prevail? To put it differently: Will the Russians become democratic?

World history includes cases where an area's dominant ethnic or racial group establishes rule of law and democracy for itself, but not for minorities (or even a majority, in the case of pre-1990 South Africa). If the repressed groups are sufficiently strong, such limited democracy remains challenged and unstable, until democracy either is lost by the dominant group or is extended to everyone. If, however, the repressed groups are sufficiently small or powerless, democracy for the dominant group can last indefinitely. The population share of the majority may increase through immigration or assimilation, and the minority may be given full formal rights when its population share is whittled down to the point where they no longer matter, because they no longer can make use of the rights received.

Such may have been Australia's attitude toward its indigenous people. In Russia's case, the minorities have formal voting rights, but Sopachin's death reminds all of the limitations of a democratic façade not backed up by tolerance and rule of law. If an elected representative like Sopachin could be murdered, then what democracy can one expect for rank-and-file voters *among the ordinary indigenous peoples?*

If democracy for ethnic Russians were as firmly grounded as it is in white

Australia, and if the indigenous nations were as scattered as the Australian natives, stable democracy for Russians only could become workable. But democracy in Russia is extremely fragile, and rule of law has barely begun to be introduced. Any repression of non-Russians is likely to spill over to those Russians who object to such repression, and the democratic experiment would rapidly end. Furthermore, many of the Russian ethnic republics have become quite visible actors (Chechenia, Tatarstan), and others, including the eastern Finno-Ugric nations, may follow this cue. Unless the issue of the ethnic republics is settled peacefully and democratically, rule of law and democracy will elude the Russians as well.

For the Russians, each of the aforementioned four geographic groups of post-Soviet minority nations (eastern Siberian, northern Caucasian, Bolgar, and Finno-Ugric) presents a different challenge. The eastern Finno-Ugric areas are Russia's oldest colonies, subdued 400 to 800 years ago. There is

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no historical Russian animosity toward the Finno-Ugric peoples, given that they never threatened Russia the way the Tatars did.

However, there is widespread Russian contempt and scorn. Most Russians also take it for granted that the Finno-Ugric areas are part of age-old Russia. Geographically,

most Finno-Ugric republics are intertwined with Russian provinces, and within most republics Russians heavily outnumber the native peoples. This latter feature should block any autonomy attempts, but oddly enough, it has not—most notably in Karelia and Komimu. There, the motivation of the Russian majority is territorial pride and desire to control their own destiny in the face of neglect by the imperial capital. Used as justification for self-rule, the existence of the despised indigenous languages becomes valuable to the colonists, and the small number of the natives makes them non-threatening.

In contrast to faraway east Siberian and north Caucasian nations and the close-by but strong Bolgar republics, the Finno-Ugric nations are close to Moscow and relatively weak. This presents Russian democracy with the challenge of magnanimity. In contrast to the other republics further south and east, there is no question of whether the Russians can hold on to the Finno-Ugric republics (either by Moscow rule or that of local Russians); they certainly can. The challenge is moral, as in the case of Australian aborigines, New Zealand Maoris, and the U.S. and Canadian Amerindians. Can the dominant culture begin to treat the indigenous minority decently? The Australian aborigines might offer the best analogy to the Hantis and other northern indigenous peoples, in that small populations are spread over wide areas and overwhelmed by a much larger number of settlers. In terms of numbers, population density, and degree of modernization, the Maoris might offer more parallels with the Finno-Ugric republics. However, there is one crucial difference. In northeastern Europe, the political culture of the

dominant group is at stake much more than in Australia or North America, where the Anglo population brought along the rule of law (and eventually democracy) for themselves but not the natives. The Russians cannot maintain such a separation as they begin to lay the foundations for rule of law at the threshold of the twenty-first century. Sopachin's murder imperils the rise of Russian democracy much more than the nineteenth-century genocide of Tasmanians imperiled the rise of Australian democracy because the tradition of rule of law is so weak in Russia. Moreover, we live in an age of rapid communications where colonies cannot be kept in isolation. This is why the treatment of Finno-Ugric nations is the touchstone of Russian evolution toward tolerance and rule of law—features without which democracy remains an empty word.

Conclusion

The Finno-Ugric republics and regions will be a litmus paper for Russian evolution toward tolerance and rule of law, precisely because they of all the non-Russian peoples of the Federation have been the most tightly bound to Russia and its culture. As long as Moscow does not tolerate genuine self-rule by the Finno-Ugric peoples, Russian democracy will remain shallow and untrustworthy. This is why the future of the eastern Finno-Ugric nations matters to the world.

Notes

¹ *Postimees* (Estonia), 7 and 29 April 1993.

² Harri Murk, "The Ob-Ugrians and the Conference on Native Self-Government in Western Siberia, Khanto-Mansiisk," Report, Chair of Estonian Studies, University of Toronto, 1993. The conference took place from 30 June to 1 July 1993, and Murk interviewed several members of the Sopachin family in June 1993.

³ The languages of all nations considered belong to the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family, except the Nenets, which is part of the Samoyedic branch of the Uralic. The linguistic relationships are quite distant and do not imply mutual intelligibility, except between Udmurt and Komi.

⁴ Rein Taagepera and Ott Kurs, *The Finno-Ugric Republics and the Russian State*, in preparation. Ott Kurs is a geography *dotsent* at Tartu University, and we welcome any information that could help us bring the present condition of these nations to the attention of the English-speaking public. Major existing English-language works include Peter Hajdu, *Finno-Ugric Languages and Peoples* (London: A. Deutsch, 1975), which stresses anthropology, and Seppo Lallukka, *The East Finnic Minorities in the Soviet Union* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1990), which stresses demography.

⁵ By "mutually intelligible" this author means a situation where, with some effort, people can converse fairly freely, each using one's own language, without previous contact with the other language. Such a relationship seems to exist between Spanish and Portuguese, Danish and Swedish, Ukrainian and Russian.

⁶ By "limited mutual intelligibility" I mean a situation where less than one-half of the content is understood, in the absence of previous experience with the other language. Such a relationship seems to exist between Spanish and French, Swedish and German, Estonian and Finnish, Latvian and Lithuanian, Czech and Russian.

⁷ Harri Murk, "Wandering through Mari-El and the Udmurt Republic," Report, Chair of Estonian Studies, University of Toronto, 1993.

⁸ Lauri Honko, Senni Timonen and Michael Branch, *The Great Bear: A Thematic Anthology of Oral Poetry in the Finno-Ugric Languages* (Helsinki: Finnish Literary Society, 1993), p. 377.

⁹ Harri Murk, "The Finno-Ugrians and the Sotkovkar Conference in the Komi Republic," Report, Chair of Estonian Studies, University of Toronto, 1992.

¹⁰ Nikolai Vakhtin, "Native Peoples of the Russian Far North," Minority Rights Group International, Report 92/5, August 1992; 379/381 Brixton Road, London SW9 7DE, UK.

Appendix

Facsimile of a declaration circulated and adopted at the World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples, Syktyvkar, Komimu, December 1992.

Declaration of Fundamental Principles, Aims, and Objectives for Cooperation of the Finno-Ugric Peoples of the World

We, representatives of the Finno-Ugric peoples, delegates to and participants in the World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples, proceeding from realities of present-day life that afford a historic opportunity for the realization of the aspiration of our peoples for cooperation, making concern about the conditions of the Finno-Ugric peoples and respecting the history, traditions, culture, language and national dignity of our peoples, understanding our responsibility for our peoples' development on the basis of their culture and mode of life, having as our aim the realization of international standards in the spheres of peoples' right to self-determination, the rights of indigenous peoples and national minorities, and human rights, declare the following:

—The World Congress of the Finno-Ugric Peoples is a forum of these peoples. It is independent of governments and political parties, and aims for the status of a non-governmental organization;

—we are open to the world community as a voluntary union of equal kindred peoples, and as such we include ourselves in the European process of security and cooperation and are guided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Paris Charter for a New Europe, the 169th Convention of the International Labor Organization concerning the rights of indigenous peoples and national minorities;

—we intend to implement our peoples' will to cooperate and render mutual aid in the spheres of law, economy, ecology, social issues, information, science, and culture;

—taking into consideration the different constitutions and constitutional systems of our states and understanding the possibility of different approaches to the implementation of the aforementioned aims, we intend to assert before the World Community our peoples' vital interests on the basis of European humanism and standards of international law.

We are convinced that our cooperation will contribute to the progress of all peoples in the world.