

Regional Report

Russian Nationalism Expands in the Regions

By Yury Shabaev, Syktyvkar

The fall of 2006 marked an increase in the activity of Russian nationalist groups in Russia at the national and regional levels. The most visible manifestation of this phenomenon was the “Russian March” held on the November 4 Day of National Unity in Moscow and many regional capitals like Komi’s Syktyvkar.

In Komi, on that day Union for National Revival (SNV) leader Yury Yekishev sought permission to hold a demonstration, but never received an official response from the authorities, even though the law requires that a response be provided within three days. However, when approximately 60 of his supporters began to gather, they were met by police who informed them that the authorities had forbidden the demonstration. Those who had intended to march were then taken by bus to the police station.

The SNV was not alone in organizing the demonstration. Among the groups that joined in the march were Dor’yam As’nyms, an association of Komi intellectuals that represents the radical fringe of the Komi nationalist movement. Such coordination among radical groups is growing at both the national and regional levels.

Radicals Benefit From Kondopoga Events

Events at the end of the summer of 2006 in the city of Kondopoga in the republic of Karelia gave the nationalists a powerful new rallying cry in the fall of 2006. After men from Azerbaijan and Chechnya killed two ethnic Russians in a bar fight in Kondopoga, young ethnic Russian men in the city burned the bar and attacked homes and businesses owned by migrants from the Caucasus on the night of September 2. Many ethnic minorities fled that night and the events received extensive national media attention.

After Kondopoga, Russian nationalists began to actively distribute information about the events there. Radicals in Komi handed out leaflets with such titles as “The Truth about Kondopoga” and “A Letter from the Women of Kondopoga” calling on Komi residents to follow the Karelian example and drive “guests from the south” out of their territory. These flyers were distributed not only in the usual places where similar leaflets have appeared in the past, but also in a host of new cities and villages where such publications had not been seen before. In essence, the geography of national-radical activity is spreading.

Like the SNV, the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) has also intensified its out-

reach efforts. During October and the beginning of November, I received requests to prepare seven reports on agitation material, determining whether the content of the flyers directed against migrants and specific ethnic groups violated laws designed to prevent the sowing of ethnic discord. This is the first time that I have seen so much activity among radical movements in Komi.

Official Policy Fails to Address Problems

Komi’s official policies to deal with ethnic conflict are characterized by their declaratory and formal nature. The authorities have no desire to form their ethnic policies based on the interests of the ethnic groups living in the republic. Moreover, the authorities are displaying clear ethnic favoritism for well-connected individuals and groups. By working with the formal leaders of the various ethnic organizations in the republic, the authorities cannot hope to influence the mood of the population or change social attitudes because these leaders have little or no influence within the larger ethnic communities.

The recently formed new commission on inter-ethnic relations, initiated by veterans’ groups (primarily Afghan), and headed by the governor, is not capable of transforming the character of ethnic relations in the republic. For a start, it has no plans to create even the most simple system of monitoring ethnic relations in the republic’s large cities. The people who set up this committee have no idea what they should be doing. Currently, their main plan is to “visit the markets” where many non-ethnic Russians engage in retail trade activities.

In fact, it seems as if the entire bureaucratic machine has decided to pay much more attention to the markets and now the situation at these sites has become the focus of considerable attention. The republic’s migration service has also begun to participate in inspections of the city markets, but these measures are hardly likely to produce the results that the bureaucracy is hoping for.

Sources of Ethnic Tension in Kondopoga

Despite the authorities’ focus on the markets and the non-Russians who work there, it is necessary to understand that the events in Kondopoga did not start in these places and did not become possible because the ethnic minorities who worked there were unpopular with the larger population. The violence

occurred because the authorities preferred to adopt formalistic nationalities policies rather than truly effective ones, thereby severely undermining the rule of law. Additionally, the social mood was such that, ideologically, the Kondopoga population was prepared for pogroms against the Caucasus migrants living there (see *Izvestia*, November 28 and 29, 2006). According to a recent survey conducted among the youth of Karelia, more than 40 percent of college and high school students in this republic have negative feelings toward Caucasus migrants.

It is important to note, however, that the atmosphere of conflict in Karelia, in general, and in Kondopoga, in particular, was not off the chart. In the opinion of conflict specialists, in this situation the danger of prolonged, open conflict does not exist. Nevertheless, the conflict potential was significant. Additionally, the sharp growth of conflictual feelings sparks incidents, which effectively violate the rights of entire ethnic communities. Such an incident took place in Kondopoga. Of course, it is impossible to predict the occurrence of such an incident. It is only possible to warn about the presence of conflict feelings within the mass consciousness of the population.

Growing Racism and Xenophobia

Russian specialists have noted with increasing alarm that there is a strong growth of racist and xenophobic feelings in Russian society. This situation is a logical result of the removal of the idea of an expansive civic solidarity from the mass consciousness. Having first rejected the idea of the “Soviet people,” and then having failed to build a general civic identity, the regional political elites (together with politicians at the federal level) and ethnic entrepreneurs created the ideological basis for the expanding xenophobia.

This growth might not have occurred, but during the last 15 years in the country there was a consistent imposition of ethnicity while simultaneously rejecting the idea of an authentic civil society. There was no effort to pursue a policy of consolidating society or form practical mechanisms to form a Russian (*rossiisky*) civil society in the civic rather than ethnic (*russky*) sense. As a result, Russian society, which experienced an intensive process of social stratification and is suffering a crisis of identity, has become increasingly divided into

ethnic segments.

Today in Russia there is an enormous deficit of civic solidarity, which naturally creates grounds for an unprecedented growth of xenophobia. In these conditions, the further continuation of the authorities’ ethnic policies could threaten the internal stability of Komi and Russia as a whole.

Clear Signs of Danger in Komi

The question remains of whether the authorities will pay attention to these warnings. Unfortunately, in Komi the authorities have declared that a repeat of the Kondopoga violence is impossible. But this is not correct! The situation in the republic differs little from the situation in Karelia. Moreover, a public opinion survey of the Komi population that we conducted in 2004 showed that 40 percent of the respondents (the same number as in Karelia!) support the idea of removing all the Caucasus migrants from the republic. Fear of the Caucasus people is growing, as we discovered when we compared the results of the 2004 survey with one we conducted in 1996.

In this situation, it is necessary to pursue a consistent policy of civic consolidation and a state program of integration, which makes it possible to strengthen regional identity and civic solidarity. Additionally, it is necessary to pay attention to the needs of the indigenous Finno-Ugric people.

The Komi authorities do not take into account the warnings that the situation in the sphere of inter-ethnic relations is extremely complex in the republic. The main ethnic advisors who influence ethnic policy are themselves ethnic entrepreneurs. As a result, like the governor of Karelia, the Komi authorities place a lot of hope in the actions of local ethnic group leaders, claiming that they are responsible for the actions of the members of their ethnic communities. These hopes proved unfounded in Karelia.

In our view, while the politicians at the federal and regional levels do not make the formation of a over-reaching Russian identity the core of their inter-ethnic policy by building a non-ethnic Russian (*rossiisky*) people through a program of integration, the ethnic Russian marches will systematically destroy the unity of the people living in Russia.

About the Author:

Yury Shabaev is a researcher based in Syktyvkar, Komi Republic.

Suggested Reading:

Aleksei Ukkone, “Proshchanie s ‘kulinarym internatsionalizmom’”, www.kominarod.ru.