The Quest for More Autonomy: Risks and Opportunities for Tatarstan

Russian decolonisation and Eurasia: an imperial legacy?

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Publication date
2023

Document Version
Final published version

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Citation for published version (APA):

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In June of 2022, the Free Nations League (FNL), a hitherto little-known network of “indigenous activists” from Russia, issued a manifesto calling for Russian decolonisation. In a public debate invigorated by Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine, “decolonisation” has become a buzzword. However, not all its users advocate for the same agenda. The FNL’s understanding of the term is linked with the concept of de-federation, i.e. splitting Russia’s territory into 34
independent regions. Thus, when divided into many independent states, Russia would arguably loosen its grip over the economic, political, and cultural life of its ethnic minorities and would pose less of a security threat to its neighbours in the future.

Public attention to political and economic inequality in Russia's regions, stirred by the debate on decolonisation, represents a welcome and much-needed development in recalibrating our view on the country. However, limiting decolonisation ambitions to secession and the creation of independent states may not be as beneficial for Russia's ethnic minority groups in the long run as it seems. Tatarstan, one of Russia's ethnic republics, exemplifies the possible risks of such a limited view.

The argument for decolonisation-through-secession is powerful. It taps into longstanding genuine grievances for Tatars in Tatarstan regarding their growing political dependence on Moscow and fears of assimilating into the majority ethnic Russian population. The Tatar language, one of the primary identity markers for Tatars, has continuously been declining. It is hardly used in administration and higher education, and in 2017 it ceased to be a mandatory class at schools in Tatarstan, further jeopardising attempts to raise new generations of Tatar speakers. Moreover, the state has prohibited practically any form of Tatar national activism. For the last three decades, the Tatar culture has remained stuck in its Soviet interpretation. Regional authorities supported and funded only apolitical, conventional and essentialist understandings of Tatarness. Attempts to challenge the status quo have led to crack-downs and the imprisonment of Tatar activists. Secessionist narratives also feed into the still-fresh memories of the 1990s. In 1994, Tatarstan—which initially contested its status within the newly-created Russian Federation—negotiated a special power delimitation agreement with Moscow, securing significant privileges. While some view the agreement as an achievement, a near-ideal form of advocacy for minority rights within a federation, others regard it as a moment of weakness, an unwelcome divergence on the path towards real independence.

Secession and its potential consequences

Notwithstanding the advocacy for Tatarstan's secession, if we understand decolonisation—in the simplest terms—as the emancipation from economic, intellectual and political oppression, secession is unlikely to bring the desired results. Ethnic nationalism as a key feature will likely fuel interethnic tensions within the republic, where Tatars constitute only about 53% of the population, and in relation to neighbouring Bashkortostan with whom it has a history of conflict over the language and identity of its border population. The vicissitudes of now-independent former Soviet republics also demonstrate that gaining true political autonomy from Moscow will take time. As one of the most prosperous regions in the country, Tatarstan is deeply embedded in Russia's economy, trade, and infrastructure. Cutting those ties would pose a significant challenge. Moreover, from a conceptual perspective, Tatarstan
as an ethnic republic and Tatarness as a distinct culture owe a debt to Soviet nation-building projects. Creating an independent state that will cement these constructs goes against the drive towards intellectual and cultural emancipation. Finally, as an independent state, the republic will need large-economic partners. Except for Russia, the closest candidates are Turkey—which currently lacks a stable economy, and China. Cooperation with the latter will likely replace one hegemon with another.

Although political, economic, and cultural emancipation comes with its challenges, this does not mean that conversations about decolonisation—in the broader sense—are useless. On the contrary, they have helped to amplify the voices of hitherto marginalised groups, bringing attention to issues not often addressed: such as racism and xenophobia in Russia, the extinction of indigenous languages, the desertion of rural areas, and how ethnicity and poverty often intersect. Inequality, in other words, exists on many levels and is not limited to the relations between Moscow and regions or inter-ethnic affairs.

To be truly emancipatory, the decolonisation of minorities must be from the bottom up. In the context of war, it is not easy to accurately measure the moods and preferences of the target population. Taking top-down decisions on behalf of a silent population is not only undemocratic but reinforces the existing patterns of coercion. Moreover, there is no guarantee that for Tatars, like Russia’s other Muslim-majority ethnic groups, decolonisation will necessarily follow the line of ethnic self-identification: one should not underestimate the power of globalised religious identity and Islamic solidarity. Finally, rebuilding a fairer society is a process that takes years, if not decades, and addressing the memory of state brutality will be a task for all groups, not only the ethnic ones. For the Russian society that has yet to fully processed the ruptures of 1917 and 1991, abrupt changes will likely reinforce trauma-induced reactionary patterns.