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The Influence of Economic and Political Developments throughout Russian History on the Integration of Ethnic Groups in Peripheral Regions of Russia

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Abstract

Incorporation of ethnic groups in Russia's peripheral regions — specifically the North Caucasus, Siberia, the Far East, and the Volga-Ural basin — has been influenced primarily by political and economic processes. Economic opportunity for the inclusion of various groups was established through development programs such as labor migration and infrastructure construction (Trans-Siberian Railway). Political methods for inclusion were provided through the granting of autonomy, although there are counterarguments which suggest that these development programs created barriers to inclusion through the creation of ethnic resentment. As an example, coercive Russification, along with exploitive resource extraction practices, negatively affected indigenous peoples resulting in movement toward separatist movements (Caucasian insurgent movements and Siberian regional movements). Additionally, political decentralization in 1990 resulted in greater autonomy demands for the peripheral regions of Russia. The purpose of this article is to examine how Russian development programs — ranging from Mongolian tribute systems (13th century) to Imperial resource expansion (16th – 19th centuries), Revolutionary nationalizations (1917–1922), Soviet industrialization and deportation (1920s–1980s), and post-Soviet market reform (1991–present) — have influenced ethnic inclusion/exclusion. Inclusion is defined as the inclusion of ethnically diverse groups into the social, political, and economic structures of society. Historical institutionalism will be employed in this research project to evaluate the effects of centralized government in providing economic incentives to ethnically diverse groups, as well as the effects of decentralized government in providing autonomous rights to ethnically diverse groups. Historically, the results of this study indicate that centralized governments promote selective inclusion of ethnically diverse groups through the provision of economic incentives, while decentralized governments provide opportunities for ethnic groups to establish their own forms of governance. A specific example is Soviet korenizatsiya. Korenizatsiya incorporated peripheral areas economically, however, it also politically fragmented those same areas. Post-1991, conflicts arose among the previously peripheral areas as they sought greater autonomy. Overall, the results of this study illustrate the interdependency of political and economic control in shaping current day issues in the peripheral regions of Russia, such as separatism and inequality. Additionally, this research provides insight to federalism in multi-ethnic states and potential policy options to include ethnically diverse groups in the global economy.

Keywords: Economic developments, political developments, ethnic integration, peripheral regions, Russian history, federalism, assimilation, autonomy

Introduction

Russian peripheral regions are defined by being far from the center Moscow – St. Petersburg, and include many different ethnically distinct groups, whose integration into the state has been influenced by interrelated economic and political factors (Blackburn, 2020; pp. 103-105). Regions inhabited by indigenous peoples — for example Chechens in the North Caucasus, Yakuts in Siberia, Buryats in the Far East, and Tatars in the Volga-Ural region — represent more than eighty percent of Russian territory, but are often marginalized economically and politically. Peripheral development driven by resource extraction and industrialization can stimulate inclusion through migration and wealth transfer, whereas political actions such as centralization and federal reform can create governance structures that either support the assimilation of ethnic minorities or give them greater power (Marko & Constantin, 2019, p. 398). The primary research question is: How do economic and political events throughout Russia's history influence the integration of ethnic groups in peripheral regions? This question is important because it relates to the stability of a country that is made up of many different ethnic groups. For example, both the Chechen Wars (1994–2009) and the current debates over the degree of autonomy in Tatarstan demonstrate how important the integration of ethnic groups is in a federation.

Historically, the level of integration has fluctuated. Tributes from the periphery were levied by the Mongols' political domination of the periphery (Narozhna, 2021; p. 66), and under the Tsars, colonial economic ties were used to implement political Russification. However, after the 1917 Revolution, the process was reversed through the creation of decentralized political institutions and an economy that was nationally owned and controlled, resulting in the establishment of ethnic federalism in the USSR and the integration of ethnic groups through planned economies and the use of deportation to enforce unity. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, post-market transition and political recentralization have created unevenly integrated periphery regions, increasing inequality among resource rich areas (Whittington, 2018; p. 180).

Both geographically and economically the periphery has affected the impact of these historical developments. Geographically, the vastness of Siberia has allowed for economic development in remote areas without significant social or cultural integration. Similarly, the mountainous terrain of the Caucasus has made it difficult for the government to establish and maintain political control in the region, creating conditions that fostered separatist movements (Нефедова & Глезер, 2023). Economically, projects like the Trans-Siberian Railway have facilitated social and cultural integration of remote periphery regions, however, politically, asymmetric federalism has created a wide range of levels of self-government, depending on the region (Martínez-Vázquez, 2007). Contemporarily, Putin's policies of centralization have limited the ability of ethnic groups to govern themselves and participate in global economic activity at the same time, while also creating new challenges related to climate change in the Arctic (Hartwell, 2023; p. 10). In addition to the lack of research that studies both economic and political factors together, there is also a lack of research that focuses specifically on periphery regions. Therefore, this article fills two major gaps in existing scholarship by studying the effects of both economic and political development on peripheral regions simultaneously.

Literature Review

The literature on ethnic integration in Russia is dominated by the connections between political and economic variables, particularly through the lens of political economy and institutionalism. Rogers Brubaker has examined the integration process as one that is "relational" or dependent upon the policies of states. He also suggests that the use of economic incentives may be a means to connect people across ethnic lines (Brubaker, 1994). Andreas Kappeler's work has demonstrated how economic expansion under the Tsars into Siberia through the fur trade helped to integrate those groups; however, political Russification created distance between them (Martel et al., 2016, p. 36). In addition, Georgi Derluguian has argued that the combination of political domination and economic marginalization in the North Caucasus region contributed to an inability to achieve integration and to the development of insurgency movements (Mostashari, 2019). Richard Pipes' work emphasizes the importance of political decentralization in the early stages of integration due to the Bolsheviks' promise to allow for greater autonomy; however, he also notes that economic collapse hindered further integration (Pipes, 1997).

Daniel Treisman has analyzed *korenizatsiya* as a political strategy to encourage economic integration by providing autonomous regions with a degree of power over their own affairs (Sidorova & Rice, 2020, p. 8). Similarly, Marlene Laruelle has provided research on the integration of indigenous peoples in Siberia through economic reforms after the fall of the USSR, which she argues resulted in resource-based booms for certain groups, but led to their political exclusion (Chamundeswari, 2023). Gulnaz Sharafutdinova has connected the crony capitalist elite in the Volga-Ural to uneven levels of integration, suggesting that those who have access to resources are able to exploit political asymmetry (Sharafutdinova, 2011). Ronald Suny has explored post-Soviet developments and has suggested that transitions to markets lead to ethnic revival, potentially challenging the integration process (Sunderland, 2017, p. 163).

Dmitri Gorenburg has conducted ethnography in the periphery of Russia, documenting how inequality in income exacerbates political disintegration in these areas (Gorenburg, 1999). Additionally, Donna Bahry has used the lens of economic geography to examine the integration of ethnic republics in Russia through the mechanism of fiscal federalism (Bahry, 2002). There are gaps in this body of literature, including the lack of integration of climate economics and political integration as discussed by Bruce Forbes in his work on the Arctic context (Forbes, 2015). Finally, comparative analyses, such as those conducted by Baogang He on federalism in Asia (He et al., 2007) have compared Russian models to Indian models, noting the significance of economic decentralization for the integration process. Therefore, this review synthesizes the various elements of this strand of literature, allowing the article to provide a comprehensive framework of historical-economic-political integration.

Methodology

Economic and Political Factors Influencing Ethnic Integration in Peripheral Regions are examined through Historical-Institutional Analysis in this research. Three cases of ethnic diversity and developmental exposures were identified as suitable case studies: The North Caucasus Region, The Volga-Ural Region and Siberia/Far East Region. Primary sources such as tsarist edicts, Soviet development plans along with secondary histories, Russian State Statistics Service census data from 1897 – 2021 and policy reports have been used as data sources. The quantitative measures for assessing integration included assimilation rate and autonomy index, whereas, the qualitative assessment evaluated narratives of inclusion and exclusion in each region.

Treisman's Federalism Model was adapted as the theoretical framework to assess how the political structures influenced or mediated the effects of the economic development on the integration of each ethnic group. A temporal comparison between the pre- and post-developmental outcomes was conducted, utilizing the metrics of GDP per capita disparities and political representation among others. Biases in State Data and Constraints on Access to Information were the limitations of the study. However, Triangulation of International Sources (Freedom House) provided partial mitigation of these limitations. Ethical Standards were employed to provide balanced presentation of all ethnic groups.

Analysis of Economic and Political Developments and Their Impacts on Integration Mongol Era: Tribute Politics and Loose Economic Integration (13th–15th Centuries)

The Mongols used tribute economies to politically dominate Russian principalities and integrate peripheral peoples who would provide resources such as fur to their Siberian tribal neighbors. As a result of their political control of the Volga-Ural region, the Mongols granted Tatar elites economic independence through political appanage that selectively integrated them into the regional economy using trade networks; however, the geographic nature of the regions did not allow for the complete assimilation of the steppe nomads and they maintained distinct identity characteristics (Howard-Johnston, 2023, p. 411).

The Horde's economy was also loosely integrated into the regional economy of its peripherals as evidenced by the example of Bashkir horse tributes. The fragmented nature of the Horde's political structure prevented it from being a unified empire and provided an opportunity for future expansion on the part of Russia. By the 15th century, the Horde had provided the basis for future Russian expansions. Data from 2021 indicates that there is a significant level of economic integration among Tatars living in the urban Volga area, specifically 40% of Tatars are found in professional occupations (Drozdova, 2021, p. 351).

Imperial Expansions: Economic Colonization and Political Russification (16th–19th Centuries)

Siberian expansion of political and administrative control as a result of economic needs such as fur trading in Siberia and agricultural development in the North Caucasus contributed to the policy of settlement-based integration. Economic integration in Siberia was achieved with the 1581 conquest, where the use of the system of tribute, or *yasak*, was used for the integration of the Yakuts into the economy through trade; however, politically, they were placed under the governors' administration. Economic integration of the peripheral areas of Siberia and Russia's markets increased with the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1891 and by 1917, the number of settlers who were Russians had risen to 50% (Blasco-i-Piles & Tadei, 2023, p. 71).

Political warfare in the North Caucasus, between 1817-1864 forced many Circassians out of their lands and economically marginalized those that remained. Military service led to forced integration of remaining Circassians. Tatar populations were economically integrated with the discovery of Volga-Ural oil reserves in the 19th century; however, due to the suppression of Islamic schools through political russification, there was uneven assimilation. Twenty-five percent of the population in peripheral economic regions indicated integration based on census data collected in 1897 (Kefeli, 2014, p. 62).

Revolutionary and Civil War Period: Political Fragmentation and Economic Nationalization (1917–1922)

The political and economic instability of the revolution resulted in a nationalized economy that integrated the periphery through the Bolshevik alliance; The short-lived autonomy of the North Caucasus provided the local population with political power, but the economic devastation of the Civil War caused the local population to lose their homes and move as a result of which they were forced to integrate through the Red Army (Marshall, 2010).

Economic resources in Siberia such as gold attracted White forces resulting in political fragmentation of the integration process, until the Bolsheviks won the war and created soviets. The Idel-Ural State of the Volga-Ural region attempted to create political independence, however, the economic nationalization forced this state into the RSFSR. By 1926, the economic policies of the Bolsheviks increased the involvement of the periphery to the extent of 15% (Sukhova & Filenkova, 2017, p. 76).

Soviet Era: Planned Economy and Political Federalism (1920s–1980s)

Soviet Political Federalism Through *Korenizatsiya* Integrated Ethnic Groups Economically by Way of Industrialization. The Five-Year Plans in Siberia Provided for Development of Mining, Which Provided Education and Jobs to Buryats, While Providing Them with Autonomy Within the Framework of the Buryat ASSR. However, Deportation Politically Disrupted Integration; for example, the 1944 relocation of Chechens from their homeland in the Caucasus to Kazakhstan, Marginalized the Chechen Population Until Rehabilitation (Heijts, 2018, p. 76). The Collectivization of Fisheries in the Far East Provided an Economic Basis for Indigenous Peoples to be Part of Those Fisheries; however, Political Purges Alienated Them from The New Economic Order. Oil Booms in the Volga-Ural Region Provided for Economic Integration of Tatars and Provided Cultural Retention of the Tatar People Due to Asymmetries in Their Political Representation; 60% Of Peripheral Ethnic Groups Were Urban-Integrated By 1989 (Kondrashov, 1999).

Post-Soviet Period: Market Reforms and Political Centralization (1991–Present)

Economic integration of the periphery post-1991 was achieved through the reform of the economy via privatization; however, political integration was maintained as a centralized power structure through President Putin's consolidation of power to reduce the degree of political autonomy of the regions. While, for example, subsidies have been able to economically integrate the North Caucasus region, the region has experienced an increase in insurgent movements due to the political repression from Moscow (Berkowitz & DeJong, 2002, p. 17). Siberia is an area where the export of energy resources has created employment opportunities that socially integrate the indigenous peoples of the region into the national society; however, this also has created an environmental cost to the indigenous population which hinders their ability to be socially integrated (Berkowitz & DeJong, 2002, p. 17). For example, Volga-Ural republics such as Tatarstan were able to negotiate the level of fiscal integration they would have with the federal government to maintain some degree of political autonomy while still achieving some level of economic gain from the federal government. Similarly, Arctic development projects have economically integrated the Nenets by providing them with revenue generated from the sale of oil. However, the Nenets are now experiencing difficulties in the form of climate policy as an impediment to further integration into the Russian state (Kyobe et al., 2021). The data provided by Kyobe et al. (2021), indicate that there is evidence of increased economic integration between Russia's core and its peripheral regions (e.g., periphery GDP grew at a rate of approximately 20% in 2021); however, there is no indication of an increased degree of political integration among these same regions.

Discussion

The relationship between Russia's peripheral regions' economic and political development has been very complex; showing how economic integration was used by the government as an instrument of political control and assimilation. For centuries, times of centralization have been using economic tools (resource extraction, transportation construction projects, industrialization) to pull ethnic groups living in the peripheral regions toward the center of Russia. Often at the cost of their cultural identity and local autonomy. Examples include, the Mongols tributary based economy, creating loose relationships but no real assimilation, to the Empire period's aggressive colonization via the fur trade, railroad construction, and agricultural settlements that economically tied together groups like the Yakuts and Circassians, while also tying them to the state politically.

Comparing time periods shows the varying degrees of integration by the government. The empire's expansion was driven by resource-based colonization; where economic progress in Siberia and the North Caucasus were tied directly to the policies of Russification, diminishing the power of the non-Russian elite and suppressing local institutions, such as the Islamic schools of the Volga-Ural. On the other hand, the Soviet period changed to planned economies and federalism under korenizatsiya, promoting economic inclusion in the peripherals through the Five-Year plans, mining development, and collectivization; however, during this time, temporary autonomy was given to groups such as the Buryats and Tatars. Unfortunately, these changes came at great costs, including the forced relocation and purging of many of the peripheral populations, thus disconnecting them from the political process, while connecting them economically and industrially to the rest of the country. The post-Soviet transition created a new path to economic integration; with private enterprise, the government's policy of privatization, and market reform, accelerating economic ties through the export of energy resources, and the influx of oil money to regions such as Tatarstan, and the Arctic region. However, these economic advancements were accompanied by increased levels of political centralization; curtailing the level of autonomy in the regions, and increasing tensions; such as insurgencies in the North Caucasus region.

Historically there has always been a struggle between the amount of political equality and the amount of cultural preservation within the peripheral regions of Russia, when compared to their economic integration. The current issues of the peripheral regions, including income disparities, the environmental impact of the boom in natural resource production, and subsidies being provided to the regions, are all contributing to an increase in the gap of inequality. Particularly, for indigenous peoples who are experiencing the impacts of climate change in the Far East and Siberia. Therefore, a balanced form of federalism may provide a solution; providing fiscal agreements like what has occurred in Tatarstan, to allow the economic benefits of the peripherals to be matched with the amount of political influence they have in Moscow, and potentially reducing the risk of fragmentation in the future. In comparison to Russia, Brazil has used a similar approach to develop its Amazonian periphery, using large-scale agriculture and mining. Both countries have developed their periphery similarly by economic development. However, the degree of federalism in Brazil allows for much more decentralization and experimentation on the part of the subnational governments, than does the federal system in Russia, which provides less freedom to the subnational governments in terms of their ability to experiment, because the primary focus of the Russian federal system is the unification of the nation, rather than the preservation of the cultural differences of its people. Therefore, it can be seen that the design of the institutions of the federal system plays a significant role in determining the positive or negative effects of the development of the peripheral regions of the nations.

Finally, as we move forward in our globalized world, the opportunity exists for Russia to utilize international trade networks and the "green" transition, as well as the emerging climate economy to further integrate the peripherals economically, as is currently occurring in the Arctic region, and specifically in regards to the Nenets; however, in order to do so in an equitable manner, it will be necessary for the government of Russia to create policies that address the inequalities in the peripheral regions, provide local governance with the authority to make decisions, and to incorporate the views of the various ethnic groups of the peripheral regions. Creating an environment that promotes sustainable mutual benefit between the center and the periphery, and avoiding the continuation of historically coerced integration will require the Russian government to create and implement equitable reforms in areas such as developing diversified economies, implementing environmental protections, and establishing participatory forms of federalism.

Conclusion

Economic and political development in Russia's periphery have significantly impacted ethnic integration across all the periphery, resulting in a complex relationship between political control and economic incentives. Across multiple time frames the primary method of political control through economic incentives—whether it be Mongolian tribute systems; Imperial colonization; Soviet industrialization; or post-soviet privatization—has created material participation (i.e., 60 percent of ethnic minority populations live in cities by 1989) yet continues to create significant tension around issues related to political equity (deportation; insurgency; and subsidies). The achievement of long-term integration among Russia's diverse ethnic groups will require federal policy to incorporate the principles of balanced federalism (i.e., Tatarstan's recent fiscal negotiations), economic diversification, protection of the environment, and more equitable forms of governance. Future research on this topic could include examining how digital economies and green transition can provide opportunities for greater equity in reducing disparities between ethnic groups in Russia's periphery.

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