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Research Paper

The USSR, Russian Federation, & South Africa:

The Role of the Central Government in Preventing Separatist Movements

Theories of secession and motivation for other separatist acts are often defined by the ethnic regions that take these actions. Little weight is allotted to the impact that central government actions can have. Researchers analyze the variables and climate within ethnic minority regions. Many researchers use the collapse of the Soviet Union as the optimal model of secession, deriving their theories from an analysis of this former communist nation. However, in this paper I argue that it is in fact the primary actions taken by the leaders of central governments that instigate or prevent separatist acts from the ethnic regions within a state. I examine the Soviet Union in contrast to the current Russian Federation, but this analysis can be further strengthened by bringing in another country torn by ethnic struggles, South Africa, in order to establish central government actions as causal. First, I will provide a concise summary of prominent secession theories. A comparison of these multiethnic states – USSR, the Russian Federation, and South Africa – is then necessary to demonstrate the parallels of these countries in terms of the level of ethnic distinctiveness or assimilation, government structure, and autonomy and resources given to ethnic regions. Then, to ascertain the amount of influence that the role of the central government played, an examination of Mikhail Gorbachev's, Boris Yeltsin's, Mandela's and De Klerk's actions will follow.

Prominent Secession Theories

Beginning with an overview of prominent theories of secession, most surround the following seven factors: regional wealth, regional autonomy, ethnic distinctiveness, group skill sets, elite upward mobility, historical symbolic resources, and demonstration effects. Looking at regional wealth, the foremost theory claims that the ethnic regions most likely to secede are the poorest and least developed ones. Hale, after looking at other theoretical work, believes the opposite: it is the wealthiest regions that pose the risk of secession. "Rich regions have the most to lose in case of exploitation, while, conversely, poor regions only risk cutting themselves off from technology transfer, access to high value-added goods, the creation of higher-wage jobs and development subsidies." (Hale 2000, 34)

In the same token, regional autonomy also has competing theories. Some authors believe that a region given more autonomy will be complacent to the central government and less likely to make separatist demands. Conversely, others believe that the more autonomy an ethnic region is given by the central government, the more likely actions of secession will occur because they were allotted a more powerful bargaining position. (Hale 2000, 34)

With ethnic distinctiveness, there is a consensus that the less assimilated a region is, the higher the probability will be for separatist activism. (Hale 2000, 35) Group skill set theories state that the less political and economic skills the leaders of a region have, the more likely they will see the protection benefits from secession and the more likely they will fail in a secessionist attempt. (Hale 2000, 35)

The next factor, elite upward mobility, like regional wealth and autonomy, has elicited contending theories. In elite upward mobility, there are those who state that denial of upward political movement by ethnic leaders leads to dissatisfaction with the central power and more

desire to separate. Others view privileged ethnic leaders as more apt to secede in order to keep their political power that could be threatened by a younger generation of ethnic elites who wish to gain power by appeasing an ill-content ethnic minority. Historical symbolic resources encompasses both the history of independence and of grievous injustices as sources to further feelings of separation. And finally, neighboring regions, when they secede from the central government, create a domino effect for other ethnic regions to follow. (Hale 2000, 36)

Some researchers have used statistical models to determine which of these factors are most influential in promoting secession, but few look beyond the actions of ethnic regions and towards those of the central government to finding explanations of why some multiethnic states break apart and others do not. Hale, in examining the role of a core ethnic group's part in advancing other regions' separatist actions, calls researchers to "shift from the focus on the behavior of minority ethnic groups; equal attention must be paid to the determinants of the behavior of dominant ethnic groups and their interaction with central federal governments and minority regions." (Hale 2005, 65) Examining *across* these theories, it would appear that little weight has been allotted for the degree of influence that central governments' actions have played in instigating or preventing separatist actions. It would strengthen theories of secession to focus not only on the actions of ethnic groups or regions, and the central government's subsequent reactions, but also to look at the *primary actions* of the central government. The impact of these primary measures taken by the government may be better demonstrated by a comparison of the fall of the Soviet Union and the continuance of the Russian Federation and South Africa.

Structure of the Soviet Union – A Federalist Nation

The USSR had a substantial number of different ethnicities and rather than assimilation, "the Soviet policy [had] been to preserve and even encourage differences of language and

The Soviet Union Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

1	Armenia
2	Azerbaijan
3	Belarus
4	Estonia
5	Georgia
6	Kazakhstan
7	Kyrgyzstan
8	Latvia
9	Lithuania
10	Moldova
11	Russia
12	Tajikistan
13	Turkmenistan
14	Ukraine
15	Uzbekistan

culture… This diversity… is the basis for Soviet federalism." (Hammer 1986, 126) The Soviet Union was primarily divided into 15 union republics, each containing their own constitution and bill of rights in addition to the Soviet's national constitution. (Hazard 1964, 85)

These regions were given the status of union republics because they were "culturally mature" as a separate ethnic minority and were located centrally in terms of land. (Hough and Fainsod 1979, 481) The size and population varied greatly among the republics, with the Russian region being the largest. Language, another distinguishing variable for union republics, was used to try to connect the minority ethnicities with Russia while allowing a level of differentiation. Each republic had two official languages, Russian and the one of their dominant ethnicity. With this policy, the central government was inconsistent. While parents were given the option of sending their children to schools instructed in Russian *or* their native language, governmental committees were conducted in Russian if there were members who did not know the native languages. (Hough and Fainsod 1979, 516) The size in land and geography, as well as the cultural dominance of Russia in the central government – particularly in terms of language – created large amounts of animosity among the other ethnicities. National identity was based on

4

blood. Internal passports required that citizens identify themselves as a member of an ethnic

nationality. If a family had moved to another region and was the ethnic minority, it did not

matter how long they had resided there, even if it was generations. Their passport was still based

on ethnicity. (Linz and Stepan 1996, 371)

The union republics were given the power of conducting their own foreign relations,

setting electoral laws, structuring housing and education, and the right to secede from the union.

(Hazard 1964, 92) Also, to ease the minority ethnicities concern, all the republics besides Russia

had their own political party, capitol, and branch of the Academy of Sciences. (Strayer 2001,

380) However, powers of the republics were limited due the centralized budget. All money and

resources were distributed by the Communist party through the federal government. "No

republic [had] its own source of revenue subject to its own control, and no republic [could] spend

on its institutions any funds except those allocated by the federal budget." (Hazard 1964, 93)

Because relationships varied between the central government and the unions, each region

was given different levels of autonomy and resources. "The balance of trade among republics

was not always favorable to the Russian Republic, even though Russia dominated the union

politically." (Remington 2002, 34) Russia was a net donor; by 1991, Russia was providing trade

subsidies to other union republics, equal to the amount of one-tenth of their gross domestic

product. (Remington 2002, 34) Social services also widely varied from republic to republic in

levels of services and the rate of their growth. (Hough and Fainsod 1979, 511) Ultimately, the

Soviet Union was a multiethnic state whose union republics were inherently separated by

ethnicity, language, levels of political powers and autonomy, and resources.

Structure of the Russian Federation – Similarities to the USSR

The Russian Federation emerging out of the Soviet Union had its own degree of

multiethnic structure problems within its federalist state similar to its fallen predecessor. While

The Russian Federation
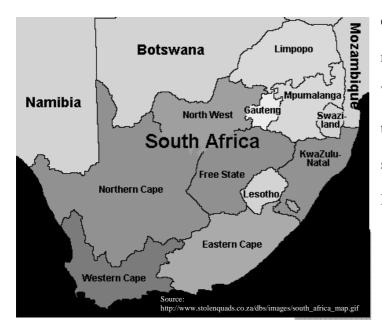

Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

the Russian Federation has 80 percent Russians compared to the USSR's 50 percent, it still has

significant ethnic differences among its 89 regions – 32 dominated by minority ethnicities, 57

dominated by Russians. Language plays another role in dividing Russian citizens by ethnicity.

Following from the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has Russian as the official language for

the entire country, but regions can opt to have a co-official language specific to their region.

Though given different unit names, all regions are granted equal status by the national

constitution; however, some "have been given special rights, such as declaring a second state

language and adopting their own constitution." (DeBardeleben 2004, 380) Also, like the USSR,

the federal constitution mandates that any regional constitution cannot be in contradiction to the

federal one; however, many are. (DeBardeleben 2004, 380)

In addition to varying levels of autonomy, there is a high disparity of natural resources between regions. The central government then struggles with the regions over the amount of control of these resources and the subsequent revenue. (DeBardeleben 2004, 380) Not only is control of funds debated, but many regions fear exploitation and mistreatment, like Russia felt towards the USSR, because of the inequality of funding and welfare for regions from the federal government. (DeBardelen 2004, 381) "Economic strains have reinforced ethnic and national cleavages." (DeBardelen 2004, 369) The Russian Federation adopted many of ethnic regional problems from the former USSR.

Structure of South Africa – A Comparison to the USSR and the Russian Federation

South Africa – like the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation – has been torn by ethnic and racial divisions. The country is racially divided into four groups: Blacks, Whites, Coloureds, and Asians, and within the racial units, South Africans are furthers split into ethnic factions. By the Population Registration Act, like the Soviet Union's internal passports, citizens are identified by these ethnicities. (Guelke 1992, 417) Similar to the Soviet and Russian states, South Africa is broken into ten homelands, though only nine provinces are officially recognized. (Guelke 1992, 419) None of the nine homelands are completely homogeneous, yet there is an:

> …enforced movement of population on quite a massive scale to fit people into their assigned homelands, a process that in some areas has not merely engendered ethnic consciousness along the lines promoted by the government but in the battle of rural

Source: http://www.stolenquads.co.za/dbs/images/south_africa_map.gif

populations for scarce resources has fostered powerful and quite novel ethnic antagonisms. (Guelke 1992, 419)

South Africa is divided by language; the country has eleven official languages: Afrikaans, English, Southern Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Swazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu.

The South African constitution distributes power between the national government and the provinces' governments; it calls the relationship between the governments' powers "distinctive, interdependent and interrelated." Considerable legislation has been passed down to the provincial governments, but these homelands, particularly KwaZulu-Natal, have called for even more autonomy. (Khosa and Muthien 1998, 4) The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) has expressed their desire "to cement their [KwaZulu-Natal] provincial base and launch a strong push for provincial autonomy." (Khosa and Muthien 1998, 115) One right in particular given to homelands, to search for and make contracts with international investors, could eventually lead to serious problems with a national foreign policy. (Khosa and Muthien 1998, 127)

Looking at resources, there is a substantial gap between the province with the highest GDP per capita – 20,893 rands in Gauteng – and the province with the lowest – 2,709 rands in the Northern Province. (Khosa and Muthien 1998, 203) This inequality can be mainly contributed to provinces' capacities to develop industry and urbanize, often helped along by the central government. The provinces still rely upon the national government for funding and resources causing struggles to receive the most amounts. The KwaZulu-Natal, in fact, "lagged behind in terms of central government funding and socio-economic infrastructure." (Khosa and Muthien 1998, 82)

Each nation has high levels of ethnic distinctiveness, disparities in regional wealth and resources, as well as desire for more regional autonomy through the division of powers between

federal and regional governments. Also comparing the theories of secession to the USSR, Russia, and South Africa, there was a fall of ideology, or a history of fallen ideology, in each. The grievances that communism caused for Soviet citizens and apartheid caused for non-Whites in South African is still fresh in everyone's minds. In addition, the Baltic states and Tuva in the Soviet Union (Hale 2000, 52), Chechnya in the Russian Federation, and the Zulu tribe in South Africa, all have histories of independence. Looking across these three countries, all the variables in the theories of secession appear to be similar, yet the Soviet Union disintegrated while Russia and South Africa remain whole. Therefore, another factor must have played the causal role in keeping these states together: the primary actions of the central government.

Variable	Soviet Union	Russian Federation	South Africa
High levels of ethnic distinctiveness, particularly seen through languages	15 union republics	89 autonomous regions	9 provinces or homelands
Regional autonomy and power disparity	High, regional constitutions competed with national constitution	High, regional constitutions competed with national constitution	Medium-high, KwaZulu-Natal has been especially fighting for provincial rights
Regional wealth, funding, and resources disparity	High	High	High
Fallen ideology (or history of)	Fall of communism	Fall of communism	Fall of apartheid
Regions with history of independence	Baltic states & Tuva	Chechnya	Zulu tribal homeland

Gorbachev's Actions

Not recognizing the dangers produced by ethnic regions, Mikhail Gorbachev continued reforms that weakened the USSR's central government and allowed the Russian region to take a position of dual power. Gorbachev became head of the Communist Party in 1985; "he hoped to reform the system in order to spur economic growth and political renewal, but without

undermining Communist Party rule or its basic ideological precepts." (DeBardelen 2004, 354) Perestroika, or restructuring, was a reform implemented to improve the economic structure through "decentralization and rationalization" in order to make enterprises individualistic, more efficient, and more willing to take initiative. Another reform, glasnost, which means openness, was used to open the sphere of public debate and various opinions. (DeBardelen 2004, 354)

However, by 1990, "perestroika had led to a decline in the economy. Glasnost unleashed economic, ethnic, and ideological rivalries." (Glad 1996, 6) Gorbachev and his closest advisors were so completely wrapped up in economic reforms and finding ways to make perestroika work that they did not see any of the problems with nationalism or stateness. Once these reforms were in place, Gorbachev "weaken[ed] the ideology and structure of the centralized party-state [and] republic elites began to look for new sources of power, new sources of ideological legitimacy, and especially new identities." (Linz and Stepan 1996, 376) Gorbachev placed himself and the Communist Party – which was the central government – in a position vulnerable to dual power with the Russian region and its leader, Boris Yeltsin.

The tipping point of power, though, was the introduction of republic-level elections in March 1990. Gorbachev wished to reshape the current political system, as well as the economic system, by making the government more responsible to the people. He often used the term *democratization* even though he was not committed to it in the strictest sense of having multiparty elections. (Linz and Stepan 1996, 378) The new republic-level elections finally allowed Russia – who had been previously denied separate elections from the central Communist Party elections – to form a Russian Parliament. (Hale 2005, 59) The Russian parliament, led by Yeltsin, then began passing protectionist acts that defied much of the national constitution and procedures, such as claiming sole power of banks within the republic and reorganizing them as

commercial banks, and then withholding 80 percent of its contributions to the central government. (Glad 1996, 13)

Russia, and subsequently Yeltsin, gained dual power with the Soviet Union and began setting events in motion for the fall of the USSR.

> Not only did the Russian Republic create a fatal situation of dual power and forge identification with a Russia that was distinct from Soviet structures, but its leadership also issued inflammatory statements and took steps that threatened Ukraine, accelerating the latter's move to secede, which ultimately triggered the final dissolution of the USSR. (Hale 2005, 61)

Therefore, it was Russia, replacing a central government weakened by Gorbachev's reforms, which ultimately brought the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, to determine if the inaction and inability of the Soviet government was the causal factor in the downfall of the USSR, a comparison must be drawn to other countries that had similar variables except for the actions of the central government. As previously determined, the Russian Federation and South Africa are comparable to the USSR in ethnic distinctiveness, regional autonomy and wealth, fallen ideology, and history of regional independence – all variables contained within prominent theories of secession.

Yeltsin's Actions

Once Russia was established as an independent nation, Yeltsin – the elected leader – recognized Gorbachev's mistakes and the threat of ethnic demands and took measures to reduce the possibility of a fight for power with the central government. He first broke up the large, Russian-dominated ethnic regions into 57 oblasts. This ensured that no region would be large enough to truly gain dual power with the national government, as Russia once had, and that no smaller ethnic regions would feel threatened by a Russian-dominated republic. It also allowed

the central government to "respond effectively to ethnic challenges either by accommodation or by coercion." (Hale 2005, 62) In a sense, Yeltsin divided and ruled.

> Individual oblasts, like the Russian Republic in the USSR, also frequently challenged the authority of the Kremlin in a wide range of policy areas in the 1990s…While these actions were seen as threats to central control, the fact that the oblasts were divided meant that there was no immediate threat to federation rule as a whole. That is, there was no credible alternative to the central government as a provider of the nationwide goods and services that these regions wanted but felt they were not getting in sufficient measure from Kremlin authorities. (Hale 2005, 62)

In addition to dividing the regions by land, Yeltsin pitted the regions against one another by economic and resource incentives, such as trade subsidies, tax breaks, and soft credits (Alexseev 2001, 102). He looked to buy off particularly troublesome regions and reward loyal ones, causing regional leaders who might have joined forces to instead accept bilateral agreements with the federal government. (Hale 2005, 62)

Furthermore, Yeltsin drew strength for the Russian central government from his "deideologization" campaigns. During the power struggle between the USSR and Russian republic, he banded non-Russians within the region to his cause by pitting all people against a common failing ideology: communism. This allowed the Russian Federation to begin as a new unified state. And, once brought into a non-communist nation, the ethnicities were no longer fused by a common struggle. (Alexseev 2001, 103)

In addition to Yeltsin's actions of 'divide and rule' and 'deideologization,' the government's legislative structure allows for minority representation. The Russian Federation has a two-house parliament: the Federal Council and State *Duma*. Half of the 450 seats in the *Duma* are determined by proportional representation. Any party that gained at least five percent of the national vote was allowed at least one seat, and those citizens that voted for parties that received less than five percent were allowed to vote against all other candidates or parties.

(DeBardeleben 2004, 392) This provision helped to appease many ethnic minority concerns about representation.

Chechnya may be considered the one exception to Yeltsin's efforts in preventing secessionist movements. However, Chechnya is also an exception to the other ethnic regions within Russia because it declared independence from the USSR in 1991, before the Russian Federation had been formed. (Hale 2005, 64) Thus, the inexorable struggle for independence from Chechnya could be considered a continuance of former Soviet secessionist claims.

Comparing all the variables, the Russian Federation remains whole today because of Yeltsin's precautionary and primary actions, whereas Gorbachev's actions weakened the central government to the point where the Russian republic dissolved the union. In order to determine if this principle can be used in future application for ethnically torn countries, the Soviet Union and Russia must further be compared to a country with similar ethnic variables. South Africa began a new government close to the same time as the Russian Federation and experienced a fall of ideology similar to that of the USSR. Since South Africa also remains intact, an analysis of Mandela's and De Klerk's actions is necessary to demonstrate parallels to Yeltsin's own actions.

Mandela and De Klerk's Actions

With the end of apartheid and the formation of a new democratic government, the African National Congress (ANC) and National Party (NP) faced ethnic opposition, particularly from Chief Buthelizi and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The IFP's main objective was to promote Zulu identity and interests. (Barber 1994, 72) Most Zulus reside within the current KwaZulu-Natal province and are mobilized behind the Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelithini. This region had long demanded large amounts of autonomy and caused much political violence and unrest during the transition. (Munro 2001, 296) Mandela and De Klerk both wished to form a

"multiracial democratic polity in a nonfragmented, economically viable and orderly South Africa," allowing them to be willing to compromise not only with each other, but with Buthelizi as well. (Glad 1996, 15)

Mandela and De Klerk first brought Buthelezi into the negotiations in order to avoid disruptive Inkatha actions. Furthermore, to ensure Buthelezi's and the Zulu's continued strength in the state, the KwaZulu-Natal province was kept as one province, even though – due to its population size – it should have been divided. (Herbst 1997-98, 608) However, a week prior to the elections, Buthelezi was still not cooperating and threatening noncooperation with elections within the KwaZulu-Natal province. Then, Mandela and De Klerk began taking measures to divide the IFP party by using coercive means on the Zulu king. Mandela "had skillfully been able to convince the Zulu king that the best he could hope for was the constitutional position offered by the ANC" and reaffirmed the ANC's support for the king. De Klerk also contributed to this reassurance by signing off 7.41 million acres of land into a trust for King Zwelithini. (Koshy 1994, 1376) The Zulus were then deftly divided between those who supported the IFP and Buthelezi and those who supported the Zulu king. Buthelezi decided to run in the elections but received less than 10 percent of the votes and had a weaker bargaining power because of the support he lost to King Zwelithini's backing of the ANC. In addition to coercive actions used to divide the Zulus, Mandela and De Klerk used military pressure when necessary, such as within the Bophuthatswana homeland to remove those that were blocking election preparations. (Alence 2004, 78)

A proportional representation system, a bill of rights, and a provincial government also ensured ethnic minority rights. "Proportionality allows small political groups to secure representation that would be unattainable in a first-past-the-post system, while the system of

provincial government reflects the political realities of the constitutional negotiations." (Alence 2004, 81) Mandela and De Klerk fought to maintain the undivided society that they had envisioned, and even though there remain high levels of political violence within South Africa, they have successfully prevented secession and separatist acts.

The Causal Role of Central Government Actions

In conclusion, since the USSR, Russian Federation, and South Africa share all the variables – high levels of ethnic distinctiveness, disparities in regional wealth and resources, desire for more regional autonomy through the division of powers between federal and regional governments, and a fall of ideology, or a history of fallen ideology – except for the actions taken by the central government, then, these actions are causal in instigating secession or separatist acts. Looking solely at the case of the Soviet Union and Russia, the prominent secession theories that revolved around the exploits of the minority ethnic regions certainly had influence on the speed and extent of calls for independence. However, when compared outside of that area, these same variables did not cause South African provinces to demand independence. Gorbachev weakened the central government's power through his perestroika, glasnost, and election reforms. On the other hand, both the Russian and South African leaders first recognized the threat of noncooperation with and movements against the central government that ethnic powers could instigate. Their precautionary measures were then the causal factors in preventing separatist actions.

Further Research Suggestions

My argument brings forth many implications for future research and application in the field of secession and ethnic quandaries. It would appear that future state governments could look at the Russian Federation and South Africa for examples to use in averting separatist

movements within their own borders. Researchers also could take a note in beginning to look more heavily at the actions of the central governments, and in particular strong leaders of a strong central government, rather than simply the actions taken by ethnic minority regions and the central government's subsequent reactions. Hale was in the right direction by focusing on the core ethnic region, Russia, instead of the other minority ethnic republics. However, the Zulus are not the core ethnicity in South Africa, and yet they posed the most threat of autonomy to the South African government.

More research could also be conducted to determine which of the actions of the central government played the most vital role in preventing separatist actions. It would appear from my comparison of South Africa and Russia that the actions taken by Mandela, De Klerk, and Yeltsin in dividing large or powerful ethnic regions by land or support is the most crucial element in inhibiting separatist movements. These actions prevented a unified ethnic front from posing a power threat to the central government. However, until more comparisons are made and proportional representation, as well as other factors, are ruled out, these dividing actions cannot be considered causal. In the end, though, until this is examined, central governments with significant ethnic problems would do well to take a page out of Yeltsin's, Mandela's, and De Klerk's book.

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