

## **THE ROLE OF NATIONAL MOVEMENTS IN RUSSIA: INFLUENCE ON THE DOMESTIC SITUATION AND THE WAR WITH UKRAINE**

**Prometheus Security Environment Research Center**

### **Peculiarities of Russia’s national policy: from the collapse of the USSR to the present day**

The administrative structure of the USSR was formally based on the ethno-federal principle. As of January 1990, its subjects were 15 union republics (SSRs), representing the corresponding number of titular peoples-nations. At the same time, the Russian, Georgian, Azerbaijani, Uzbek, and Tajik republics, in addition to general administrative-territorial units, also included ethnic entities of various levels: autonomous republics (ASSR), autonomous oblasts (AO), and autonomous districts.

Given the large number of such autonomies within the Russian Federation, the RSFSR even included the additional word “federal” in its name (although this clarification dates back to early Soviet history, when the vector of Bolshevik state-building was not yet clear). While the USSR was formally a symmetrical federation of 15 republics, with a constitutionally enshrined right to secession (withdrawal from the union state), the RSFSR within it was asymmetrical, with ethnic entities standing out against the background of “ordinary” regions and krais.

During the “parade of sovereignties” of 1990, most ethnic autonomies of the RSFSR declared that they had raised their status to the level of union republics and claimed to be signatories to the updated union treaty under Gorbachev’s project on an equal footing with the “old” subjects of the Union. In fact, this process led to the equalization of the status of most of the Autonomous Republics (except for the Jewish Autonomous Republic) and the ASSR, and two autonomous republics (Chechnya and Tatarstan) even claimed to be independent from Russia.

The modern Russian Federation, formed on the territorial basis of the RSFSR, was reorganized by the Federal Treaty of March 31, 1992, which was signed by both ethnic autonomies and the still “ordinary” regions, krai and cities of federal significance. Thus, the Russian Federation became a de jure symmetrical federation, in which the status of national republics was lowered to the level of oblasts and krais.

In May 2000, as one of his first decrees as president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin introduced federal districts, which are territorial associations of several federal subjects headed by plenipotentiary representatives of the president of the Russian Federation.

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Formally, federal districts are not administrative units, but in practice, their “coordinating role” directly encroaches on the rights and competence of the federal subjects.

The Russian Federation, like the USSR, was not a real federation for most of its existence, and the rights and self-determination of its peoples remained declarative. Moscow maintained tight centralized control over all regional processes. The current political class of the Russian Federation often complains about even formal federalism as a “toxic” legacy of Soviet predecessors, which led to their collapse. Fearing a new collapse, the Kremlin is gradually eroding the federal foundations of the Russian state system and increasing assimilation pressure on non-Russian peoples in order to eventually eliminate the very basis for ethno-federalism—distinctive ethnic identities.

That said, this policy can be neither too fast nor too straightforward. Like the USSR, the Russian Federation remains vulnerable to outbreaks of radical national resistance, and some indigenous peoples are still poorly integrated into the project of the Russian political nation. Therefore, Russification often alternates or goes hand in hand with flirting with the national feelings of non-Russians. In some cases (such as in Chechnya), this is part of a “social contract” of loyalty to the Kremlin. Appeals to national and local patriotism also occur in times of crisis. For example, in the republics, recruiting men for the war with Ukraine is easier under the brand of “national battalions”.

Parallel to Russification, attempts to construct a multiethnic Russian political nation are based mainly on the image of the Russian Federation as a “common home”, “fair arbiter”, guardian and protector, including from “external threats”. Elements of the supranational unifying mythology include the cult of victory in World War II, the “greatness” of the world’s largest state, and traditionalism, which is opposed to “Western values”.

The relations between the federal center and the national subjects of the federation reflect the model of interaction between the metropolis and the colonies. Moscow or St. Petersburg have never had experience of interacting with the lands of the North Caucasus, the Idel-Ural (Volga region), or Siberia as equal states, co-founders of the federation.

In the last decades of the USSR’s existence, the state proclaimed the overcoming of interethnic conflicts and interethnic contradictions as a result of building a new community—the Soviet people. Interfaith conflicts were also considered to be overcome, as religion did not play a prominent role in social relations and was stigmatized as a relic of the pre-Soviet past. In a state that denied that individual nations and ethnic groups had national interests, conflicts between nations and ethnic groups could not exist, as where there are no subjects of relations, there are no conflicts.

The collapse of the USSR instantly exposed the whole complex of interethnic and ethno-confessional problems both in the former Soviet republics and in the RSFSR itself. The parade of sovereignties made the fictitious borders within the RSFSR appear important, and they became the subject of a sharp political struggle, which sometimes resulted in armed confrontations involving activists, police, special forces, and regular troops. Specific armed conflicts arose: not for independence and secession from the Russian Federation, but for the administrative border between the two subjects of the federation (the most striking example: the Ossetian-Ingush conflict in the fall of 1992).

Under these circumstances, Moscow began to use any conflicts and even competition between



the federal subjects as a pretext to curtail federalism, limit the sovereignty of national subjects, and launch large-scale repressions designed to “repel separatism”.

The first Russian-Chechen war, launched by Boris Yeltsin, had many hidden goals in addition to the proclaimed goal of “restoring territorial integrity”. For ethnic Russians, it was a demonstration of the threats and challenges of separatism, in the face of which Russian society must unite and support the government and the federal center. Otherwise, Moscow painted pictures of chaos, the collapse of the country, and a protracted civil war. For representatives of indigenous peoples (primarily residents of the North Caucasus republics, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan), it was a bloody warning to avoid any thoughts of separatism.

In this atmosphere, not only was the sovereignty of the national republics attacked, but the state policy was justified, in which Russification was presented as a defense of the foundations of statehood, as support for the Russian language. The system of education in the state languages in the national republics was curtailed, numerous bans and restrictions on the activities of national political parties and public associations were introduced, and strict censorship of the media and total control over the life of national and religious communities were imposed.

In the domestic dimension, this policy has found expression in arrogant and suspicious attitudes toward non-Russian peoples; fear of separatism and irredentism; and growing xenophobia and racism.

### **Inter-ethnic, inter-confessional, territorial and other conflicts in the Russian Federation and their impact on the stability of the regime**

In today’s Russia, there are 21 national (or multinational) republics, 4 autonomous districts and one autonomous oblast, as well as 46 regions, 9 krais and 2 cities of federal significance (excluding the illegally annexed territories of Ukraine). Despite the fact that the territory of national subjects occupies a fairly significant share of the Russian Federation (over 40%), the internal geographical location of some of them is problematic for secession without changing the existing borders.

During the Putin regime’s rule, six autonomous okrugs ceased to be subjects of the federation. Between 2003 and 2008, the Komi-Permyak, Taymyr (Dolgano-Nenets), Evenk, Koryak, Ust-Orda Buryat, and Agin-Buryat autonomous okrugs were merged with neighboring regions that do not have the status of national entities. Discussions on the feasibility of liquidating several other national autonomies are being supported in the public space.

The national subjects of the federation are concentrated in the North Caucasus (7 republics), in the Idel-Ural (6 republics), in Siberia and the Far East (5 republics and 1 autonomous district), and in the North (2 republics and 3 autonomous districts). Since Soviet times, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast has only been nominally an ethnic entity: according to the official 2021 census, the number of Jews among its population was only 0.6%.

The population of the national subjects of the federation is predominantly multi-ethnic, with a large Russian ethnic community. At the same time, many representatives of the titular peoples live in Russia outside their republics. According to official statistics, ethnic non-

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Russians make up about 20% of the population of the Russian Federation (in the late USSR, they made up about 50%).

The non-Russian indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation are mainly representatives of several linguistic communities: Turks (Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvash, Kumyks, Yakuts, etc.), Nakho-Dagestani and Adyghe peoples of the Caucasus (Chechens, Avars, Circassians, etc.), Finno-Ugrians (Erzya, Mari, Udmurt, Komi, Karelians, etc.), Mongolian peoples (Buryats, Kalmyks). The most numerous indigenous peoples are the Tatars, Chechens, Bashkirs, Chuvash, and Avars (all of whom have more than 1 million representatives). The peoples of the Russian Federation are not equally well integrated into Russian society and have different capacities to resist assimilation. The religious factor plays an important role. Muslim believers are generally better at preserving their own identity. A certain obstacle to Russification is also the racial type, i.e. the distinctly different appearance of Mongolians.

The ethno-demographic situation in Russia is dynamic: some peoples rapidly diminish in number due to Russification and depopulation, while others grow due to high fertility. There is a high level of internal labor migration. Ethnic and ethno-religious communities (diasporas) have formed and are growing in large cities. Many Russians who come from ethnically mixed or previously assimilated families may be inclined to naturalize among indigenous peoples under the influence of political processes (as it happened after the collapse of the USSR in the newly independent states).

The military and political leadership of the Russian Federation considers the disintegration or loss of certain territories as a real threat, which only increases with the prolongation of the so-called “special military operation”. Despite Moscow’s considerable success in assimilating non-Russian peoples, even such closed ethno-religious communities as the mountain peoples of Dagestan, the national question in Russia has not been resolved, and the war is aggravating existing contradictions.

Outbreaks of domestic xenophobia in large cities (directed not only against Muslims, but also against Buryats, Kalmyks, Yakuts, and Tuvans); public protests against the construction of a new mosque in Moscow (with the obvious support of the authorities and special services); massive riot police raids on mosques in the Moscow region and the protest reaction of Muslims to manifestations of Islamophobia in the Russian Federation—all this demonstrates the atomization of Russian society, deep interethnic and interfaith contradictions, and mutual distrust. The current regime is trying to hide these ills of Russian society under the mask of unity and cohesion.

One of the key mythologems used by the Kremlin regime to mobilize the population in its support is the threats posed by the aggressive and anti-Russian West. The active involvement of indigenous peoples in new colonial wars outside Russia, among other things, is supposed to put historical traumas such as the massacre in Kazan (1552), the Circassian genocide (1763-1864), or the two Russian-Chechen wars on the back burner.

Inter-ethnic, inter-confessional, territorial and other conflicts between the subjects and peoples of the Russian Federation remain Achilles’ heel of the regime and demonstrate the sham and deceitfulness of the ostensible unity of the ruling regime and the people, the federal center and the regions.

In the current situation, Moscow has both internal and external tasks to address the threat of

disintegration.

### Internal:

***Balancing between non-Russians on the one hand and imperialists and Russian nationalists on the other.*** The Kremlin needs the loyalty and support of the peoples (not just the ruling elites) of the North Caucasus, Idel-Ural, and Siberia as an important mobilization base. This loyalty is used primarily for recruiting social and economic outsiders for contract service in the Russian Armed Forces: Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, North Ossetia-Alania, Buryatia, and Tuva. In such republics as Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia, it is due to the connivance of partial or complete withdrawal of these territories from the Russian legal field and the legitimization by local elites of the institutions of adat (customary law) and sometimes sharia (Islamic law). On the other hand, the regime has to reckon with the sentiments of Russian nationalists and imperialists who see the very existence of national republics, languages, cultures and religions of indigenous peoples as a threat to the existence of the state as such.

For Moscow, the complexity of the situation lies in the fact that the centralized autarky applies a single national policy and common methods to all national subjects. It is difficult for the current regime to be flexible and quickly adapt to different situations and different regional peculiarities. Currently, the Russian state policy towards its own colonies looks like assimilation through the dismantling of the education system in national languages, Russification and renunciation of national identity as a prerequisite for access to the social elevator, and the forced transformation of donor entities into subsidized subjects of the federation, dependence of regions on the federal budget, marginalization of national elites, bribery of republican elites through corruption, destruction of republican political institutions, and as a result, encouragement of the indigenous population to migrate between the subjects of the Russian Federation, as well as to perform military service under contract.

However, this model has some serious flaws. If encouraging Erzyas, Mokshas, Komi, Mari, Udmurts, Chuvash people and a number of other indigenous peoples to migrate outside their national republics inevitably leads to assimilation and complete dissolution in large Russified cities with a population of millions, the situation with the peoples of the North Caucasus and even some peoples of Siberia is quite different. Representatives of the Caucasian peoples (primarily of the eastern part of the North Caucasus), when they find themselves in Moscow, St. Petersburg, or Yekaterinburg, remain the bearers of their own identities and reproduce in their new place of residence the usual patterns of behavior based on adat and their own ideas about good, evil, and the distribution of social roles. To a certain extent, a similar situation can be observed in the Khanty-Mansi and Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrugs, which are rapidly changing their ethno-religious map not only due to migrants from the North Caucasus republics, but also Muslims from the Stavropol Territory and even Bashkortostan, who come to work on a rotational basis and have no obvious incentives to integrate.

“Forced migration”, which has become a widespread social phenomenon among the population of Muslim regions of the Russian Federation, has another particular feature: the strengthening of the Islamic integration factor in large Russian cities. In other words, the Tatars of Kazan or the Bashkirs of Ufa, the Kumyks of Makhachkala or the Chechens of Urus-Martan do not adequately integrate migrants from the Central Asian republics into their

societies. Even when it comes to attitudes toward related peoples (e.g., Muslim Turks in Tatarstan), everyday chauvinism is quite common. However, as soon as Chechens and Bashkirs arrive in Moscow, along with interethnic competition, powerful inter-Muslim manifestations of solidarity appear, which go far beyond the all-Russian Ummah. Thus, the arrests of Uzbek migrants at Juma Namaz certainly spark irritation and anger among both Chechens and Avars in Moscow.

***Loyalty and clientelism of regional elites.*** The Kremlin still views the national republics as the weak link in the pseudo-federation. This is the reason for the political pressure exerted by the federal center on the leadership of the national republics, control over the power bloc (the extraterritorial principle of manning garrisons, when natives of Kaliningrad serve in Yakutia, and Yakuts serve in the Voronezh region), strengthened counterintelligence regime (the number of personnel of the FSB, Rosgvardia and other military formations in Ingushetia is several times higher than the contingent in Tver Oblast, which has twice as many people and is 20 times larger than Ingushetia). As a result, the leaders of national republics, unlike the governors of regions and territories, are forced not only to constantly prove their personal loyalty to Putin, but also their republic's commitment to the idea of Russia's indivisibility. This results in unhealthy excesses by republican leaders, for example, in Bashkortostan, where, on the initiative of Radiy Khabirov, a new national battalion is formed every 2 months and sent to the front with minimal coordination and equipment. As a result, Bashkortostan consistently ranks first in the Volga Federal District in terms of the number of people killed in the war in Ukraine.

***Control over religious communities.*** Regions, especially national republics, have a high level of unsatisfied public demand for justice. Young people often find the answer to this demand in religion. In the Islamic republics, justice is offered by Salafis, i.e. the followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Caucasus Emirate, and even Daesh (the Islamic State). Since 2014, religious life has been under total state control. All Salafi mosques have been taken away from Jamaats (communities), khutbah (preaching at Friday prayers) are delivered under the strict control of official spiritual departments, and special services monitor the appearance of new believers in mosques and prayer rooms (where surveillance cameras are forcibly installed). The situation is similar with representatives of other religions. As a result, religious life does not stop, but goes underground. Communities operate without registration, are marginalized and radicalized. The Russian Orthodox Church and Muslim spiritual administrations are rapidly losing the remnants of their authority among young people.

## **External:**

***Chaos and nuclear war.*** To discredit the idea of decolonizing Russia, the Kremlin uses a set of slogans aimed at a foreign audience. Moscow is trying to present the disintegration of the Russian Federation as a "Yugoslavian" scenario with the use of nuclear weapons. However, not all national republics and regions have nuclear weapons. Instead, all national movements declare their readiness to give up nuclear weapons without any conditions and to conclude international agreements on the reduction of weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, the current military and political leadership constantly threatens to use nuclear weapons not only against Ukraine but also against NATO member states. In addition, without national republics and regions, Russia will not be able to maintain its existing nuclear weapons due to the inaccessibility of beryllium deposits, which are mined exclusively in Buryatia and one of the national districts of the Sverdlovsk region.



***The rise of China.*** Moscow has been cleverly playing on the phobias of Western society, and until recently has successfully created the illusion that Russia is a buffer against China, a counterweight to China's dominance in the Eurasian region.

In fact, Russia itself has long been neither an adversary nor a deterrent to China. Beijing has no interest in disintegrating Russia, because today this state already meets all of Beijing's expectations for an ideal neighbor: it is an authoritarian and despotic state that consistently supports China on international platforms, a reliable supplier of cheap energy, a predictable military ally, and etc.

In contrast, the population of both the national republics of the Russian Federation and ethnically Russian regions is clearly anti-Chinese. In the regions of the Russian Federation, there is strong dissatisfaction with China's economic expansion, which is being facilitated by the federal government. Under Moscow's encouragement, and sometimes pressure, 38 cooperation agreements have been signed at the level of federal subjects and provinces of the PRC. Projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the creation of special investment conditions and the announcement of special offers for Chinese partners (Sichuan-Chuvashia, Sichuan Railway Investment Group Co., strengthening of the Chinese presence in the Tolyatti and Alabuga special economic zones, etc.) have caused a wave of sinophobia far from the Russian-Chinese state border. Beijing's genocide of Uyghurs in East Turkestan, along with the persecution of other Muslim Turks in the region, including Tatars, constantly fuels hatred of China on the part of a significant number of Muslims in the Volga region and the North Caucasus.

Therefore, the proactive position of the West, as well as regional players such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, can win the support of national and regionalist movements in Russia on the grounds of deterring Chinese expansion and criticizing the Kremlin, which condones it.

***Intimidation through conflict moderation.*** There is a large number of potential conflicts in the Russian Federation, both between nations and between the subjects of the federation. For example, the Ossetian-Ingush, Ingush-Chechen, Chechen-Dagestani, Kabardino-Balkar, Tatar-Bashkir territorial conflicts; Kumyk-Avar, Kumyk-Dargin and other interethnic confrontations, etc. The Kremlin traditionally acts as an arbitrator and mediator in these conflicts, while simultaneously fomenting and provoking them. Using this colonial technique, Moscow frightens the international community with "unrestrained carnage" that will certainly result from the collapse of the Russian Federation.

### **The current state of national movements within the Russian Federation**

Moscow exerts systematic pressure on the national movements of the indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation with the aim of their ultimate eradication. The most powerful repressions are being applied to those national movements that, after the collapse of the USSR, achieved state independence or real sovereignty in their republics: Chechnya, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Sakha-Yakutia.

During 2001–2023, the Kremlin, through pressure and criminal prosecutions of regional elites, achieved a significant restriction of the sovereign rights and powers of national republics by amending federal laws and further "bringing republican legislation in line with

federal laws”.

Along with this, all national political parties, national representative bodies and a large part of indigenous public organizations were banned without exception. Discrediting of their leaders, abductions, torture, ill-treatment, murder and other serious human rights violations were systematically and repeatedly carried out on the territories of all indigenous peoples. Russian law enforcement agencies and special services use mainly repressive methods to counter national liberation movements of the peoples enslaved by Moscow. Inside the Russian Federation, they have eliminated the organizational structures and institutions of self-determination movements, whose representative bodies were actively working to protect the rights of their communities.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin’s repressive efforts have not led to a solution to the national question. The colonial nature of the governance of national republics, the unfair distribution of resources, environmental damage, the growing tax burden on donor entities, and the privileged status of the Russian language, culture, and church are causing discontent among indigenous peoples and turning the regions against the federal center. In other words, there are objective prerequisites in Russia for the growth of anti-federal sentiment, distancing from Moscow, and the development of powerful disintegration processes that could lead to the destruction of Russia’s territorial structure and political system.

National movements were most active in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the repressive function of the union/federal center was weakening. This was mainly public activity: the creation of parties and movements, mass political actions, and the struggle for granting or raising the status of national autonomous entities. During the years 1991–1994 and 1996–1999, Chechnya was de facto independent. Tatarstan also declared (but did not achieve) independence.

The second Russian-Chechen war was a catalyst for the emergence of armed resistance to Russia in the national republics under Islamist (Salafi) slogans. Salafi proselytizing contributed to the recruitment of representatives of both traditional Muslim peoples (mostly) and neophyte Muslims, including ethnic Russians. The underground guerrilla movement began in the North Caucasus (under the political brand of the Caucasus Emirate), and some of its echoes were also in the Idel-Ural. The most active phase lasted during the decade of 2005–2015. Nowadays, the centers of Islamist armed resistance have been completely crushed by the punitive authorities of the Russian Federation.

National representative bodies and organizations of indigenous peoples, namely the Komi organizations Tom Izvatas and Komi Voytyr in the former Komi-Permyak Autonomous Okrug; the Circassian Congress and the Adyge Khase movement in the Republic of Adygea, defended the rights of national republics and autonomous okrugs; The Council of Teips of Ingushetia and the Ingush Independence Committee; the Congress of the Buryat People, the Erkhe and the Defense organizations, and the Buryat Regional Organization of Young Scientists in the former Agin and Ust-Orda Autonomous Okrugs, etc. They organized protests of thousands of Circassians in 2005–2006 and Buryats in the spring of 2007.

Strong anti-government sentiments among Circassians escalated into clashes with law enforcement. The Kremlin managed to restore the balance only through the appointment of a Circassian prime minister in Karachay-Cherkess Republic (KCR).



Later, protests took place in defense of the Bashkir language in the school system (Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan, 2017); in support of Ukrainian political prisoners (Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan, 2018); against the destruction of forests in Buryatia (Ulan-Ude, Republic of Buryatia, 2018); against police obstruction of a rally of the indigenous Shors people, who demanded the resignation of the speaker of the regional parliament (Kemerovo, Kemerovo region, 2018); against the arbitrary transfer of the Chechen-Ingush border (Magas, Ingushetia, 2018), against the construction of a hazardous waste processing plant (Udmurtia and Bashkortostan, 2020), against the creation of a solid waste landfill (Komi Republic and Arkhangelsk Oblast, 2020-2021).

In 2019, Udmurt scholar Albert Razin committed an act of public self-immolation in front of the Udmurt parliament to protest the oppression of the Udmurt people.

Apart from mass protests and official appeals to the regional and federal authorities, national movements resorted to international campaigns against the violation of their right to self-determination by Moscow through the destruction of national administrative-territorial entities. Thus, Buryat intellectuals sought support from Mongolia and the Buddhist clergy, while Circassians convened a national congress in Cherkessk in 2008, where they adopted a series of ultimatum statements that seriously frightened the Kremlin. In many countries, from Australia to Türkiye, massive demonstrations of the Circassian diaspora took place against the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, located on the ethnic lands of the Ubykhs, one of the sub-ethnic groups of the Circassian nation.

Certain revitalization of the protest activities of the indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation occurred after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The first anti-war action was an attempt by women of Karachay-Cherkessia on March 20, 2022, to block the bridge over the Khusa River in Zelenchukskaya village, demanding to provide true information about their husbands sent to war in Ukraine. After the mobilization was announced in September 2022, mass women's rallies were held in Buryatia, Sakha-Yakutia, and Tuva. The most powerful protests erupted in Dagestan in areas densely populated by Kumyks and in multinational Makhachkala. Anti-war rallies in Endirey and Babayurt were accompanied by highway blockades, clashes with police, and the involvement of Russian Guard troops, who were forced to open fire in the air to control the crowds.

Indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation have become particularly vulnerable. Statistics on Russian casualties in the first months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine showed a disproportionately high percentage of killed representatives of certain indigenous peoples of Dagestan, as well as Buryats, and later Bashkirs. These figures are due to both to the generally high representation of non-Russians in the military (which is perhaps the only social elevator available to them) and to Moscow's deliberate policy of ethnocide (saving Russians from megacities while sending ethnic minorities to die).

In the spring of 2022, the national representative bodies of the Kalmyks, Tatars, Bashkirs, and Erzyans publicly condemned Russian aggression.

Public interviews and statements by leaders of the Tatar (Rafis Kashapov), Bashkir (Ruslan Gabbasov) and Erzya (Syreś Boläeñ) national movements reveal that national activists have carried out a series of arsons of military commissariats and offices of all-Russian political parties in Bashkortostan and Mordovia, and industrial facilities in Tatarstan, as well as

conducted a series of anti-war actions, destroying military mobilization visual agitation and propaganda materials, posting anti-war leaflets in Russian and national languages, and damaging Russian military memorials and monuments. In the second half of April 2023, fighters of the resistance movement in Ingushetia engaged in armed confrontation with Russian security forces several times, causing losses. As a result of these clashes, considerable forces and means of the Russian Armed Forces, FSB, Rosgvardia, and the Interior Ministry are deployed in Ingushetia, the smallest subject of the Russian Federation by area.

The national movements of Chechens and Circassians have succeeded in forming their own national units fighting in Ukraine against the Russian occupiers. The representative bodies of the peoples of Dagestan and Ingushetia are taking certain measures to form such units.

In order to suppress any protest movements in Russia, the Putin regime has adopted a series of repressive laws and regulations, under which administrative and law enforcement agencies have banned the existence and activities of representative organizations of indigenous peoples, exerted systematic pressure on their activists, and impeded the exercise of the right to peaceful protest and fair and transparent investigations into the abductions, murders, and assassinations of those who defend the civil and political rights of indigenous peoples in Russia.

Since activists of national movements are usually not as well known in the Western media and often have a reputation as “radical separatists” rather than “democrats”, they do not enjoy the same strong moral and political support from the international community as Navalny, Khodorkovsky, or Kasparov. This gives the Russian repressive system carte blanche to use harsher methods of suppression against national movements than it does against the liberal Russian opposition.

In the aftermath of the repressive policy, the national representative bodies of the Avars, Lezgins, Ingushes, Circassians, Kumyks, Balkars, Karachais, Mari, Karelians, Kalmyks, Buryats, and a number of other peoples ceased to function or went into exile.

In 2008, the Milli Meclis formed a government of Tatar politicians in exile to represent the interests of the Tatar people in the international arena. This government is still functioning, with Rafis Kashapov as its current Prime Minister.

Representative structures of national movements have emerged: Chechen in the UK, France, Türkiye, Poland, and Sweden; Ingush in Türkiye and France; Tatar in the UK, Türkiye, Finland, and the U.S.; Bashkir in Lithuania and the U.S.; Buryat and Kalmyk in the U.S. and Mongolia; Erzya in Ukraine and the U.S., etc. The degree of influence of these movements on compatriots in the Russian Federation, as well as the intensity of ties with the homeland, varies. After the mobilization announced in the Russian Federation in September 2022 and the resulting new wave of emigration, the activities of these movements revived. Almost all of them have set up special guardianship committees abroad, which, under the guise of consultation and patronage, have begun campaigning and recruiting newly arrived migrants. Some of the emigrants, faced with financial and social difficulties in emigration, return to the Russian Federation to their national republics, maintaining contacts with national emigration centers. The so-called “returneeism” is becoming more and more widespread and is seen by national movements as an important tool for strengthening their positions in their homeland.

Founded in the spring of 2022, the League of Free Nations united the leaders of 12 national movements of indigenous peoples in Russia. The organization focused on working with newly arrived migrants, conducting social and political education courses for activists, organizing rallies and demonstrations in Europe and the United States, seeking to draw the attention of the international community to the violation of indigenous peoples' rights in Russia. The League of Free Nations, as well as the New Tuva movement (a Tuvan socio-political movement that emerged in 2022), Asians of Russia (a human rights movement of the Buryat, Yakut, Chukchi, Tuvan and Kalmyk peoples that emerged in 2022), and others, have undergone a swift evolution from federalist sentiments to calls for the creation of new nation states. Former ministers, members of regional parliaments, and top management of state-owned companies involved in mineral extraction have taken leading positions in the Buryat, Kalmyk, and Tuvan national movements. They are well-known in the national indigenous communities and have a certain influence on the formation of socio-political sentiments among the republican elites and the public. In 2022-2023, a number of national movements (Kalmyks, Tatars, Bashkirs, Erzyans, Ingushes, and Buryats) adopted declarations of independence. In April 2023, the Ingush Independence Committee convened in Türkiye proclaimed the formation of the Ingush Liberation Army.

The resurgence of national representative bodies outside the Russian Federation is a challenge for both the Putin regime and the emigrant political organizations of the Russian opposition, which aspire to become the new government in Moscow in the future. National movements reject the concept of a simple regime change in Russia and demand recognition of the republics' right to independence. This is the cause of tension between Russian and national politicians in exile. The ambitions of national movements are gradually growing, and the space for compromise is shrinking.

### Trends and scenarios

As of the summer of 2023, all organized structures of national indigenous movements or regionalist movements inside the Russian Federation have been defeated. As described in the previous section, national representative bodies and national leaders of indigenous peoples are in exile, physically eliminated or neutralized through pressure or imprisonment. Yet, the complex of problems and fundamental contradictions that exist in the Russian Federation (described in the section *“Inter-ethnic, inter-confessional, territorial and other conflicts in the Russian Federation and their impact on the stability of the regime”*) have not been resolved.

The prospects for disintegration of the Russian Federation directly depend on the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Russia's serious victories and territorial gains in Ukraine can complete the process of transition from authoritarianism to totalitarianism, and vice versa—a fiasco in Ukraine poses a threat to both the current regime and the state as such.

***Scenarios of Russia's victory.*** In case of victory or material military and political success of the Russian Federation in the confrontation with Ukraine and the West, Putin's regime will postpone the collapse of the state, but will not prevent it. The Kremlin will face serious challenges that go beyond economic stagnation and constant sanctions pressure. In fact,

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postponing the collapse will also mean postponing modernization, strengthening indoctrination of all spheres of public life, including education, science, business, religion and culture, which, in turn, will only increase the degradation of state institutions.

Demographic problems caused by low birth rates, high mortality among ethnic Russians, and their migration abroad will remain unresolved. Unlike Ukraine or other European countries that have faced similar problems, for Russia, the demographic gap is a challenge to the very existence of the federation, as an entire generation of Russians has been brought up on the ideas of isolationism, extremely aggressive rejection of any migrants, and even hatred of their own citizens of non-Russian origin. New massive raids against Muslim migrants conducted by Russian security forces in large cities, forced recruitment of illegal immigrants to fight in Ukraine, anti-Islamic campaigns in Moscow—all this only aggravates atomization and accumulates ethnic tensions and mutual distrust in society. In the event of a victory (or what Moscow itself will declare a victory for its population), ethnic Russians will be the main beneficiaries. Most or all of the national republics will be eliminated in the short term as a threat to the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation. (This threat has become more acute with the international community's refusal to recognize Russia's so-called "new borders").

That said, the Kremlin has already become a hostage to its own chauvinistic propaganda within Russia. It will not be able to revise the state policy on migration, nationalities, and religions (to fully open the door to the only possible flow of labor resources—from Asia), because such revisionism will be extremely negatively perceived by the core electorate. Meanwhile, demographic changes are irreversible, and they affect not only cities such as Moscow or St. Petersburg. With the rapid growth of the Muslim community, there are fundamental changes in the population structure of many national republics. In most of the North Caucasus republics, in Tuva and Yakutia, the number of ethnic Russians is steadily declining, and the ties between these federal subjects and the rest of Russia continue to weaken. These trends will prevail in the coming decade.

The economic and demographic disparity between internal Russia and Moscow-controlled Siberia, the Arctic, and the Far East is growing, and the level of migration of Russians from other countries is decreasing. In case of further isolation and closure of borders, the return of Russians to their historical homeland will stop completely. Moscow is trying to alleviate these problems, among other things, by deporting Ukrainians and abducting Ukrainian children, but the demographic challenges are too global, and the methods chosen have short-term and extremely limited results.

Scenarios in which Russia wins will also mean further rapprochement with China, Iran, and North Korea, and attempts to balance between New Delhi and Beijing. Each of these vectors will contribute to the alienation of Russian Muslims and their attraction to states with loyal policies toward Sunnis. This, in turn, will stir up Moscow's phobias about the perceived or real strengthening of the Turkish presence in regions such as the North Caucasus (which is already manifested in the personnel policy in Dagestan, in particular in the appointment of non-Muslims to top leadership positions).

The tree of *victory scenarios* can have a number of branches. Among them are the continuation of Putin's rule, accompanied by the degradation of state institutions, further restrictions on freedoms and a slide into totalitarianism, gradual economic decline and depopulation of Siberia and the Far East. Another branch of this scenario is the transition of

power to a successor, adjustment of Russia's domestic and foreign policy to ease sanctions pressure and preserve the state apparatus and the state as such. Among the variations of this scenario is a conspiracy to remove Putin from power (real or insinuated), which in turn will also have a variety of scenarios: from efforts to get closer to the West to further isolation and attempts to start new wars of conquest, primarily in Kazakhstan, or to reactivate frozen conflicts (in Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan).

This multitude of *victory scenarios* will not lead to stronger Russian influence in Central Asia, the South Caucasus, the African continent, and the Middle East. On the contrary, it will contribute to the development of multi-vectorism in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Turkmenistan. Moreover, the positions of China in Central Asia and Africa, Iran and Türkiye in Syria and Iraq, and Türkiye in the South Caucasus will continue to consolidate. This stems from the fact that the obvious failures of the Russian Armed Forces' military campaign in Ukraine, regardless of its future results, are already prompting the current political regimes of Central Asian states to develop plans in case of Russian aggression (which no longer looks like a far-fetched scenario), as well as to look for international partners more attractive than Russia, capable of ensuring sustainable and predictable cooperation in the sphere of security, defense, trade, etc.

In addition, it should be noted that Russia, even in the most favorable scenario, will emerge from the war weaker than it was before it started. Its economic and military potential will diminish, and its human capital will decline. Russia will not be able to quickly engage in new wars, rearm and modernize its army, and international isolation will undermine its diplomatic capabilities. This, in turn, will also serve to redistribute influence in the regions of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. With the growing role of Türkiye in international politics, the loss of Russia's position as the sole arbitrator and mediator in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, disagreements between Ankara and Moscow will escalate, and at the same time the number of Moscow's allies in Armenia will decrease.

***Scenarios of Russia's defeat.*** By these scenarios, we mean not just the loss of control over the occupied territories of Ukraine (all or part of them) by the Russian armed forces, but the loss of combat capability, controllability and subordination of Russian armed forces to Moscow—in other words, the inability to continue fighting due to a combination of military, technical, mobilization, socio-economic, personnel and other reasons.

These scenarios will lead not only to a significant reduction in the combat capability of the regular Russian army, but also to a weakening of the entire security bloc: Rosgvardia, the FSB, and the Interior Ministry. This will result in a drop in the credibility of the federal center. This tree of scenarios can unfold both rapidly and slowly—over months or even decades. The scenario branch described above will be accompanied by an expanding role of regional elites, in particular through attempts to stay in power and establish control over local fossil resources, restrictions on federal laws, and strengthening of clans (primarily in the North Caucasus, especially in Dagestan, where the Umakhanov, Shikhsaidov, and Aliyev clans will be the first contenders to regain their positions), taking control of the security apparatus in the regions or creating private armies (PMCs), a crisis of all-Russian identity and the beginning of the process of re-identification (both in the national republics and in the regions), strengthening of horizontal ties between the subjects of the federation and between individual

subjects and neighboring states, a surge in national revival and the resumption of activities of banned and oppressed religious organizations and movements.

In practical terms, this will mean:

The growing budget deficit and deteriorating economic situation will force Moscow to make a tough choice: reduce social spending or cut defense and security budgets. Almost certainly, the current regime will try to avoid cutting funding for the security forces as its mainstay and source of power in Russia. At the same time, cuts in spending on salaries, pensions, and various types of benefits will increase discontent in society and stir up social tensions, which, combined with the failures of the military campaign in Ukraine, could pose a real threat to the regime. Aware of these challenges, the Kremlin will resort to a set of measures: increasing the tax burden on donor entities, attracting material and technical assistance from China, deepening defense and industrial cooperation with Iran and the DPRK, increasing hydrocarbon exports to India, nuclear blackmail of the West for immediate concessions in Russia's interests, and stepping up repression inside Russia.

Regime imbalance will have similar manifestations for all regions: loss of authority of the federal government; growing discontent and aggression of the local population, which local authorities will increasingly look to local clans and groups rather than Moscow to curb; formation of parallel federal security structures or emergence of dual loyalty among existing security agencies (both to the federal center and local elites).

However, there will be substantial differences in the development of disintegration processes in individual Russian territories.

- *Scenarios of Russian disintegration in the North Caucasus.*

Moscow will strive to maintain the most powerful counterintelligence regime in the most vulnerable region in terms of disintegration—the eastern North Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia). This is due to the fact that these republics do not only enjoy exclusive rights within the Russian Federation, but have managed to build an autonomous legal system and integrate adat and sharia into it. The Chechens, Ingushes, Avars, Dargins, and Kumyks have something that other indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation do not have: numerous and still unassimilated diasporas in the Russian Federation itself, as well as in the EU and Türkiye. With the weakening of the counterintelligence regime in the North Caucasus, which would be accompanied by a surge in nationalism (aggravation of ethnic conflicts) and a renaissance of Salafism, the most active and charismatic muhajirs and political emigrants would return to the republics.

Nonetheless, even here, a similar development for the three republics is highly unlikely. While in Chechnya there are prerequisites for retaining power in the hands of Kadyrov and his entourage, in Dagestan and Ingushetia the possibility of retaining the current heads of republics and their entourage in leadership positions is close to zero.

Therefore, in the event of a substantial weakening of the federal center, Ramzan Kadyrov will consider the following important factors signaling the need to distance himself from Russia: a) Moscow's inability to protect his regime and guarantee the security of his clan; b) a significant reduction in subventions from the federal budget; c) an attempt by the federal center or some of its actors to bring new people/clan to power in the republic. As a result,

depending on the dynamics of the situation (these factors may develop separately or simultaneously), Kadyrov may resort to the following actions:

- Restriction of federal laws on the territory of Chechnya under the vague slogans of “protecting the homeland and order”.
- Attracting to its side or eliminating (through bribery, promises of power and influence, disarmament, or coercion to leave the territory of Chechnya) those military units that do not report to Kadyrov personally (units of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division, FSB).
- More rapid and radical Islamization of the republic, up to pandering and making obvious concessions to Salafists in order to reduce their social base. Possible measures include: permission to open Salafi mosques, inviting Salafi alims (scholars) from Saudi Arabia and Egypt to Chechnya, a “promotional tour” of one of the “disgraced” preachers who is very popular in Chechnya and the North Caucasus in general (Abu Umar Sasitlinsky, Abdullah Kosteksky).
- Reconciliation with the Ichkerians: negotiations with all or one of the factions, a joint congress in their homeland, granting positions in the government to prominent figures of Chechen emigration, and including Dudayev in the pantheon of national heroes along with Akhmat Kadyrov.
- Appointment of those responsible for rampant corruption, repression and persecution, and their exemplary punishment.
- Putting forward territorial claims against Dagestan for the Aukh region (primarily Novolak, Kazbekovsky, and possibly Khasavyurtovsky districts), and as a result, “restoring historical justice” by setting up checkpoints and unilaterally demarcating the border.

These steps can greatly improve Ramzan Kadyrov’s image in the eyes of ordinary Chechens, split and completely marginalize the Ichkerian opposition, and draw even the most ardent supporters of the Caucasus Emirate to the regime’s side. These measures can also mitigate the turbulence of the transition period in Chechnya, which will be accompanied by a serious deterioration in the economic situation.

Kadyrov and his entourage can apply these measures selectively, adjusting the depth of certain “reforms” and alternating them with targeted repressions against enemies of the regime. At the same time, the turn in domestic and foreign policy will be made in such a way as to preserve Russia as a “second string”. In other words, Kadyrov can carry out all these transformations “in the interests of the Chechen people” and, if the federal center restores its position, declare himself the only leader of the North Caucasus republics “who prevented chaos and preserved the republic until the Russian Constitution is restored in all its territories”.

However, Ramzan Kadyrov’s retention in power after the disintegration of the Russian Federation is not the only possible scenario. A number of circumstances, such as the loss of control over the power bloc; the emergence of political rivals supported from outside the republic, including strong financial resources; Kadyrov’s deteriorating health; betrayal of his inner circle, etc., could push Kadyrov into exile—most likely to one of the Islamic monarchies of the Gulf.

The situation in neighboring Dagestan is fundamentally different from Chechnya. After the elimination of the presidency and the removal from power of the Avar leader Ramazan Abdulatipov, all subsequent leaders had extremely limited powers and owed their power and appointment exclusively to Moscow. During 2014–2017, key Dagestani clans were defeated, the role of the parliament was leveled, and FSB established full control over the religious life of the republic.

As Moscow is haunted by the constant phobias of “Turkic expansion” (especially after Azerbaijan’s success in the Karabakh war) and the “spread of Salafism”, the latest appointments to Dagestan have been quite revolutionary. Since 2017, the republic has been governed by non-Muslims, an unprecedented situation since the collapse of the USSR. This means that Moscow is losing confidence even in the Avars, who have traditionally been a pillar of the federal center in a complex system of interethnic balance. Dagestan is a fully Muslim republic, with a strong influence of Salafism among the youth. The head of the republic, Sergei Melikov, has neither credibility nor support among the population—one of his common nicknames is “the one who doesn’t wash himself”—a direct reference to a half-breed lak, an outsider who has abandoned Islam. In addition, Melikov has very weak family, property, and clan ties to the republic. Thus, the likelihood that Melikov will be able to stay in charge of Dagestan in the event of a disintegration scenario is slim to none.

The weak republican government in Dagestan, combined with the consolidated position of Chechen society (not only Kadyrov’s supporters, but also emigrants) on the return of the Aukh, significantly reduces the chances of Dagestan maintaining its territorial integrity in the event of Russian disintegration. This means the following:

- Dagestan, despite the establishment of a powerful counterintelligence regime in the republic by the Russians, is one of the key candidates for secession from the Russian Federation.
- The basic principle of ethnic balance has been violated in the republic and the system of checks and balances has been destroyed, which will inevitably lead to a radical redistribution of power.
- There is a high probability of the republic’s collapse: Aukh will become part of Chechnya; Avars, Dargins, Tabasarans, and Laks will try to keep the remaining territories under their control. The Turkic peoples will try to eliminate kutans (settlements of highlanders, but on the plains, that emerged during the Soviet era when cattle breeding was encouraged) on their territories and regain key positions in the municipal government. If these claims fail, there is a high probability that the Kumyks and Nogais will try to form their own state.
- Azerbaijan, supported by Türkiye, fearing Lezgin irredentism and seeking to prevent the formation of Lezgistan on its northern borders (and thus to get the same problem in the north of Azerbaijan as Türkiye got in its southeast with Iraqi Kurdistan), it could increase its presence in the region, support Dagestani Azerbaijanis (including by sending a limited military contingent to protect the Azerbaijani population) or promote the alliance of local Azerbaijanis with Kumyks and Nogais.

The weakening of Russia’s presence in the region, the reduction or withdrawal of the 58th Combined Arms Army from Vladikavkaz, will almost certainly lead to a resumption of the Ossetian-Ingush conflict. Both Kadyrov’s regime and Salafist groups can take advantage of



the situation to strengthen their positions by offering assistance to the Ingushes. Such a move by Ramzan Kadyrov could solve several problems at once: strengthen his authority among the Vainakh people (an ethnic community of Chechens with Ingushes), marginalize his critics and opponents, and improve relations with the Ingush teips after the alienation of large areas of the Sunzhensky District from Ingushetia.

North Ossetia-Alania will seek support from Russian groups of influence, as it will not be able to count on either Chechnya's favor or Georgia's support (which, under certain conditions, the Ingushes can rely on).

The disintegration processes in Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Adygea, Krasnodar and Stavropol Territories will develop much more slowly than in the eastern North Caucasus. It is likely that local elites will be able to retain their leadership positions and move from real autonomy within the Russian Federation to independence and the formation of a Caucasian federation or confederation.

Moscow strictly controls any investment projects in the region, and subventions and subsidies directly depend on the political loyalty of the republics' leaders and their ability to meet the expectations of the federal center. Federal transfers account for 80% of all revenues and are used as corruption tools to ensure the loyalty of local elites.

- *Scenarios of Russian disintegration in the Idel-Ural.*

Another region with a high separatist potential is the Idel-Ural: Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chuvashia, Mari El, Udmurtia, and Mordovia. Here, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan have the greatest potential for secession. However, as in the case of Dagestan and Chechnya, these republics have their own unique structures of power and elites, and different societies. Tatarstan has a clan-based system of governance. The change of ruling elites in the republic took place through agreements on the transfer of power from one strong clan (the Shaimievs) to another (the Minnikhanovs) with the consent and supervision of Moscow. Despite the severe weakening of state institutions (2014–2023) and attempts to limit the power of the Minnikhanovs and Shaimievs, their influence on politics in the republic, including on personnel appointments, still remains significant. Unlike in Bashkortostan, Tatarstan's clans retain control or have a substantial stake in companies involved in the extraction and processing of minerals. In the event of a gradual or sudden weakening of the federal center, the likelihood of a new leader of an independent orientation emerging in Tatarstan is extremely low. The likelihood of a seizure of power in post-Russian Tatarstan by emigrant groups, such as the Government of Independent Tatarstan in Exile (led by Rafis Kashapov), is tending to zero. At the same time, the weakening of the federal center, with the concomitant weakening of the repressive apparatus and censorship, is revitalizing the political life of the republic. Old political forces (Ittifaq, Watan) will certainly resume their activities, new players will appear (from pro-European Tatars to pro-Russian liberals, from secular Pan-Turkists to Salafists), and emigrant communities will have an impact on a rather limited but authoritative audience (primarily national intellectuals).

The decline in oil prices in 2020 and 2023 had a profound effect on the republican budgets of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, which faced severe deficits. The Tatarstan Parliament increased the expected budget deficit for 2023 to RUB 45.4 billion. For comparison, in 2022, this

amount was RUB 27.1 billion. In order to stabilize the economic situation, the parliament is forced to take unpopular steps, including an increase in income tax.

Bashkortostan is facing even greater economic distress. Although official statistics declare consistently low unemployment rates, due to the lack of stable work with decent pay, more and more men from Bashkortostan are going to the North to work on a rotational basis. According to official statistics, men in Bashkortostan choose the rotational method 5 times more often than in neighboring Tatarstan.

In the eastern regions of the republic, local people increasingly resent the illegal and predatory mining of minerals and precious metals. The Bashkir rural population, living in areas with rich deposits of precious metals, suffers from constant intimidation by illegal miners or outside companies that leave behind wasteland, destroyed forests and fields, dried up water bodies and poisoned groundwater. Having no benefit from the natural resources on their native lands, the Bashkir rural population is forced to relocate under pressure from the republican authorities (who are in collusion with the mining companies). This policy has repeatedly caused public outrage and mass protests. Mining companies and illegal miners, on the one hand, and the local Bashkir population, on the other, are in a state of constant conflict, which has repeatedly escalated into violent clashes. The republican authorities manage to keep the situation under control only with the use of force and threats of prosecution. Tens of thousands of peasants (primarily ethnic Bashkirs) feel deceived and insulted. The problems described above, which are not being adequately addressed in Bashkortostan, will make the position of both the municipal and republican authorities extremely shaky and uncertain in the event of a weakening of the federal center.

Depending on the intensity of the disintegration process, events in Tatarstan may develop according to different scenarios:

1. Initiation of a new federal treaty with Moscow and bargaining by Tatarstan's elites for a place in the sun in a renewed Russia.
2. Distancing from Moscow (either gradual or abrupt) under the pressure of public sentiment, which, as in the early 1990s, may be fueled by the Kazan Kremlin.
3. Transition of power to new political actors, with the consent of the Shaimiev and Minnikhanov clans, is due to the need for ostensible renewal to preserve the integrity of the political system and prevent mass unrest.

If Tatarstan's elites continue to benefit from the republic's stay in the Russian Federation even if the federal center is weakened, they will seek to extend their stay in the federation.

These are the most likely scenarios for Tatarstan. The likelihood that Kazan will lead the parade of sovereignties or become a battering ram that will destroy the system of state power in the Russian Federation is extremely low due to the high degree of integration of Tatarstan's elites into the federal government, the system of government contracts, etc.

The situation in Bashkortostan is markedly different from that in Tatarstan. Neither Rakhimov's clan, nor Khamitov's, have any real political, financial, economic, or even symbolic weight in the republic. The first president of Bashkortostan, Murtaza Rakhimov, had a certain authority among the Bashkir population, but after his death, his children did not inherit this authority and moral influence. Millionaire Ural Rakhimov, Murtaza's son, is in exile in Austria, feeling hurt and offended by Moscow, but has no real position or supporters

in his homeland.

The current head of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Radiy Khabirov, has incomparably less authority among Bashkirs than Rustam Minnikhanov has among Tatars. Given that ethnic Bashkirs make up only 1/3 of Bashkortostan's population, Khabirov's real support from the population of the Republic is scarce. He realizes that his support is not from the population of Bashkortostan, or even from the local nomenklatura, but from the federal center and a group of bureaucrats he brought with him from Moscow to Ufa. If the federal center is weakened, Khabirov will first of all face resistance from the Bashkir people, which perceive him (and not even ethnic Russians) as the main threat to their well-being, security, Bashkir identity, and the republic as a whole. Therefore, the chances of Radiy Khabirov remaining in power in the event of a material weakening of the federal center are meager. More likely is the scenario of a surge in Bashkir nationalism and a tacit alliance of popular leaders such as Fail Alsinov and Airat Dilmukhametov with representatives of republican business, both small and medium, to regain control of key sectors of the republican economy, which has been under the control of Muscovites and "Russians-Varyags" since the time of Rustem Khamitov.

Since both Bashkortostan and Tatarstan play a crucial role in the Russian economy, it is possible that in times of federal crisis and a surge of powerful centrifugal sentiments in Kazan and Ufa, Moscow will encourage the Tatar-Bashkir conflict over the northwestern regions of Bashkortostan, which are densely populated by ethnic Tatars. Moderating the conflict, positioning itself as a mediator, without whose help the two Turkic peoples will plunge into a bloody confrontation, can help the Kremlin keep Tatarstan and Bashkortostan within the Russian Federation on special rights. A triggered conflict could lead to the imposition of a state of emergency or martial law in the republics and the cancellation of elections. These measures will allow the Kremlin to seize the initiative from local elites, clans and civil society representatives and force them to play by the rules written in the weakened federal center.

The other national republics in the region will be more inert, focused on the developments in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, and will not dare to openly confront Moscow without a successful separation.

The Kremlin will invest in cultivating phobias related to Tatar imperialism in Chuvashia, Udmurtia, Mari El, and Mordovia. In the darkest periods for Moscow, Russian agents in Kazan will be activated, both among recruited secular Tatar politicians and among Sufis and Salafis, who will publicly try to defend the interests of Tatars/Muslims in neighboring republics.

- *Scenarios of Russian disintegration in Siberia and the Far East.*

The regions with the potential for secession from the Russian Federation are Sakha-Yakutia, Tuva, Buryatia, Irkutsk Oblast, and Khabarovsk Krai. The social, economic, cultural and administrative ties of these territories with internal Russia continue to weaken as a result of growing demographic disparities, a decrease in the number of large enterprises and a shrinking labor market, underdeveloped social infrastructure, and the outflow of ethnic Russians. The mere climatic conditions for living in Sakha-Yakutia or the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug make it much more difficult for ethnic Russians to immigrate. In addition,

unlike the residents of the Volga national republics, Tuvans, Sakha, Buryats, and smaller indigenous peoples living in Siberia and the Far East still face racism and domestic xenophobia, which significantly impedes social mobility and complicates the migration of the autochthonous population to the capital and large cities of the European part of Russia, and as a result, serves as a deterrent to the assimilation of non-Russian populations.

Tuva remains one of the poorest regions of the Russian Federation. More than 40% of the population lives below the poverty line, and almost 20% of the working-age population is unemployed. At the same time, the republic ranks 3rd in the Russian Federation in terms of birth rates. The population of Tuva is consistently increasing due to the growth of ethnic Tuvans. Due to the constant outflow of ethnic Russians, the republic is turning into a mono-ethnic region, where the share of the autochthonous population is approaching 90%. Opportunities for labor migration of the Tuvan population or education outside the republic are extremely low. The Tuvan society is rather closed, with strong manifestations of everyday chauvinism towards Russians. The positions of the Tuvan language and culture are quite strong compared to neighboring Buryatia, and the national policy of Russification is ineffective due to a strong ethnic imbalance.

The republic remains economically underdeveloped, with a strong dominance of agriculture in the local economy, with weak ties not only to the federal center but even to neighboring large cities populated by ethnic Russians: Krasnoyarsk, Tomsk, and Novosibirsk. Tuva has a clan-based governance structure. The overall level of education is low. The network of public organizations is extremely weak and developing very slowly. Affiliation with all-Russian political parties has no real or nominal value here. The formation of the government, police, and staff of budgetary institutions is primarily based on the clan principle. Despite the fact that Tuva stands out sharply against the background of the rest of Russia, and even neighboring regions, the republic's secession from the Russian Federation is possible only in the event of a systemic and deep crisis in the state and under the influence of the unfolding sovereignization processes of neighboring regions, in particular Buryatia.

Neighboring Buryatia is markedly different from Tuva in terms of population structure, ethnic composition, social mobility, etc. Only one third of the republic's residents are Buryats. However, the share of ethnic Russians has been steadily declining over the past 30 years, and Buryats are playing an increasingly prominent role in the republic's life. Compared to Tuvans, Buryats have a higher level of education and a much more powerful stratum of intellectuals, both scientific and creative. Yet the Buryat language is in a deep crisis, and its prospects, compared to Tuvan, are very vague. Meanwhile, the Buryat identity is still strong, the percentage of mixed marriages is low, and Buddhism plays an important role in the life of the nation. Buryatia is a clan-based society. Depending on the clan's influence and authority, its members receive positions in local government or in the republican authorities. Clans can be inter-familial—in the form of an alliance of families to effectively control certain sectors of the economy or areas of public life. The head of the republic, Alexei Tsydenov, acts as an arbitrator appointed to this position by Moscow. The clan leaders know that it is Tsydenov who ensures the functioning of the system of checks and balances. However, the head of the republic himself is not a clan leader and has no real influence on the redistribution of spheres of influence, liquidation or merger of clans. The authority of the arbitrator is supported solely by the availability of power resources provided by Moscow.

The Buryats and Tuvans have a long and close relationship with neighboring Mongolia, which provided shelter to tens of thousands of evaders of conscription into the Russian Armed Forces in 2022. In addition, the successful economic transformation and a series of effective reforms implemented by the government over the past 10 years have turned Mongolia into an attractive model for all the “branches of the descendants of Genghis Khan”, as Mongolians refer to the Buryats, Kalmyks, and Tuvans. Although Mongolia remains a fairly closed country for mass migration, Moscow is seriously concerned about the growing authority of Ulaanbaatar among the Mongolian peoples of the Russian Federation and Tuvans. In 2023, the refusal of the Mongolian migration service to extradite to the Russian Federation the well-known Kalmyk insurgent Batyr Boromongnaev, who sought political asylum in Mongolia, and his subsequent flight to the United States with the consent of the Mongolian authorities, became a cause for wide discussion in the Mongolian and Russian media. Despite the Kremlin’s pressure, Mongolia seeks to maintain its influence over the Buryat, Kalmyk, and Tuvan communities and continues to position itself as the protector of the Mongolian peoples.

In spite of the widespread stereotype among Ukrainians about the primitiveness of Buryats and their willingness to die for a bowl of soup serving the interests of Russians, many representatives of this indigenous people (among whom military service is traditionally considered very prestigious) feel deceived and find the actions of the military leadership incompetent and malicious. Over the past year and a half, the number of Buryat emigrants has increased significantly, primarily to Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, and the United States. Not only is the diaspora growing, but so is its influence on Buryat society in the homeland.

Disintegration scenarios in Buryatia will reveal the fragility of the republican governance system, both in the field of administration and in the field of security and defense. The existing clan-based model of society and the system of enrichment, which is limited to a very limited number of people from certain clans, will not allow Tsydenov to rely even on Buryat security forces at a critical moment.

Sakha-Yakutia stands out from both Buryatia and Tuva. It is a wealthy republic with an extremely strong indigenous national identity. The main sectors of the economy are mining and precious stones and precious metals. For decades, the republican leadership has actively supported national education and culture, including cinema in the Yakut language. Sakha is one of the few regions where the indigenous language is actively used in government, administration, business, and public communications and is a real competitor to Russian.

Over the past 30 years, the share of Russians in the population of Sakha-Yakutia has been steadily declining, while the number of Yakuts has been growing. The 2020 census recorded that for the first time since the end of World War II (which resulted in the deaths of many Yakuts and the influx of ethnic Russians into the republic), Yakuts make up more than half of its population. The trend toward an increasing share of Yakuts and a decreasing share of Russians continues. All residents of Sakha-Yakutia, regardless of national origin, understand the injustice of the distribution of income between the republic and the federal center. If the disintegration of the Russian Federation begins, there is a high probability that events in Sakha-Yakutia may develop along the lines of 1991: sovereignization and distancing from Moscow will be carried out precisely through the efforts of the republican leadership and local

nomenklatura, under public pressure and with the aim of concentrating the republic's national wealth in their hands.

To summarize, the disintegration of the Russian Federation may be very different from the processes of the collapse of the USSR, when 15 Soviet republics gained independence almost simultaneously, and virtually by default. It is a mistake to look to the late USSR as a model for the disintegration of the Russian Federation.

The disintegration of the Russian Federation will be a non-linear, time-consuming, chaotic process, accompanied by numerous conflicts, both territorial and ethnic. While some subjects of the Russian Federation may quickly and decisively declare their intentions to secede from the Russian Federation, others will wish to preserve or re-establish the federation or will go a long way from real autonomy to state independence. In addition, in the event of disintegration of the Russian Federation, new federal and confederate entities, trade and defense alliances will form and disappear in the first two to three decades after the start of this process. It is likely that not all new states will be proclaimed within the existing administrative boundaries, and not all will be able to maintain control over the declared borders. After all, the existing borders are perceived quite differently in each federal subject. While for Bashkortostan the current borders of the republic are a “maximum program”, for Ingushetia it is a national catastrophe that can only be averted by the return of lost territories.

The course of disintegration processes will depend on many factors that will shape the overall situation at the time of the centrifugal movements: both internal (level of national/regional consciousness of the population, national composition of the population, access to external borders, presence of national representative bodies, organizations, movements and prominent national leaders, economic self-sufficiency) and external (support of allies, existence of related peoples, influential diaspora). Ukraine's position, or lack thereof, will play no small role in the disintegration of the Russian Federation.

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