
Prerequisites for the determination of potentially separatist subjects of the Russian Federation

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Abstract

The article examines the problems of regional separatism in the territory of the Russian Federation based on the analysis of historical, political, social and economic conditions in its subjects. It was determined that against the background of the ongoing Russian armed aggression against Ukraine, the issue of the development of separatist movements in the Russian Federation, as a factor of its weakening from the inside, is of particular importance.

Through an in-depth study of the essence of internal contradictions on the territory of Russia, the prerequisites for identifying potentially separatist subjects of the Russian Federation have been revealed. Such prerequisites can be considered: contradictions on a political, ethnic, and religious-confessional basis; complex socio-economic situation in the state; disproportionality of regional development, distribution and natural potential of resources, potential prospects of individual subjects of the Russian Federation; political ambitions, growing influence of regional and local leaders, business elites.

It has been established that potentially separatist subjects of the Russian Federation are separate upper-level territorial units within the federation, which are under the influence of relevant prerequisites (from one or more), which can stimulate the growth of separatism in their territories against the background of political instability, weakening of the influence of the Center (State Council of the Russian Federation) and the possibility of supporting such trends by external allies (interested parties).

The revealed results can serve to select an effective toolkit for countering the aggressor against the background of the ongoing aggressive (expansionist) Russian foreign policy.

Given the fact that secession (separation) can be implemented during decolonization and the struggle of the people against occupation, the gradual recognition of the national republics of the Russian Federation as occupied on the basis of historical and legal precedents seems quite promising. This will contribute not only to the internal weakening of the aggressor state, but also to the emergence in the future of new nation-states friendly to Ukraine.

Key words: separatism, secession, potentially separatist subjects of the Russian Federation, the right of peoples (nations) to self-determination.

Introduction

Since Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency in December 1999, the Russian Federation has consistently pursued a policy of restoring the empire by undermining or dividing the states along Russia's borders, weakening the influence of the US in Europe, destabilizing NATO, discrediting European democratic systems, and conducting a campaign to split the EU, using various tools of influence both on individual countries of the European Union and on the organization as a whole (Bugajski J., 2004; Bugajski J., 2008; Bugajski J., 2016).

However, in the course of implementing its own imperial project, Russia's internal troubles

are becoming more and more significant, and the centralized “federation” is facing potential disintegration, upheaval, and rupture. Despite the masking by official Moscow of its growing fragility due to external aggression, internal problems that are brewing can provoke a number of crises, in particular the struggle for power between elites, as well as open conflicts between Moscow and several Russian regions (Bugajski J., 2022). The specified scenarios can be implemented through the realization of the right to self-determination by the peoples of Russia, which will definitely be regarded by the Russian authorities as separatism (Chebankova E.A., 2010, p. 13, 185).

The provision on the right of peoples to self-determination is present in the fundamental sources of international law: the UN Charter (Article 1, 1945), International Covenants on Human Rights (adopted in 1966), declarations of the UN General Assembly (1960 and 1970), documents of intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations, etc.

In turn, according to (Pro Zvernennya do mizhnarodnogo), the Ukrainian Parliament:

1) supports the inalienable right of the peoples of the Russian Federation to self-determination in accordance with the UN Charter, generally recognized norms and principles of international law;

2) calls on the international community to take all necessary measures to: “... unquestionably guarantee to the citizens of the Russian Federation the right to free expression of views, opinions, participation in peaceful assemblies, freedom of association, freedom of conscience and religion, as well as to ensure the free development of traditions and cultural identity of the peoples of the Russian Federation”;

3) appeals to the United Nations, the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly, and the national parliaments of the countries of the world with a call for: “... strengthening of comprehensive support for Ukraine for its victory in the Russian-Ukrainian war with the subsequent de-imperialization of the Russian Federation and decolonization of the peoples attached to and kept within it”.

In addition, Ukraine recognized the occupied Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (Pro Zayavu Verhovnoyi Radi Ukrayini). A similar bill regarding the Republic of Tatarstan has been registered and is under consideration in the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament).

Theoretical foundations of research

The analysis of the latest research and publications makes it possible to state that in the context of the ongoing Russian armed aggression against Ukraine, the issue of the development of separatist movements in the Russian Federation, as a factor of its weakening from the inside, takes on special importance. Among Ukrainian and Western experts, there are often more or less well-founded predictions about the possibility of the collapse of the Russian Federation. However, it must be recognized that expert assessments of the potential of existing centrifugal tendencies are hyperbolized and often based on the subjective interpretation of individual events or decisions (Separatistski tendenciyyi u suchasnij Rosiyi, 2016).

According to forecasts of the American private intelligence company “Stratfor”, Russia is unable to maintain its current administrative structure and maintain control over the entire current territory of the state (Decade Forecast: 2015-2025). The main manifestation of the potential disintegration of the Russian Federation is considered to be the separatism of its regions, which the federal center will face during the forecast period: the regions will become financially and economically self-sufficient and create formal and informal autonomous entities, and the economic ties between Moscow and the periphery will gradually fade. However, in practice, the disintegration of Russia does not occur, although the corresponding forecasts have been made several times.

The results of the Russian-Ukrainian war, namely the successful resistance of Ukrainian citizens against the invasion and the establishment of an autocratic regime, may have a public resonance in Russia, inspiring protests against government policy (Bugajski J., 2022, p. 46).

At the same time, it is stated (Denisenko V., 2023) that among the causes of the collapse of the USSR (given the identification and historical parallels between the end of the existence of the Soviet Union and the current perspective of the collapse of the Russian Federation), separatism was far from the primary cause. In addition, unlike in 1991, there is not a single economically self-sufficient region within the Russian Federation (with the exception of the Republic of Tatarstan) in which there would be influential elites who would advocate for secession or at least the expansion of powers and opportunities. If we analyze the regions with the largest percentage of non-Russian population, all of them will be economically backward, as well as without significant separatist movements for a significant period of time.

The basis of the work is a synergistic approach (in particular, the idea of self-organization of ultra-complex systems under the condition of increasing their instability, imbalance, which helps to understand the mutual influence of threats, risks in the conditions of globalization/counter-globalization and glocalization processes in the formation of separatist regions, “quasi-states”), ideas of metamodernism (determining the value of past experience for the present). The synergistic approach also allows for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of interaction and the development of hierarchical relationships between institutions of political power (represented and latent) in potentially separatist subjects of the Russian Federation.

Formulation of the problem

The purpose of the article is to identify the prerequisites for identifying potentially separatist subjects of the Russian Federation, by deepening the understanding of the essence of internal contradictions on the territory of Russia, which, against the background of the ongoing aggressive (expansionist) Russian foreign policy, will allow effective selection of tools for countering the aggressor.

Theoretical background and methods

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Result and Discussion

Considering the principle of self-determination from the point of view of natural law, it is possible to state that starting from the 17th century it is the leading idea of liberal political state thought. The idea of self-determination was put forward by prominent figures of that time, including John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as well as ideologues of the American and French revolutions.

The right of the people to self-determination implies that each nation is free to determine its political status without outside interference and to carry out its economic, social and cultural development (Klimenko K. O.).

At the same time, the UN Millennium Declaration (Deklaraciya tysyacheletiya) actually advocates an exclusively anti-colonial and anti-occupation interpretation of the principle of self-determination of peoples. Thus, in view of international law, the principle of the right to equality and self-determination of peoples does not classify separatism and separation as forms of self-determination. Yes, secession can be realized with: decolonization, struggle with occupation and a regime that professes racism.

There is confirmation in the practice of the constitutional courts of countries, according to which the right of the people to self-determination does not imply that every people should have its own independent state. In the opposite case, there would be much more countries in the world than 193 members of the UN (United Nations). The right of the people to self-determination determines that each people can freely, without outside interference, establish its political status and carry out its economic, social and cultural development.

Instead, the right to secession (as a result of separatism) is outside the norms of international law. The people can choose to exercise the right to self-determination with the help of cultural autonomy, federal and confederal state formations, national-territorial units, interstate integration (with the transfer of a part of national sovereignty to supranational structures), full independence (Aksenok A.).

Thus, a certain contradiction can be traced between the realization of the right of peoples to self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity of states, according to which the territory of the state cannot be changed without its consent (Klimenko K. O.).

Separatism (derived from the Latin words “separatio” - separation, “separatus” – separate) is a phenomenon potentially present in any state entity. The activation of such a phenomenon

occurs under certain conditions, under the influence of various groups of factors associated with the political and socio-cultural transformation of society, a significant weakening or strengthening of the central government. In general, separatism as the desire of some regions of the state to separate, acquire greater political independence, sovereignty is partly a manifestation of a defensive reaction to processes that do not suit one or another part of society at critical moments of its development (Potencialni zagrozi regionalnogo separatizmu v Ukrayini, 2014).

Given that separatist movements become more active at a time when the general socio-economic situation in the country changes dramatically for the worse and/or when political instability occurs, none of the countries is guaranteed from the threat of separatism, including highly developed and rich ones. The potential of separatism depends primarily on the strength of the regional community, in the midst of which separatist sentiments spread or can spread. It is about both its number and the attractiveness of the corresponding identity; the presence of common interests, different from the interests of the rest of the country's population; the existence of noticeable linguistic, cultural, and confessional features determined by the history of the region. Quite often, the formation of such a community is facilitated by the existence of certain geographical barriers that complicate communications within the state (water obstacles, mountains, etc.) (Potencialni zagrozi regionalnogo separatizmu v Ukrayini, 2014).

An important factor in the activation of separatist practices is the presence of external separatist allies and their relative strength compared to the state where the separatist movement operates. External allies are able to become a source of resources, provide political and informational support, exert diplomatic, economic or even military pressure in favor of the separatists. In itself, the existence of regional communities with a pronounced identity does not pose a threat to the territorial integrity of the state. Such a threat becomes real when the idea of secession begins to be supported by the regional elite, at least a significant part of it (Potencialni zagrozi regionalnogo separatizmu v Ukrayini, 2014).

In addition to the above-mentioned main factors, each country has its own specific factors for the activation of separatist movements, characteristic only for this society.

In particular, according to (Separatistski tendenciya i u suchasnoj Rosii, 2016), Russian separatism is conditioned by a number of objective reasons and prerequisites:

- polyethnicity of the population and compact settlement of representatives of different ethnic groups (in total, there are more than 190 of them in Russia), on the basis of which the current federal nature of relations between the center and the regions was formed. The number of representatives of six ethnic groups, excluding Russians, exceeds 1 million (Sajt Vserossijskoj perepisi naseleniya 2010). Thus, if Ukrainians and Armenians are national minorities in Russia, dispersed and settled in many regions that do not pose a danger of separatism, then the centrifugal potential of Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvash and Chechens and others is enhanced by their compact residence in the respective national republics;

- low population density, which is manifested in the weak population of certain areas of significant size: the territory of Russia is almost 13% of the world's land area, on which only 2.4% of the world's population lives (according to UN forecasts, 1.1% of the world's population will live in the country by 2050) (Velikaya malonaseleennaya derzhava);

- significant differences in the resource and natural potential of the territories and the resulting difference in the socio-economic development of the territories (Mezhregionalnye razlichiya; Socialnaya differenciaciya regionov i gorodov).

So, the prerequisites for the growth of separatism in Russia, and as a consequence of the emergence of potentially separatist subjects of the Russian Federation, can be considered: contradictions on a political, ethnic, and religious-denominational basis; complex socio-economic situation in the state; disproportionality of regional development, distribution and natural potential

of resources, potential prospects of individual subjects of the Russian Federation; political ambitions, growing influence of regional and local leaders, business elites.

Thus, *potentially separatist subjects of the Russian Federation* are separate upper-level territorial units within the federation, which are under the influence of relevant prerequisites (from one or more), which can stimulate the growth of separatism in their territories against the background of political instability, weakening of the influence of the Center (State Council of the Russian Federation) and the possibility of supporting such trends by external allies (interested parties).

A typical cliché in assessing separatism in Russia, used by Western and Ukrainian sources, is potential contradictions between the titular nation and non-Slavic and non-Christian ethnic groups [8]. At the same time, the Kremlin is actually concerned that the status of republics by subjects of the federation dominated by ethnic Russians could lead to the cultivation of a more distinct regional identity, particularly in the remote Ural, Siberian and Pacific regions of the Russian Federation. The consequence of such developments may be the acquisition of more integral territorial and administrative identities of national dimensions, capable of leading to the “dismemberment” of the Russian state (Bugajski J., 2022, p. 157). To prevent such a scenario, Moscow strongly discourages the formation of ethnic Russian republics, trying to promote a single Russian imperial history based on an allegedly ethnically intact Russian nation. In some cases, the Russian authorities co-opted various regional symbols and history as a representation of “true Russianness” in order to weaken their separatist potential (Donovan V.).

The assessment of the prospects for the development of separatism in the Russian Federation mainly boils down to the identification of centers of disintegration within the administrative boundaries of the subjects of the federation, as well as the natural boundaries of the settlement of ethnic groups in the national republics (*Separatistski tendenciya*). Conducting a preliminary analysis of subjects of the Russian Federation with the aim of identifying potential separatists among them is possible, according to the above-mentioned prerequisites, according to the criteria:

- political (availability of certain state management tools at the subject);
- national (the degree of monoethnicity of the resident population);
- economic (the uneven distribution of resources among Russian subjects);
- religious (the possibility of contradictions on a religious basis);
- historical (the presence of a certain entity with a corresponding historical past of a coherent state entity, which can serve as a basis for further separation).

According to [8], in general, it is possible to distinguish two types of separatist manifestations in Russia:

1) *staged (controlled) separatism*, which is a political technology aimed at identifying latent separatists and radical activists by creating false or supporting existing initiative groups and movements in the subjects of the federation. The direct or indirect controllability of the leadership of such organizations to the Federal Security Service or the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation allows to quickly neutralize potential threats, which under other conditions could manifest themselves spontaneously or purposefully. According to a similar scenario, many organizations with the above-mentioned focus appeared (“Armies of the Liberation of Siberia”, “Russian Autonomy” movements, “Donskaya Povstancheskaya Armiya”, etc.).

2) *spontaneous separatism*. So far, its manifestations have not posed a danger to the territorial integrity of the Federation, as they are neutralized at an early stage. They do not have mass manifestations, do not enjoy widespread support of the population, are promoted by little-known political forces or individual citizens.

However, outside the borders of Russia there is a significant number of international bridges, platforms, opposition movements, which have recently united to generalize the vision of the post-Russian reality (“Forum of free peoples post Russia”, “Congress of People’s Deputies of Russia”, “Free Idel-Ural Movement”, “Forum of Free Russia”, “Moscow School of Civil Education”, etc.). Such organizations can be considered the instigators of separatist movements in Russia, since their members openly call for the secession of specific regions and the dismantling of the Russian state entity as such.

Thus, at the end of February and in the middle of July 2023, online referendums were held for the secession of 10 Russian regions from the Russian Federation (Keningsberg, Siberia, Urals, Kuban, Ingria, Chuvashia, Karelia, Voronezh region, Belgorod region, Novgorod region). More than 10 million people participated in the votes held on the referendum website. The overwhelming majority of participants voted for independence from the Russian Federation. According to the organizers, the results of the online referendums demonstrated two important trends: ideas of regional independence took root in the society of peoples inhabiting the “Russian Empire”; the Russian authorities are afraid of free citizens and the results of their expression of will (Oficijnij sajt nacionalnogo).

It should also be noted the intensification of the activities of guerrilla movements in various regions of the Russian Federation from 2022 (from the beginning of Russia’s war against Ukraine), in particular the “Russian Volunteer Corps”, “Anarcho-communist militant organization”, “Stop the wagons”, “Atešh” and others. The mentioned organizations carry out various actions, including sabotage on railway tracks, damage and destruction of weapons and military equipment of the Russian armed forces, elimination of key persons associated with carrying out armed aggression against Ukraine.

In turn, the Russian authorities consistently take measures to counter and prevent any manifestations of separatism in Russia: introducing changes to the legislation (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation), strengthening the counter-intelligence regime, active involvement of the propaganda apparatus, etc. The use of anti-extremist legislation so far allows the Russian authorities to counteract any manifestations of political discontent, and the potential realization of the right to self-determination of individual subjects of the Russian Federation immediately acquires the maximum possible negative connotation (Separatistski tendenciya).

Conclusions

In order to achieve their own benefit, the states of the world widely use various hybrid technologies of influence on the competitor (adversary). In the conditions of the crisis of the world political order, Ukraine should not only take a defensive position (advocating and protecting its own interests), but also move to biased use of similar tools.

From the point of view of international law, separatism is an illegal manifestation among the population of a certain community. However, the distinction between separatism and the right of peoples to self-determination is somewhat unclear. At the same time, the legalization of the right to self-determination must be preceded by the recognition of the respective region as occupied (with a subsequent right to decolonization and/or freedom from a racist regime in appropriate cases).

The realization of the right of peoples (nations) to self-determination is certainly an existential threat to the territorial integrity of any multinational state. However, such a threat grows in proportion to the decrease of the state’s respect for the human right and the right of each people living on its territory to independently determine their own political status. At the same time, the denial of such a right awakens and further stimulates separatist manifestations among the indifferent population. Refusal to grant the right to self-determination at first glance seems to help

preserve the integrity of the multi-ethnic state, but actually works in the opposite direction, stimulating the disintegration function.

In view of the above, the gradual recognition of the national republics of the Russian Federation as occupied on the basis of historical and legal precedents seems quite promising. This will contribute not only to the internal weakening of the aggressor state, but also to the emergence in the future of new nation-states friendly to Ukraine.

In order for the recognition of a certain subject as occupied (and subsequently independent) not to acquire an exclusively symbolic character, comprehensive support of the relevant national movements (organizations) is necessary. On their basis, governments in exile can be formed (following the example of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria), with which diplomatic relations have already been established in the future. This may stimulate other UN member states to take similar steps, which will lead to the escalation of diplomatic isolation of the Russian Federation on the world stage.

In the current situation of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, the long-term effect of the objective reasons and prerequisites for separatism imposed on Russia may increase under the influence of the negative consequences for the Russian Federation of military defeats on the battlefield, international sanctions, the militarization of the economy and society, and economic recession. As a whole, such consequences create a favorable environment for the growth of separatist tendencies in Russia.

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