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Ethno-Cultural Landscapes of Russia: The Influence of Geography and Spatial Arrangements on Ethnic Diversity, Cultural Identity, and Regional Autonomy Movements

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Abstract

From the vast European plains and Ural Mountains to the broad Siberian taiga, arctic tundra, and jagged Caucasus ranges, and from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean, the Russian Federation occupies an enormous area of approximately 17 million square kilometers across Eurasia, and therefore encompasses a rich tapestry of ethno-cultural landscapes formed by an array of geographical features and human adaptations. In this paper we explore the primary research question: how does the physical environment and spatial organization shape ethnic diversity, regional culture, and regional autonomy movements in the Russian Federation? Using a qualitative comparative case study methodology to examine several major geographic locations (North Caucasus, Volga-Ural region, and Siberia/ Far East), our analysis utilizes historical documents, census data provided by Rosstat, ethnographic research, and sociopolitical analyses to illustrate the multiple dimensions of the relationships between physical geography and ethnicity/culture/autonomy. For example, the mountainous barriers within the North Caucasus have enabled the sustenance of greater than 30 different micro-ethnic groups in the Republic of Dagestan, which has fostered clan-based identities and separatist movements such as those in Chechnya. Our findings demonstrate that regions located in the periphery are characterized by higher levels of ethnic diversity (approximately 190 groups nationally), more strongly developed cultural identities linked to the local landscape, and recurring movements for regional autonomy. These are largely influenced by a variety of characteristics including topological fragmentation, barriers to migration, and the economic leverage gained by regional populations. We conclude with recommendations for spatial reform of the federal system in Russia that will reduce ethnic conflict, and promote equal resource sharing and climate adaptation strategies to address the needs of indigenous peoples living in the arctic regions who face significant challenges due to geopolitical forces.

Keywords: Ethnic diversity, cultural identity, regional autonomy, geography, Russian Federation, spatial arrangements

Introduction

Russia spans approximately 17 million km² of landmass, making it the world's largest country geographically, which includes an array of diverse terrains from the fertile steppes of Europe, to the Ural Mountains, vast Siberian forests, Arctic tundra and the rugged peaks of the Caucasus range. There are 190 plus ethnic groups residing in Russia and over 100 different languages spoken within its borders, giving Russia the highest ethnic diversity of any nation in the world. Geography has an enormous influence on how people settle, their cultural activities, and the development of political relationships among peoples and with the government, e.g., The Caucasus Mountain Range has separated the North Caucasus into so many separate communities that there are now 30 micro-groups of people in just one province in Dagestan alone, creating very distinct cultures; the harsh climate of Siberia has kept many of the indigenous peoples, such as Evenk, Yakut and Chukchi living in sparsely populated areas, keeping their traditional ways alive; the abundance of resources found in the Volga-Ural basin has allowed for many different ethnic groups to live together, but at the same time has given some groups, including Tatars, economic power to empower them politically (Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 72).

Thus, these geographical factors have played a significant role in determining how the ethnic groups interact with the state and with each other, and as such have influenced the desire for cultural preservation and autonomy for many ethnic groups (Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 72). The center-periphery model has been used to explain and understand many of the issues of separatism in Russia by explaining how the dominant identity and culture of the central authority clashes with the culture of the peripheral regions (Kolosov et al., 2022, p. 91).

Therefore, the primary research question that will be addressed by this thesis is: How does geography and geographic arrangement impact the ethnic diversity, cultural identity, and regional autonomy movements throughout the Russian Federation? It is important to examine this issue now because, as of the writing of this thesis, Russia is dealing with issues of regional separatism, cultural preservation, and federalization and integration into the global community. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the relationship between the physical landscape and the administrative spatial structure of a region and how this relationship can promote or inhibit ethnic unity and autonomy aspirations.

Historically, Russia expanded its borders westward from the Muscovite core to conquer and incorporate various ethnic territories in Eurasia to its present-day borders covering over 17 million square kilometers of land. This was accomplished through conquest (e.g., 19th century Caucasian Campaigns), colonization (Cossacks) in Siberia, and diplomacy. During the Soviet period ethnic federalism was institutionalized and formalized by defining more than twenty autonomous republics and several autonomous districts based upon ethnic majorities, which were maintained after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, even though there were efforts during the Yeltsin and Putin periods to centralize the government. As a result, the geography of the Russian Federation — such as the mountainous terrain of the North Caucasus supporting more than thirty micro-ethnic groups in Dagestan; the harsh climate and vast expanse of Siberia allowing for low-density settlement patterns that have helped preserve the traditions of indigenous peoples such as Evenks, Yakuts, and Chukchi; and the isolation and abundant natural resources of the Volga-Ural basin providing Tatar groups with economic leverage and empowerment — has supported the retention of unique cultural identities, which in turn has fueled desires for greater autonomy — as evidenced by the demand for separation by Chechnya and the diamond-revenue sharing agreements entered into by the Republic of Sakha (Sitdikov et al., 2019).

This paper is organized as follows: a literature review on ethno-geographic theory, methodology, empirical results for specific regions, a discussion of the influences, and conclusions with policy recommendations.

Literature Review

Work in scholarly ethno-culturally focused landscape theory illustrates how geography has an impact on the formation of identity. The idea of "imagined communities," put forth by Benedict Anderson in relation to nation-building, describes how geographic space creates national identities, but could be applied to Russia's multi-ethnic federal system. Geographers have argued that regions are created socially through the practice of using space to define ethnic groups, creating ethnic boundaries (Lass, 1988), however, there is evidence that long-term exposure to the same geographic environment can lead to cultural similarities among different ethnic groups and reduce the initial physical separation of the two, leading to the creation of shared regional identities as demonstrated in Russian border studies (Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 72).

Marlene Laruelle's research demonstrates how geography in the form of harsh climates, vast distances and sparsely populated settlements in Siberia contributes to the development of strong indigenous identities and robust independence sentiments in groups like the Yakuts. Research done by Georgi Derluguian shows that the mountainous terrain of the North Caucasus has contributed to long-lasting clan-based societies and sustained rebel movements as seen in the conflict-ridden history of Chechnya. The dynamics mentioned above are amplified when combined with the spatial structure of a federal system: as Daniel Treisman and other researchers point out, asymmetric federalism (the level of autonomy granted) interacts dynamically with geography to create both stable and unstable regional conditions, as well as exacerbate center-periphery conflict in separatism research in Russia (Kolosov et al., 2022, p. 91). Additional research also indicates that the bargaining power of titular elites in ethno-regional states, often influenced by geographic considerations, greatly determines the success of autonomy measures as demonstrated in the autonomous republics of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Yakutia (Tsakhirmaa, 2020). Therefore, although ethnic identity is a major driving force behind secessionist tendencies, it is the geographic advantages that provide a region with the bargaining power to act upon those sentiments (Desmet et al., 2024, p. 2; Treisman, 1997). In addition, the control over important resources that are geographically concentrated, will increase a region's bargaining power in its negotiations with the central government (Tsakhirmaa, 2020).

Finally, economic geography also has an effect; regions rich in natural resources located in the periphery of a state, such as oil-rich Tatarstan, can use their spatial advantages to negotiate for greater autonomy. There are several gaps in the existing research; one area of weakness is that there is no analysis of the impact of climate change on Arctic ethnic groups (Tsakhirmaa, 2020), which is addressed superficially in this study. Another area of research that is extended upon in this study is the examination of how differences in land quality and elevation contribute to the complex mosaic of ethnolinguistic diversity; it examines how various geographic features can create cultural homogeneity or heterogeneity both within and between regions (Michalopoulos, 2012, p. 1527). It also looks at how factors such as population density, accessibility and proximity to international borders affect the spatial distribution and concentration of ethnic groups and therefore their ability to engage in collective action and self-governance (Sambanis & Siroky, 2023, p. 152; Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 72).

Methodology

In this research qualitative comparative case study is applied for examining of three ethnocultural areas: the North Caucasus; Volga-Ural; and Siberia/Far East. The sources used for collecting data were secondary sources such as Census data from Rosstat, historical maps and ethnographic studies.

Using of the framework of analysis for assessment of the effect of geographical and administrative aspects upon diversity; identity and autonomy is based upon spatial theory. Movements for autonomy are assessed using the indicators such as frequency of protests; degree of separatism in rhetoric; and existence of bilateral treaties between each of the autonomous area and the central government of Russia, which have been collected from media archives and academic database until 2023. Limitations of the research include dependence on secondary data and potential bias in the reported statistics by the state.

Findings and Analysis

Ethnic Diversity and Geographical Influences

Geography plays an immense role in shaping Russia's ethnic diversity (Michalopoulos, 2012, p. 1527). The vast Eurasian plains provide for extensive migration and assimilation in central areas, contributing to increased assimilation rates of both Slavic and small ethnic populations through time through cultural convergence (Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 72). Conversely, remote, and isolated areas like the Siberian taiga tend to preserve indigenous languages and traditions of groups such as the Evenks and Chukchi due to limited external influences, reduced mobility, and a localized ethnicity generated from the expansive nature of their environments (Michalopoulos, 2012, p. 1527; Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 72). Such effects of geography can be clearly seen in studies on ethno-geographic and ethno-demographic mapping, which map distinct ethno-cultural landscapes in each part of Russia (Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 71). However, there are also arguments against the effect of geography on diversity, stating that adapting to geography can lead to cultural convergence among ethnic groups over time, reducing the original separation and developing common regional identities, such as those demonstrated in border studies of Russia (Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 72). As stated by Sambanis & Siroky (2023, p. 152), geographic characteristics (such as terrain) are often constant, providing only for opportunities and facilitating the development of the tendency based upon other non-geographic characteristics, including political exclusion.

The mountainous regions of the North Caucasus serve as barriers to the movement of people and help create the micro-ethnic enclaves with unique dialects and customs, examples include the Dagestani peoples who comprise greater than thirty ethnic groups within a compact space, as well as maintaining diversity through topological fragmentation. However, counterarguments suggest that geography is simply a constant factor that facilitates tendencies influenced by other factors including political exclusion (Sambanis & Siroky, 2023, p. 152). Formalizing the spatial arrangement of ethnic groups, through creating ethnic republics after 1917, has maintained the diversity of the peoples of the region, while at the same time creating separate administrative units. Maintaining culturally distinct ethnic identities, as the formalization of ethnic republics did, has contributed to the growing regional ethnic polarization observed since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Мамаков & Теренина, 2023, p. 13).

Cultural Identity and Spatial Arrangements

The way that people perceive themselves culturally is directly tied to how they relate to their physical surroundings in Russia. In the Volga-Ural region, river systems — most notably, the Volga River — have long been an important link between Tatars and Bashkirs, thereby connecting two Muslim-majority ethnic groups who were being dominated by Russians at the time — a relationship of cultural identification that has also influenced the degree of support that separatism has had from those in the Volga-Ural region (Treisman, 1997). The fact that the Volga-Ural region is geographically central lends considerable bargaining power to regional elites of titular ethnicities; this can enable the development of cultural revival movements (such as language education programs for the Tatar language in Kazan) through both spatial planning in cities and autonomous political arrangements (Tsakhirmaa, 2020).

At the same time, regions on the periphery of Russia increase the likelihood that ethnic groups will preserve their identities. Indigenous peoples living in areas affected by climate change — especially Arctic indigenous peoples, who are experiencing unprecedented and unpredictable spatial changes (e.g., permafrost thawing) — adapt their traditional identities to changing landscapes, while increasing demands for cultural autonomy. However, federal policies designed to protect indigenous identities (e.g., through designating "areas of traditional nature use") are often ineffectual due to the priority placed on extracting resources (Naumov et al., 2020, p. 1507). These examples illustrate a key contradiction between what federal policies claim to be doing in terms of protecting cultural identities and the underlying economic motivations behind resource extraction policies that lead to on-going disputes between indigenous peoples and the state regarding control of land and cultural identity. As with all the previous cases of conflict over identity and land in Russia, there exists a complex interaction between territorial and ethno-national logics, which reflects deeper civilizational patterns of coexistence and solidarity in Russia (Mchedlova & Sokolov, 2022, p. 614).

Regional Autonomy Movements

The geography of regions creates spatial disparities and inequalities and allows resource rich regions to utilize physical isolation as a basis for negotiating better terms with the centre (Treisman, 1997). In this regard, remote Sakha in Siberia has successfully negotiated increased financial autonomy through a revenue sharing agreement for diamond revenue with Moscow because of the distance and mineral wealth of Sakha (Tsakhirmaa, 2020). Similarly, the geography of Siberia exacerbates feelings of being marginalized, fuelling demands for greater autonomy among Buryats and Tuvans in peripheral Siberia, as well as increasing their sense of grievance due to lack of access to politics (Sambanis & Siroky, 2023, p. 152). Regional awareness and local historical narratives have been shaped by the way the periphery has been viewed as a challenge to the centre in Russian thought since the 1980s (Wilmers, 2022, p. 263). The distinct cultural identity of many of the regions involved in the current wave of autonomy movements is also frequently tied to their geographical location and is used as the basis for framing the demand for greater autonomy (Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 72). Cross-border regional identities have also added complexity to these issues, as is the case in the Buriat and in the Crimean region, and illustrate the ongoing conflict between regional cultural cohesion and national unity (Clowes, 2016, p. 125).

In the North Caucasus, the rugged terrain has long supported guerrilla style autonomy, as was evident during the Chechen wars (1994-2009). While the 1993 Constitution granted each of the republic's nominal autonomy, the concentration of power under Putin has severely restricted the development of autonomous movements, forcing some to pursue underground separatist movements. A comparative study of autonomy movements across different regions of Russia found that ethnically homogeneous and geographically isolated regions were significantly more likely to develop autonomy movements than those that were ethnically heterogeneous or highly integrated into the larger Russian society (Gorenburg,

1999). Regions that rely heavily on exporting raw materials also tend to be plagued by political instability and therefore may seek greater control over their own natural resources (Press, 2023, p. 87). Due to the vastness and diversity of Russia, a multi-level and multi-scale methodology will be necessary to understand the spatial dynamics of the country, rather than using an aspatial methodology that does not account for the localized causes of regional movements (Okunev & Lopatina, 2022, p. 636).

Discussion

Findings indicate that geography is both unifying and divisive in terms of Russia's ethnically diverse cultural landscape. Geography impacts how diversity, culture and local autonomy are distributed throughout Russia's territory. On one side, geography has allowed for connectivity between people such as Tatar and Bashkir peoples who share similar Islamic identities and culturally converge due to geographical river systems in the Volga-Ural Region and the overwhelming presence of Russian culture. Conversely, geography such as mountains in the North Caucasus and great distances in Siberia create physical barriers that protect the preservation of micro-ethnics, unique languages and customs and maintain separateness from the national government.

Physical distance has two functions: it protects cultural differences and a strong sense of community especially for indigenous people living in the peripheral Arctic or remote Siberian republics; however, it can also promote feelings of autonomy and separatism when combined with regional economic inequalities and lack of representation in the national government. Peripheral regions rich in natural resources (such as diamonds) utilize their remote location to negotiate better financial arrangements with the Federal Government of Russia. Conversely, underdeveloped areas develop grievance movements and demand more local control and autonomy in response to a lack of development and resource extraction.

Federal structures attempt to counterbalance the effects of geographic isolation and related tensions by decentralizing power through ethnic republics and special territories of traditional use, and therefore provide formalized autonomy and support to local efforts of cultural revival (i.e., language education programs in cities such as Kazan). Inconsistencies within the system, however, including an unequal distribution of nominal sovereignty among ethnic republics and ordinary oblasts, as well as post-Soviet centralization of authority, often create new regional divisions and reinforce conflict regarding issues of land, resources, and identity amid pressure from climate change and economic exploitation.

In broader terms, there exists a potential for fragmentation in a warming Arctic as indigenous peoples make increased demands for greater local autonomy in response to shifting geographies. Comparatively, Russia's model of flexible spatial federalism stands in contrast to China's unitary approach to managing ethnically defined regions; thus, equitable application of flexible spatial federalism may contribute to greater stability in managing ethnic diversity.

Conclusion

Ethnic diversity, regional autonomy, and cultural identity in the Russian Federation are all shaped by geographic and spatial arrangement. Over time, natural physical characteristics of an area have allowed ethnic groups to keep their individual cultures and traditions intact, even while under Russian domination. River systems connecting Tatar and Bashkir communities in the Volga-Ural region support a unified Islamic identity. Government created administrative boundaries, including ethnic republics and federal districts, manage the demand for self rule; however, they can also create "silos" that increase tensions between the regions and the center.

The two examples show how geography acts as both a unifier (shared landscapes) and divider (isolation), particularly when combined with economic disparities and political disenfranchisement. Resource rich and isolated areas, such as Sakha in Siberia, utilize their resources and location to bargain for increased fiscal autonomy from Moscow. Conversely, the difficult-to-access North Caucasus area historically provided a haven for guerrilla movements, such as in Chechnya. Although Moscow has recently centralized authority, this has forced separatist movements into underground activity. Indigenous peoples of the Arctic are experiencing additional stressors due to climate change, such as thawing permafrost, disrupting their traditional lands and increasing calls for cultural protections against resource development.

Russian policy makers wishing to contribute to national unity and reduce conflict can take several concrete actions:

- 1. Fair distribution of resources:** Equitable revenue sharing of extractive resources (oil, gas, and minerals) to avoid creating a "resource curse" where extraction dependent areas experience high levels of instability.
- 2. Real federal power sharing:** Meaningfully empower peripheral republics and indigenous areas to govern themselves with real authority, eliminating inconsistencies between republics and oblasts, rather than granting them merely nominal rights.
- 3. Support for identities:** Implement better land-use policies to protect cultural sites and languages through the extraction process, balancing extraction activities with preservation of local traditions.

Additional broad concerns exist regarding the potential fragmentation of the Arctic as climate change continues to alter geography and strengthen indigenous claims. The flexibility of Russia's federalism is different from China's rigid central control of ethnic areas and can help provide stability if implemented fairly and consistently. Future research should investigate "digital geography," or how on-line ethnic networks and social media create virtual communities that allow individuals to form and participate in community outside of physical space and reshape identities and activism.

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