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## Current Situation in Yakutia

### Executive Summary

Located in East Siberia, the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) is central to the survival of the Russian Federation. Suffice it to say that Yakutia constitutes about 1/7 of her territory and is enormously rich in diamonds, gold, coal, and other mineral resources. There are two kinds of conflict currently underway which already aggravate inter-ethnic relations in the Republic.

The first one is connected with the struggle between the local leadership and the government in Moscow over Yakutia's sovereignty and control over her economic resources. Part of the Russia population of the Republic tends to support President Nikolaev in this conflict, while another one sides with Moscow. The second conflict is connected with increasingly tense relations between the indigenous population, the Sakha (Yakut), and the Russian migrants, particularly those who only recently settled in Yakutia. Both of these conflicts are closely interlaced and this makes the situation in Yakutia potentially explosive.

## Current Situation in Yakutia

Located in East Siberia, Yakutia<sup>1</sup> is central to the survival of the Russian Federation. Suffice it to say that Yakutia constitutes 1/7 of her territory and is enormously rich in diamonds, gold, coal, and other mineral resources.

Russian politicians and experts in inter-ethnic relations in Moscow currently consider Yakutia relatively quiet and tend to underestimate the troubles the Russian Government may face there in the future. Actually, at present the situation in the Republic is fraught with conflicts.

The northernmost Turkic-speaking people, Yakut were the majority in their country until the nineteen sixties. A significant part of the Russian minority have lived there for many generations, is involved in agriculture, and is well acquainted with Yakut culture and its language. Intermarriages have been rather frequent. Many members of the Yakut political elite, like the President Mikhail Nikolaev, have Russian mothers, or spouses. These factors had reduced ethnic tension. However, during the last twenty-five years the development of mining has resulted in an influx of new migrants from European Russia and other East Slavic republics. As a result, the percentage of Yakut in the overall population of the Republic dropped from 90% in 1920, to 43% in 1970, to 36.9% in 1979, and to 33.4% in 1989.

The new mining industries were under the complete control of the central ministries

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<sup>1</sup> Sakha is the self-appellation of the people. The Russians call them "Yakut," though they resent being known by this name. Since April 1992 the official name of the Republic is "The Sakha Republic (Yakutia)".

in Moscow, which never shared with Yakutia the revenues from their enterprises. By 1989, the government of Yakutia controlled only 4% of the industries in the Republic, and received only 1% of their revenues. Industries other than mining, the infrastructure, and services remain undeveloped and agriculture is in decay. Moreover, the environment is deteriorating. In the Vilui zone, the historical heartland of Yakutia, the indigenous peoples' life span has dropped to 40-45 years. While the indigenous population was virtually excluded from participation in the mining industries, the new migrants enjoyed higher wages, better living conditions and provisions and some other privileges, such as "northern wage-increments", which were denied the local population. As a result, the living standards of the Yakut are half the Republic's average.

In spite of incentives, many new migrants cannot adapt to the harsh Northern environment. Often they depart after serving out one or two terms of their contracts (three, or six years) and saving some money. These temporary migrants have no respect for, or interest in, the indigenous people and their culture. Furthermore, they are not concerned with the preservation of the environment, and tend to look down on the Yakut. The policy of Russification also affected the Yakut in a negative way. In the sixties, Yakut schools were ordered to teach only in Russian beginning from seventh grade. Simultaneously, Yakut schools and pre-school educational institutions were drastically curtailed. As a result, at present 26.2 percent of the Yakut school children do not know their own language.

It is not surprising that inter-ethnic relations in Yakutia deteriorated during the last decades, and in 1986 the tension resulted in open clashes between Yakut and Russian students in Yakutsk, the capital of the Republic. My informants in Yakutia claim that these

clashes were actually provoked by the KGB, who wished to use them as a pretext to step up preventive measures against a growth in Yakut nationalism.

To a large extent, the division of labor in Yakutia coincides with ethnic divisions. A majority of the agricultural population consists of Yakut, while in the mining sector Russians dominate and occupy all privileged positions. The directors and other managerial personnel of mining enterprises were appointed by Moscow and were not accountable to the government of Yakutia. However, while economic power in Yakutia belongs to Russians, it is not accompanied by political power.

In the republican political elite the Yakut are overrepresented. This is due to the fact that, first, Soviet nationalities policy included providing some members of indigenous ethnic groups privileged positions in the local party apparatus and administrations in order to secure their support, and second, because many Russians in Yakutia, particularly the most influential managerial-administrative personnel in the mining industry, associated themselves not with Yakutia but with Moscow and were not very interested in the local political process. The political passivity of the Russians in Yakutia, and a system of electoral districts which gives an advantage to the rural population, created a situation in which more than 50% of the deputies of the Supreme Soviet of Yakutia are ethnic Yakuts.

In addition, the Yakut have a numerical advantage in the educational sphere. A vast majority of students at the university in their capital are Yakut. They also have a relatively numerous and well-educated intelligentsia that is very sensitive to any deterioration of Yakut positions in their Republic, and is capable of articulating nationalistic goals.

As in many other parts of the Soviet Union and the Russian federation, the

"perestroika" period and the subsequent disintegration of the empire were accompanied in Yakutia by a growth in nationalism and resentment towards the central government. In the cultural sphere the Yakut are insisting on a revival of their traditional culture and on reinstating the Yakut language in their schools. The most remarkable development is their recent complete rejection of Orthodox Christianity, to which they were forced to convert three hundred years ago, and their enthusiastic return to Shamanism. In the daily life inter-ethnic relations are deteriorating. Mixed marriages, which are particularly resented by Yakut nationalists, are much more rare than in the recent past, and small-scale fights provoked by Russian youth dating their Yakut peers, or similar events, are at present rather common. Because of the ratio of Yakut and Russians in the Republic, complete independence from Russia is not considered an immediately feasible goal by the majority of Yakut. However, they certainly wish to occupy a privileged status as the indigenous and titular ethnic group in the Republic. They also desire Yakutia to gain more sovereignty within the Russian Federation. In the latter respect, aspirations in the political elite, which consists mainly of former Communists and nationalistic Yakut intelligentsia, coincide. Moreover, they enjoy the support of many Russians, particularly those who are living outside the mining regions as well as those who do not consider their residence in the Republic temporary. Though these Russians are afraid of growing Yakut nationalism, they tend to support the leadership of Yakutia in its struggle with the Moscow leadership over control of the Republic's economic resources. A prevailing opinion in Yakutia is that given its richness in diamonds, gold, oil, and minerals, and its small population (1,094,065 in 1989), the living standards in the Republic would easily reach that of Kuwait, if they are not exploited by Moscow.

The Soviet Government of Gorbachev, and then the Russian government of Yeltsin have clearly been unwilling to comply with Yakutia's requests, and have considered diamonds mined in Republic as federal property. For some time, the President of Yakutia, Mikhail Nikolaev, who is apparently on good personal terms with Yeltsin, hoped to get concessions from Moscow by demonstrating the Republic's loyalty in actively supporting the Federal Treaty. In the spring of 1992, it looked as if his efforts were rewarded. On March 31, just three hours before signing the Federal Treaty, Nikolaev and Yeltsin signed an economic agreement which would provide Yakutia 25% of the diamonds mined on its territory, a revenue share from the diamonds sold on foreign markets, and the right of ownership of newly discovered deposits. In addition, the Yakut government received the right to appoint the top managerial personnel in the mining industry. The parliament of Yakutia was put in a jubilant mood, and in April 1992, it ratified the Federal Treaty practically without any discussion. Shortly, their mood sobered when it became apparent that the Russian government was not going to fulfill the agreement. In August 1992, President Nikolaev complained to me that Yakutia still could not receive the promised revenues. Shareholding in the joint-stock company "Diamonds of Russia-Sakha" established in July 1992 is controlled by the Russian government.

By the end of Summer 1992, the conflict between the government of Yakutia and the Russian government had resumed. Yakutia began to ally itself with Tatarstan and Bashkortostan (Bashkira) and suspended the payment of federal taxes. As of October 1992, this conflict was not yet resolved. In addition to the dissatisfaction of the Russian managerial elite in Yakutia, President Nikolaev began to appoint ethnic Yakut to key positions in the



mining industry. Thus, for the first time in history an ethnic Yakut became head of the Yakut Gold Corporation ("Yakutzoloto"). The government of Yakutia is also eager to establish direct contacts with foreign countries, particularly in the economic sphere. Businessmen, experts, and tourists from Japan and South Korea are visiting the country in increasing numbers. President Nikolaev complains that Americans in this respect are far behind, in spite of his desire to activate contacts with the USA.

Like many other leaders in the CIS, and in the Russian Federation, Nikolaev clearly wishes to concentrate in his hands as much power in the Republic as possible. He is already accused of authoritarian tendencies. Even directors of libraries are appointed now by the President. However, to a large extent, his internal position depends on his ability to uphold the Republic's interests and on his success in maneuvering between the two major ethnic communities in Yakutia. He repeatedly stresses that all ethnic groups in the Republic have common goals: to regain ownership of economic resources and to become rich.

So far Nikolaev has apparently enjoyed the support of the majority of Yakut, while many Russians consider him a lesser evil. However, he now faces growing criticism from both sides. In the last few years, the Yakut nationalist movement has made remarkable progress in the Republic's political arena. Last summer, during my visit to Yakutia, I met and had long conversations with many leaders and activists of this movement. At present, it is represented by two major organizations: "Sakha Omuk Union" (The Union of Yakut People) that concentrates its activities in the political and cultural spheres (significantly enough, it took the name of its predecessor, the Yakut organization that was condemned by the Soviets as secessionist and destroyed in 1928), and the less influential "Kut-Siur" that

unites the traditionalists who strive to restore the indigenous Yakut religion.

By 1991, Sakha Omuk numbered 5,000 members, a significant figure, if one takes into account the relatively small number of Yakut. Its nominal leader is the Minister of Culture of Yakutia, a very popular theater producer, Mikhailov, who is considered a moderate. However, the real leader of the Union is its very energetic First Vice-President, V. Nikolaev (not a relative of the president) who represents the radical wing of the Union. In our conversations V. Nikolaev stated quite frankly that the ultimate goal of "Sakha Omuk" is an independent state in which Yakut would become the most powerful and numerically strongest ethnic group in the state. He was less specific as to how the latter goal could be reached; however, it appears that his hopes are connected with a restriction of migration to Yakutia and with a voluntary out-migration of non-Yakut from the Republic. In 1985-89, 304,938 people migrated to Yakutia, while 262,112 people left it. However, at present the out-migration exceeds the in-migration, and due to economic hardships and other factors a growing number of Russians are leaving Yakutia. As a kind of compromise, the Yakut nationalists are ready to consider as a part of the indigenous population those Russians and non-Yakut who have lived in Yakutia for several generations. However, they insist that temporary residents should be denied republican citizenship. They also insist on a six year residence qualification as a precondition for the citizenship application. The Yakut nationalists, and intelligentsia in general, also strive for closer ties with other Turkic-speaking republics of the CIS, and with foreign countries. Sakha Omuk already maintains various contacts with similar Tatar, Bashkir, Azerbaidzhanian, Uzbek, and other organizations.

In spite of his radical views, V. Nikolaev is an influential political figure in Yakutia. He is not devoid of pragmatism and has demonstrated his capability to make temporal alliances with various political groups, including the Russian organizations of democratic orientation. He expresses a desire to visit the United States to discuss the Republic's problems.

President Nikolaev was elected in December 1991 with the strong support of Sakha Omuk. Since then his relations with this organization have become more strained. However, there is some evidence that he is rather pleased with its activities and demands because they allow him to demonstrate the moderateness of his own positions. In his negotiations with Moscow he likes to point out that he acts under heavy pressure from Sakha Omuk and that some decisions of Yakutia's parliament were made against his will. Thus, in April 1992, despite extremely cold weather (-35°C), about 2,000 people responded to the call from Sakha Omuk and the Yakut student organization "Eder Saas" and picketed the session of the Republican Supreme Soviet, demanding adoption of the new constitution. This constitution proclaimed the sovereignty of the Republic including its right to self-determination, although at President M. Nikolaev's insistence the clause which declared a right to secession from the Russian Federation was rejected.

However, the greatest challenge to the internal stability and peace in Yakutia consists now of separatist tendencies already revealed by the Russian-dominated mining regions of the Republic. As in other parts of the former Soviet Union, like Pridneprovie, or Northern Estonia, the secessionist movement in Yakutia was initiated by the managerial elite who consider themselves representatives of the central administrative apparatus and are instigated

by the chauvinist forces in Moscow. Already in August 1991, the Supreme Council of Yakutia was warned that Aldanskii, Lenskii, Mirninskii, and Neriungrinskii raions (districts) would secede and join Russia, if Yakutia secedes from the latter. At present, the secessionist forces in Yakutia are playing with the idea of creating the Lena Slavic Republic which would include not only the aforementioned districts but even the capital, Yakutsk, in which Russians constitute the majority. Such developments would certainly provoke a civil war in Yakutia.

The Yakut also watch with great alarm the emergence of the Cossack movement in the Republic, although before the revolution the Cossacks there never constituted a separate administrative and economic body. Surprisingly enough, President Nikolaev does not oppose this movement and even supports it financially, apparently in an attempt to please the Russian community and to have a trump card in dealing with the Yakut nationalists. However, considering the destructive role that the Cossack movement now plays in other parts of the CIS, it may turn out to be detrimental to inter-ethnic relations in Yakutia.

#### Conclusion

At present, the internal peace in Yakutia is fragile. To a large extent, future development depends on the policy of Yeltsin's government. If the Republic gets a higher stake in exploration and benefits from its mineral riches, this may improve the living standards of all its ethnic groups and, though it will not eliminate ethnic tension and competition, it will reduce these conflicts. Otherwise the situation may soon become explosive. In any case, the situation in Yakutia will affect the situation in the whole Siberian region.