Minorities in North-west Russia

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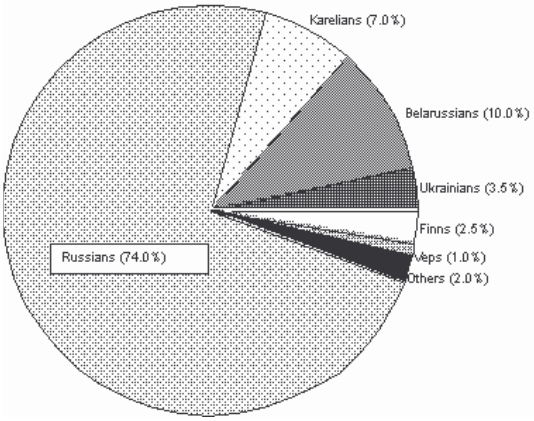
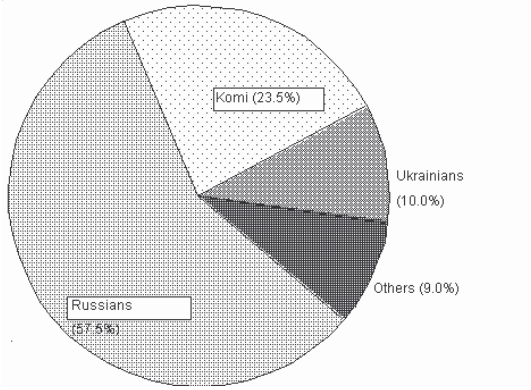
Map: North-west Russia



Ethnic Composition in Karelian Republic



Ethnic Composition in Komi Republic

Ethnic problems in North-west Russia should be considered part of the more general problem of survival of the native peoples of the Russian Far North. Limiting the geographical scope of this article to the North-west, that is, to the European part of the Far North, may seem somewhat artificial. For instance, the area populated by the Nenets people is divided by the Ural Mountains, with only some 20% of the Nenets living in the European part. Developments related to the Barents Initiative, which, after the recent inclusion of the Nenets Autonomous District, includes all of North-west Russia except the Komi Republic (i.e., the Karelian Republic and Murmansk and Archangelsk oblasts as well as the Nenets Autonomous District), still provide justification for particular focus on the national problems in this region.

Ethnic Patchwork and Administrative Borders

There are six main groups of native peoples in North-west Russia. The Komi live mostly in the Komi Republic and the Komi-Permyak Autonomous District, with a total population of 484,000 (the Komi-Permyaks, who number 147,000, are sometimes considered a separate ethnic group). The Nenets, totalling 34,000, are spread over the Nenets Autonomous District as well as the Siberian Yamal-Nenets and Dolgano-Nenets Autonomous Districts. The Finns, numbering 47,000, now live rather dispersed throughout the Russian Federation, while the Karelians, about half of whom live in the Karelian Republic, number 125,000. The Veps, who also live in the Karelian Republic, total 12,000. Finally, the Saami, who inhabit the Murmansk Oblast, number 1,900. (These data are based on the 1989 census.)

Three of the five federal units included in the analysis are ethnically defined and, as such, established with the goal of protecting the ethnic identity of the titular nations (the Komi and Karelian republics and the Nenets Autonomous District). In none of the units, however, does the titular nation constitute a majority of the population. The Komi hold the strongest position vis-à-vis the other groups, making up 23.5% of the population in their republic (down by 6.5 percentage points since 1959). Still, an absolute majority of the republic's 1,250,000 inhabitants are ethnic Russians (57.5% in 1989).

The ethnic composition of the Karelian Republic, with a population of 790,000, is more complex: 74% are ethnic Russians (up 10 percentage points since 1959), 10% Karelians, 7% Belarusians, 3.5% Ukrainians, 2.5% Finns and Ingrians, and 1% Veps. Thus, the four Finno-Ugric groups, taken together, do not constitute more than 13.5% of the total population.

In the Nenets Autonomous District, one finds the same tendency to ethnic dominance by the Russians. Of a total population of some 55,000 people, the Nenets make up only 12%, while the Russians constitute 66%. In addition, 9% of the population are Komi and 7% Ukrainian.

Not surprisingly, in the two remaining units, both territorially defined, the Russian dominance is even greater. Ethnic Russians make up more than 90% of the population in Archangelsk, and more than 80% in Murmansk. The traditional Saami minority on

the Kola Peninsula make up only 0.1% of the population of Murmansk Oblast. The ethnic composition of the federal units of North-west Russia thus makes effective protection of the northern minorities complicated.

The complexity of ethnic problems in the Russian part of the Barents region is also related to the differences in the character of the indigenous peoples: the Nenets and the Saami are by their cultural background reindeer-herders, while the Komi, Karelians and Veps were traditionally hunters and farmers. The Finns again represent a separate case, as they are just an isolated part of a neighbouring nation.

Administrative borders in this area, as in the Russian Federation in general, have very little in common with ethnic boundaries, and have been determined rather by economic or, as in the case of Karelia, political considerations. Even the borders of the autonomous districts, drafted in 1929–30 by the Committee for Assisting the Peoples of the Far North 'to establish new and rational economic boundaries that would not contradict the ethnic boundaries', were made irrelevant to the actual living areas of the indigenous peoples through subsequent economic developments.

Historical Developments

Russian settlers (Pomors) arrived on the shores of the Barents and Kara seas as early as the 13th century. They occupied themselves with fishing, hunting and trading, while generally establishing peaceful relations with the native peoples, who were mostly reindeer-herders. Another wave of Russian migration took place in the mid-17th century, related to the split in the Russian Orthodox Church that forced the Old Believers to seek refuge in the North. In spite of attempts to integrate the northern fringes of the Empire, Moscow's influence in this region was limited and mainly connected to the collection of fur-tax (yasak). Traditional ways of life and shamanism thus survived and remained unchanged up to the 20th century.

While Russian claims to the Far North went largely undisputed, the expansion to the North-west was a result of protracted warfare. Karelian territory, which had been ruled by the Swedes, was gradually incorporated into the Russian Empire. Reforms and territorial acquisitions of Peter the Great in the early 18th century gave a new boost to economic development in North-west Russia. After the final incorporation of Finland (1809), a need to protect the life of indigenous peoples in this area was recognized. In 1822, the 'Code of Indigenous Administration' was introduced, to be followed in 1892 by the 'Statute of the Indigenous Peoples'. Although both documents reserved substantial rights and privileges for the native peoples, they in fact failed to contain the waves of colonization.

The 1917 October Revolution brought new impetus to the efforts to protect the rights of the indigenous peoples of the North. The Committee for Assisting the Peoples of the Far North (Committee of the North) was established as a government body mandated 'to define and to reserve the territories necessary for the life and cultural development of each ethnic group'. Thanks to the activity of this committee, the so-called Northern Minorities, which include almost 30 different ethnic groups of the Far

North, numbering from a couple of hundred to a few thousand members, were exempted from all taxation and from military service. Several educational programmes were started, and the newly created Unified Northern Alphabet was introduced. Furthermore, the sale of alcohol was prohibited.

But these initiatives proved short-lived. From the early 1930s, protective efforts were made subordinate to state programmes of industrialization and collectivization, and in 1935 the Committee of the North was disbanded.

The construction of the canal linking the White Sea and Lake Onega (Belomor Canal) in 1931–34 marked the beginning of the practice of labour camps. Soon after, the gulag system started to pump manpower to the numerous camps in the North. Besides the timber production in Archangelsk Oblast, various types of mining on the Kola Peninsula and coal mining in Vorkuta, the Central Agency for the Northern Passage (Glavsevmorput) was one of the main users of prison labour.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the indigenous peoples of the North suffered mostly from the destruction of their environment, a side-effect of the influx of forced labour. The 1950s, however, saw a campaign of intensified collectivization and forced relocation that resulted in the physical destruction of many Nenets and Saami villages. The campaign followed the guidelines set out in the resolution 'On the Measures for Further Economic and Cultural Development of the Peoples of the North', issued by the CPSU Central Committee in March 1957, and proved to have grave consequences for the further development of the reindeer-herders of the northern tundra.

In the Soviet period, Karelia held a unique place as a potential springboard for westward expansion, and therefore warrants some special attention. The Soviet Union recognized the independence of Finland in 1920, and the border between two states was settled by the Tartu Treaty. The new division, which gave Finland the city of Vyborg (Viipuri) and the Karelian Isthmus, as well as some territory on the northern shore of Lake Ladoga, more or less followed the old borderline between the Grand Duchy of Finland and the Russian provinces of the old empire. On the Soviet side, a Karelian Workers Commune was established in 1920, subsequently upgraded to an autonomous republic.

As a result of the Soviet–Finnish Winter War (1939–40), the border was shifted westwards, and the conquered territories included in the newly proclaimed Karelian–Finnish Soviet Republic. In 1941, Finland recaptured its Karelian possessions and expanded further on the Karelian Isthmus and in the region between lakes Onega and Ladoga. After the new Finnish defeat in 1944, Finland had to agree to return to the 1940 border. These shifts created up to 500,000 refugees within Finland, while thousands of Finns and Karelians living in the USSR were forced to resettle outside their traditional territories.

As long as Karelia was a Soviet republic, some superficial support was given to Finnish language and culture. In 1956, owing to a shift in political climate under Khrushchev and a normalization of the relationship with Finland, Karelia was again downgraded to an autonomous republic inside the Russian Federation, which resulted in less resources being devoted to the development of local culture.

Perestroika and Beyond

The introduction of the policy of glasnost in 1985–87 launched a wide-ranging discussion in the USSR of the catastrophic situation facing the northern minorities. Independent political and social organizations began to appear throughout the North. Among the first was the Kola Saami Association, established in 1989. According to its statutes, 'The Association is an independent nongovernmental organization which is called upon to promote the social and economic development of this ethnic minority, to preserve its traditions based on the harmony of man and nature, and to study and develop its cultural and spiritual heritage.' The same year, the organization Yasavey was set up by the Nenets in the Nenets Autonomous District. This organization came to monopolize representation of the Nenets minority to the extent that it was acknowledged by the local authorities and the district charter as the legal representative of the minority. In Karelia, the main Finno-Ugric nations united in 1991 under the umbrella of the National Congress of the Karelian, Finnish and Veps peoples. As a result of the National Congress's radical stance on national issues, combined with its lack of potential for becoming a mass movement, this organization came to play only a marginal role in Karelian politics.

Besides these local initiatives, the northern minorities joined forces in the Congress of Northern Minorities. An important contribution to alerting public opinion was made by the First Congress of Northern Minorities, meeting in Moscow in March 1990 with the goal 'to unite all our strength in order to survive'. Responding to criticism that only 7 of the 26 Northern minorities had formal ethnic autonomous structures, the Soviet Parliament in 1990 passed a law 'On Free Ethnic Development of the Citizens of the USSR Who Live Outside Their Ethnic Territories or Have No Such Territories Within the USSR'. The law did not, however, have much impact on the situation of the minorities. The dissolution of the Soviet Union the following year and the subsequent establishment of the Russian Federation did not lead to extension of territorial autonomy to the marginalized northern minorities.

Another main target for criticism in the late 1980s was the industrial policy in the North; a new law 'On General Principles of Local Self-Administration' provided the local authorities with the possibility of cancelling many centrally planned industrial projects in the North. Further development of this positive trend was, however, challenged by the deepening economic crisis and later by the breakup of the Soviet Union. The Russian Federation assumed responsibility for protection of the indigenous peoples of the North, but had scant resources available for this task.

Actually, in the first Russian Parliament, the northern minorities were even less represented than in the Soviet Parliament. The fierce political struggle in Moscow reduced the problems of the North to a low-priority issue, a situation which was termed unacceptable at the Second Congress of Northern Minorities, held in Moscow in November 1993. Still, the message from the North drowned in the hectic election campaign leading up to the first State Duma elections.

The establishment of a State Duma Committee on Northern Affairs has contributed to heighten awareness of the problems of the North. Owing to the current economic recession, the committee has had limited possibilities to solve the major problems. The severe financial crisis has led to a cessation of practically all industrial

construction in the North and a general economic retreat from this area. This has been followed by net out-migration from North-west Russia. According to estimates, Archangelsk Oblast lost 30,500 people between 1989 and 1995; the Komi Republic, 49,200; and the Nenets Autonomous District, 4,600. Worst in this respect is the situation in Murmansk Oblast, which has lost as many as 97,500 people, or more than 8% of its 1989 population.

The economic retreat in principle brings a substantial reduction of the industrial pressure on the northern environment, but that in itself does not mean any relief for the indigenous peoples. Decades of centralized control have made them highly dependent on external supplies and financial support. Rebuilding of the traditional way of living is also hampered (if not precluded) by the industrial pollution and environmental destruction of vast territories; nor are the badly needed investments in their rehabilitation likely to arrive in the foreseeable future. A recent illustration of the precarious situation in the environmental sphere was the catastrophic breakdown of the pipeline in the Komi Republic (it had not had proper maintenance since 1975). The break started in August 1994, but was discovered only in September after 103,000 tons of oil had spilled out, polluting beyond repair some 90 square kilometres of land and vast riverine areas. The imminent northwards expansion of oil and gas extraction to the territories of the Nenets Autonomous District will not reduce the pressure on the vulnerable arctic nature and the traditional life of the northern minorities.

Regional Options

Lack of attention from Moscow has forced the federal units to take greater responsibility for ethnic problems, including those related to the indigenous peoples of the North. The Karelian Republic was among the first to recognize that the question of minorities actually provides new opportunities for international cooperation. Despite the relatively low percentage of Finns and Karelians in the total population, the Finnish language has been made the second state language in the republic, and all forms of cultural contact with Finland are strongly encouraged. This policy has paid good economic dividends: a majority of joint ventures in Karelia involve Finnish companies.

Paradoxically, this new emphasis on the republic's historic and cultural ties with neighbouring Finland may in the long run constitute a new threat to the Karelian minority. The Karelian language is still not codified, and as a result there has been a high degree of linguistic assimilation among ethnic Karelians. In 1989, only 51.5% used the vernacular, while 48,3% preferred Russian. Today, the only remaining districts with a compact Karelian population are found in the countryside in the south and the North-west. With Finnish acquiring status as the second state language and being introduced as the language of instruction in these areas, there is a risk of further linguistic and cultural assimilation and the gradual disappearance of a separate Karelian ethnic identity.

In the Komi Republic, as throughout most of the federation, the problems related to the well-being of the indigenous people are overshadowed by more pressing economic problems. Economically depressed areas such as the Vorkuta coal-mining region,

where the miners have several times resorted to strikes, are predominantly Russian. The lack of strong lobby groups among the Komi has led to cuts in funding for education in the Komi language.

In the Nenets Autonomous District, the situation of the titular nation is similarly difficult. Reindeer-herding has become economically unsustainable since transport of meat is too expensive and subsidies have been slashed to zero. With the present economic situation, the Nenets people can hardly expect sufficient resources to be allocated either by local authorities or through the Barents Initiative. One crucial problem is the delivery of supplies to the capital, Naryan-Mar, and many villages throughout Glavsevmorput, which in turn is entirely dependent on subsidies from the state budget. The only source of hope for the Nenets Autonomous District is an exploitation of on- and offshore oil and gas reserves. Extraction, which is complicated by climatic conditions and lack of infrastructure, is currently the subject of intensive negotiations with several international partners, including Norsk Hydro. If these projects come anywhere close to implementation, an option for reserving certain territories for exclusive use of the native peoples (biosphere national parks), as proposed by many Russian experts, could be part of a solution of the problems facing the Nenets population today.

In Murmansk Oblast, ethnic problems have indeed been a low-priority issue. The Kola Saami Association is seeking support not so much from the local authorities as from partners in the Barents Region, first of all through the Committee of Indigenous Peoples, which includes representatives of the Nordic Saami parliaments. Gradually, the authorities in Murmansk are becoming more aware of the touchy Saami question, and are carefully avoiding any steps that could be interpreted as challenging the Saami way of life. The relatively small Saami population makes it easier to simply continue subsidizing reindeer-herding. In neighbouring Archangelsk Oblast, the ethnic question has been given similarly low priority. However, with the Nenets Autonomous District being recognized as a separate federal subject according to the new Russian Constitution, the Nenets population still within the jurisdiction of the oblast is minuscule.

In general, the ethnic problems in North-west Russia do not seem likely to become a source of serious political trouble. The marginalization of the titular nations has lead to a weak base for ethnic mobilization. Furthermore, there seems to be an understanding in all five federal units in North-west Russia that while greater reliance on local resources is necessary, regional separatism could endanger not only relations with Moscow, but also the prospects for cooperation in the Barents Region.