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The *Sibiriak* Movement and the Roots of Modern Siberian Regionalism

In the months leading up to the 2010 Russian census held in October, the Russian blogger community was abuzz with discussion over potential controversies regarding how citizens might report their nationality. Seeing an opportunity to make an important political statement, an informal network of bloggers from Siberia began an online campaign encouraging all residents of Siberia to declare “Siberian” (*Sibiriak*) as their nationality, regardless of their ethnic background. This push to be recognized as a distinct national group in the official Russian census quickly became the cause célèbre of a community of individuals who have rallied behind the idea of a singular Siberian identity, and who, through various online forums, have voiced their frustration over the perceived exploitation of Siberia and its resources. Citing successful campaigns for such regional self-identification in past censuses in Primorskii Krai and the Altai Republic, those promoting a Siberian nationality hoped that a strong showing would result in some measure of autonomy for Siberians in deciding the social and economic future of their own region.¹ Proponents of the campaign have pointed out that, with a total population of 24.5 million in the region, roughly 13.8 percent of the population of the Russian Federation could potentially declare themselves “Siberians,” which would certainly send a powerful message to the Kremlin about the state of Russia’s social cohesion.²

While it would be absurd to expect such absolute solidarity from the entire population of Siberia, statements released ahead of the actual census results in early 2011 by the Russian state

¹ schriftsteller. (2010, September 4). Ia - sibiriak! [Web log message]. Retrieved from http://community.livejournal.com/real_siberian/492981.html. (2011, March 26).

² 24,5 milliona chelovek vo vremia perepisi smogut nazvat' sebia sibiriakami. (2010, September 6). Retrieved from <http://globalsib.com/8257/>. (2011, March 26).

statistical agency Rosstat seem to indicate that the campaign has had more success than most might suspect. Officials at regional Rosstat offices in such major Siberian cities as Tyumen, Omsk, Novosibirsk, Kemerovo, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Barnaul, and Yakutsk have noted that an “impressive” number of census respondents have given “Sibiriak” as their nationality, and that these responses do not represent “a statistical error or humorous joke,” but rather that Siberian identity appears to be a “medical fact.”³ Remarkd one statistician from Krasnoyarsk, “during the last census [in 2002], the majority of these people considered themselves Russians, but in eight years they’ve become Siberians,” adding, “there really are a lot of them!”⁴

Fresh off the census campaign, proponents of Siberian regional identity convened in the city of Tomsk in December 2010 to establish an official organization for the promotion of their goals. Dubbed the *Sibiriak Social Movement*, its founders aim to preserve Siberian culture and traditions, facilitate interethnic and interfaith dialogue among Siberians, promote the development of Siberian civil society, and ultimately help raise general standards of living for all residents of Siberia.⁵ With the *Sibiriak* movement now behind it, and with the forthcoming census results expected to reveal its true extent, it would appear that Siberian regional identity is an increasingly legitimate social phenomenon that the Kremlin may soon be forced to address.

But why has this suddenly become an issue? Why do residents of Siberia appear to have been abruptly awoken to a collective consciousness? In part, it may be considered a reaction to growing discontent with Russia’s leadership and with the state of Russian society from a segment that has always felt distanced – both physically and culturally – from the Russian core.

³ Antipin, V. (2011, February 22). Grazhdanin Sibiri: Pochemu russkie za Uralom bol’she ne khotiat byt’ russkimi. *Russkiy Reporter*. Retrieved from <http://rusrep.ru/article/2011/02/22/sibir/>. (2011, March 26).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ustav obshchestnogo dvizhenie “Sibiriak”. (2010). Retrieved from <http://sibirnet.ru/node/15>. (2011, March 26).

Though Russia as a whole has prospered immensely from its expanded oil and gas production in the past decade, it has been at the expense of the Siberian wilderness from which much of these resources are extracted, and with little direct benefit for the people of Siberia itself.⁶ Many in Siberia feel that the region is treated as merely a “resource-rich appendage” to the Russian core, the revenues from which are all funneled back to Moscow and used primarily for development in European Russia, with little finding its way back across the Urals to fund projects in the regions from which the resources originated.⁷ Furthermore, many in Siberia have grown increasingly disenfranchised with the rise in xenophobia and right-wing nationalism among ethnic Russians living primarily in European Russia. This trend was demonstrated most recently by the large violent and racially-charged demonstrations held in Moscow and other Russian cities in December 2010, sparked by the killing of an ethnic Russian soccer fan by a group of men from the North Caucasus.⁸ Because Siberia is home to a number of indigenous groups, many feel that Siberians are distinguished from European Russians – or *Moskovichi* as they are often referred to as in Siberia⁹ – by their ethnic diversity and multiculturalism, and believe that they must strive to exemplify the kind of tolerance they believe should characterize all of Russian society.¹⁰

While Siberian regionalism may seem like a recent phenomenon, it is hardly a new idea. Even in the late Soviet period, with the founding of the Siberian Agreement by regional political leaders in 1990, efforts were being made to ensure that wealth generated in Siberia stayed

⁶ Antipin, V. (2011, February 22).

⁷ Sibiriaki khotiat otdelit'sia ot “rossiiian” vo vremia perepisi naseleniia. (2010, September 7). *Novyi Region*. Retrieved from <http://www.nr2.ru/society/299464.html>. (2011, March 26).

⁸ Barry, E. (2010, December 12). Russian protests erupt over soccer fan's killing. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/13/world/europe/13russia.html> (2011, May 8).

⁹ Dvizhenie “Sibiriaki” opredeliaetsia s proektami i tseliami. (2011, January 25). Retrieved from <http://globalsib.com/9433/>. (2011, March 26).

¹⁰ V Tomske sozdaetsia obshchestvennoe dvizhenie “Sibiriaki”. (2011, January 16). Retrieved from <http://www.peoples-rights.info/2011/01/v-tomske-sozdaetsya-obshhestvennoe-dvizhenie-sibiryaki/>. (2011, March 26).

there.¹¹ In fact, the roots of this movement run much deeper still. Records indicate that census takers in the 1926 Soviet census encountered regions of Siberia and the Russian Far East where a majority of respondents had chose *Sibiriak* as their nationality.¹² However, today's Siberian regionalists must look as far back as the mid-nineteenth century to find the original forebears of their movement – particularly to the works of Grigorii Potanin and Nikolai Iadrintsev. Potanin and Iadrintsev founded the *Oblastnichestvo* movement for Siberian regionalism in the 1860s, advocating against the division of Russia into a core and periphery and promoting the social and economic development of Siberia for its own sake. Both men were Russian explorers and writers who had fallen in love with the diverse landscapes and cultures of Siberia and the rest of inner Asia. Their writing controversially espoused the influence of Asian cultures on contemporary Russian society, and expressed the need for Siberian autonomous development.

While a discussion of their *Oblastnik* predecessors appears to be conspicuously minimal among today's *Sibiriaks*, there are a number of striking similarities between the two movements, both in outlook and approach. Both have conceived of Siberia as a region exploited for its resources to the benefit of the Russian core. While the fur, dairy, and precious metal industries that once dominated the Siberian economy have given way primarily to oil and gas, many Siberians have long viewed the Russian core as something of an imperial power, interested only in wringing Siberia of whichever native resources it values most. In fact, Potanin and Iadrintsev were quite explicit in their defining of Siberia as a colony of Russia. Because its natural resources were being extracted and exported, because it was being used as a place of political exile, because it was receiving no cultural or educational subsidies from the state, and because the socioeconomic concerns of its indigenous population were largely being ignored, the

¹¹ Mote, V. L. (1998). *Siberia: Worlds apart*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. pp. 159-160.

¹² Hirsch, F. (2005). *Empire of nations: Ethnographic knowledge and the making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. pp. 129.

Oblastniks argued that Siberia was no less a colony of Russia than India was of Great Britain.¹³ Furthermore, in his groundbreaking 1882 work, *Siberia as a Colony*, Iadrntsev also criticized the highly centralized and bureaucratized structure of Russian government, which, he contended, was intentionally designed to hinder regional self-government and stifle local development.¹⁴ Potanin and Iadrntsev's sentiments would certainly ring true among followers of the *Sibiriak* movement in their crusade to keep Siberian resources and revenues in Siberia.

Another key issue for both the *Oblastniks* and *Sibiriaks* is their reverence for diversity, and commitment to indigenous rights and broad inclusivity. Kovalaschina remarks that, "the root of the *Oblastnichestvo* ideal was that the world's wealth lay in its multiculturalism, that multiculturalism should be the guide by which the world is structured."¹⁵ Potanin and Iadrntsev themselves were captivated by the indigenous cultures of Siberia, and argued that the complex cultural differences regarding spirituality, social organization, economic activity, and senses of property between each ethnic community must be taken into consideration when forming social and political policy in Siberia.¹⁶ They also understood that Siberians of European decent hardly represented a homogenous group themselves; the region had not only been settled by Russians, but also by large numbers of Ukrainians, Byelorussians, various Baltic nationalities, Tatars, and other groups found throughout the Russian Empire.¹⁷ The *Oblastniks* also recognized Siberia's rich religious diversity – with significant communities of Muslims, Buddhists, Shamanists, Jews, and followers of various Orthodox sects, such as the Old Believers. With such a heterogeneous population, the *Oblastniks* understood that Siberia's strength lies in its diversity, which therefore

¹³ Kovalaschina, E. (2007). The historical and cultural ideals of the Siberian oblastnichestvo. *Sibirica*, 6 (2), 87-119, pp 88.

¹⁴ Mote (1998), pp. 64.

¹⁵ Kovalaschina (2007), pp. 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 100.

¹⁷ Mote (1998), pp. 66.

must be celebrated and preserved. Today, proponents of Siberian regionalism clearly see the same necessity; many of the stated goals within the charter of the *Sibiriak* movement pertain to the facilitation of dialogue between various ethnic and religious groups, and the preservation of native Siberian languages and cultures.¹⁸

Also common to both movements is a repudiation of separatism, and a commitment to state federalism and the rights of different regions to develop according to their own unique needs and circumstances. The *Oblastniks* rejected the division of Russia into a core and periphery, wherein the former is sustained by the resources of the latter. Instead, they promoted the establishment of a federation of the Russian Empire's various regions – similar in structure to the United States – that would guarantee each region a large measure of cultural and economic autonomy, and would allow each region to develop along its own trajectory, while still being part of a strong Russian state.¹⁹ While today Russia is officially divided into such a federation, many in the *Sibiriak* movement feel that authority is still too highly concentrated in the central government, and that Russian federalism should be strengthened. Remarkd one blogger and member of the *Sibiriak* movement, “I hope that nobody sees in our actions a call to separatism. In my view, Siberia is well off within a federal state. The fact that we don't have an authentic federal state today is another issue.”²⁰ Though there have certainly been small groups of radicals calling for complete Siberian independence over the years, both the *Oblastniks* and *Sibiriaks* – as the more mainstream currents of Siberian regionalism – have expressed their goals within the framework of a central Russian state, promoting federalism and autonomy over revolution and separatism.

¹⁸ Ustav obshchestnogo dvizhenie “Sibiriak”. (2010).

¹⁹ Mote (1998), pp. 65.

²⁰ Sibiriaki khotiat otdelit'sia ot “rossiian” vo vremia perepisi naseleniia. (2010, September 7).

Underlying this entire debate over Siberian regionalism is a pervasive sense that, at their core, Siberians are simply different from those who live in other parts of Russia. Mote has noted that, upon their banishment to Siberia, the participants of the 1825 Decembrist Revolt found Siberian peasants to be “freer, cleverer, better educated, more humane, and more egalitarian than other Russian peasants.”²¹ In *Siberia as a Colony*, Iadrintsev even explains that “through interbreeding with native tribes, the Siberian Russian population apparently tends to constitute some sort of *unique regional nationality*²², which is not equally attributable to its two parent races – Slavic/Russian and Asian/Non-Russian.”²³ Mote further describes Iadrintsev’s perception of Siberians, stating that, in his view, “Siberians were liberty-loving ‘individuals’ who could barely remember their Russian pasts, and most of them regarded European Russians as contemptible foreigners.”²⁴ Celebrated Russian author and self-proclaimed “Siberian patriot,” Valentin Rasputin, believes that the unique Siberian character is tied to the landscape and climate of the region. “A Siberian,” he maintains, exhibits “a certain fatedness, a deep and solid rootedness to the land, a compatibility between the human soul and the spirit of nature.”²⁵ This sense of Siberians’ distinct character is certainly a driving force behind modern Siberian regionalism as well. According to one blogger involved in the *Sibiriak* movement, a Siberian is easier to define than a Russian. He comments that,

I feel like a Siberian. I’ve traveled around Russia many times, and I understand that we are different. It’s hard to explain, but it’s true. In general I think that we don’t know what exactly is a Russian. During the Soviet times we lost our

²¹ Mote (1998), pp. 61.

²² *svoeobraznaia narodno-oblastnaia tipa*.

²³ Iadrintsev, N. (1882). *Sibir’ – kak” koloniia*. St. Petersburg: Tipografiia M. M. Stasiulevicha. pp. 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁵ Rasputin, V. (1996). *Siberia, Siberia*. Evanston, IL: Northwest University Press. pp. 52.

Russian culture and became “Soviet people.” Now, Russian is somehow an abstraction.... Siberian is more concrete.²⁶

Unfortunately, though many behind the *Sibiriak* movement are extremely dedicated to their cause, it seems unlikely that they will have any serious impact on Russian politics or society in the near future. Like the *Oblastniks* before them, the *Sibiriaks* are frankly too marginal of a group to affect the kind of political and societal changes that they would like to see. However, with a big enough showing, the results of their census campaign may serve as an important reminder of the heterogeneity of identities, interests, and social aspirations within Russian society – even among ethnic Russians – that many take for granted, both in the West and in Russia itself. Furthermore, the movement’s commitment to peace, tolerance, and community should serve as a shining example of the potential for progressive social movements in a society that often appears increasingly xenophobic and nationalistic. Thus, while Siberian regionalism may not be a new idea, it appears to have been given new life at a time when Russia may actually need it the most.

²⁶ Antipin, V. (2011, February 22).