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Introduction

In the aftermath of the violent ethnic clash in Kondopoga (Karelia) in 31 August this year, which was sparked by the death of two ethnic Russians during a cafe fight with Chechens, some journalists and local citizens openly regretted the abolishment of the old *'propiska'* system whereby all the housing was distributed centrally, making it extremely difficult to change one's place of residence. It was a serious obstacle to the free movement of labour because a person was practically 'pinned' to the place of birth, or work. The reason for such nostalgic feeling was the pervasive impression that mass migration upsets the demographic balance in an individual region and create a fertile soil for interethnic conflict. In ethnically diverse societies like Russia this problem can be rephrased as follows: Does the ethnic tension arise when an indigenous local ethnicity is outnumbered by ethnically diverse migrants? What are the factors that exacerbate the conflict between indigenous people and newcomers? And second, whether the ethnic tension is likely to diminish when the reverse outmigration brings the indigenous people into a dominant position?

In order to answer these questions I draw on the evidence from Sakha republic, which experienced a similar influx of immigrants during Soviet times. In the first section I will map the dynamics of the population growth of the Sakha and Russian ethnicity in the republic and find out the corresponding levels of interethnic tension between 1997 and 2005. In the second section the main factors necessary for further analyses of genesis of the interethnic conflict between the two major nationalities in the republic will be examined.

The interethnic conflicts in the Sakha Republic have rarely been in the focus of academic scholars despite the remarkable relevance of the Sakha Republic for the study of interethnic relations in the Russian Federation. Firstly, the historical background and recent status of the republic are similar to other 21 ethnically based republics in Russia. Secondly, the Sakha people have a long history of contact with Russians which framed a full-range continuity from integration of Russian newcomers and Yakutisation¹, on the one extreme, to suppression of Sakha culture and tendency to assimilation of Sakha in mainstream Russophone Soviet society on the other². Third, the Sakha people are unique in their resistance to assimilation, despite the high pressure of Russification, which was ideologically legitimised.

Section 1. Nationalism and interethnic conflicts in the Sakha Republic (1980s-2005)

1.2. Socio-economic background.

¹ Slocum, John W. "Who, and when, were the inorodtsy? The evolution of the category of 'aliens' in imperial Russia.": *Russian Review: An American Quarterly Devoted to Russia Past & Present*, Apr 98, Vol. 57 Issue 2, p. 7 173-191

² Balzer, Marjorie and Uliana Vinokurova "Nationalism, Interethnic relations, and federalism: The case of the Sakha Republic(Yakutia)": *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol.48, , No.1, 1996, 104

The Sakha Republic is Russia's largest and at the same time one of its most resource-laden territories³. While richly endowed with mineral resources and land, it is sparsely populated, with total population approaching a million inhabitants. The republic is made up of 120 ethnic groups, with the top represented being 45.5% Sakha, 41.1% Russians and 3.7% Ukrainians. The North is populated by a numerically small but politically important number of 'small indigenous peoples of the North' (*malye narodnosti Severa*)⁴. The Sakha people have Turkic linguistic and cultural origins, however ethnographic evidence shows that the modern Sakha population has an extremely mixed ethnic background which comprise ethnic ancestors who most probably came from the Baikal region and local northern indigenous people⁵.

An extremely diverse ethnic structure of the population of the republic is due to a continuous flow of migration, starting from the XVII century⁶. Migration, one of the four factors determining the size and distribution of the ethnic group (migration, fertility, mortality and ethnic re-identification) was the main source of the gradual Russification of the republic (see Appendix 1).

Table 1. The national composition of the Sakha Republic in the years 1926, 1939, 1959, 1970, 1979, and 1989, %

Nationality	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	2002
Russians	10,4	35.7	44.2	47.3	50.4	50.3	41.2
Sakha	82	56.5	46.4	43	37	33.4	45.5
Ukrainians	0.05	1	2.5	3	5.4	7.1	3.7
Evens	4.5	2.5	1.9	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.9
Evenks	0.3	0.8	0.7	0.9	0.7	0.8	1.2
Tatars	0.58	1.1	1	1.1	1.3	1.6	1.1
Belorussian	-	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.9	0.5
Jewish	0.2	0.8	1	1.1	0.3	0.4	0.1
Buriats	-	-	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.7	0.8
Chinese	-	-	0.2	0.4	0.4	0.8	0.1
Koreans	-	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.6	0.7	0.2
Others	1.97	1.2	1.0	0.9	1	2.0	3.8

Source: "Itogi vseoyuznyh perepisei naseleniya. Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniya Yakutskoi ASSR. Moscow 1962, Moscow, 1973, Moscow 1990.

³ The territory of the republic, more than 3 mln. square kilometres, comprises one fifth the Russian land area, or two thirds the territory of Western Europe, and make up 2% of the earth's land mass. The land of the republic presents a tremendous potential for mining and energy production. Sakha industry produces 100% of Russia's antimony, 98% of its rough diamonds, and 21 % of its gold, while diamond production being worth more than \$1 billion annually³. These estimations are important in evaluating the balance of power between the federal government and the Sakha Republic: relative economic strength and large potentials of the republic predefined the basis for centre-periphery negotiations and were significant factors of greater recognition of the republic on the federal level.

⁴ Summarily they make up no more than 2 % of population

⁵ The territorial origins of the Sakha people for a long time constitute a hot debate in the regional press, varying widely from the assertions of East-North Baikal territory to the Territory of the modern Kyrgyzstan. See also Grigor'ev, Vasilii "Nekotorye stranitsy proshlogo yakutskogo naroda" *Sotsialisticheskaya Yakutia*, January 11, 1991; Ivanov, Afanasii, "Byvshie territorii proživaniya naroda Sakha", Sahaada, Yakutsk, 30 March, 1992

⁶ The Russian conquest of the Sakha land started at the beginning of the XVIIth century, and at the time the Sakha nation constituted its own societal culture with a full range of social practices and institutions, embracing all aspects of the private and public life of society. The annexation of the region happened in a different way from that in the USA and Canada, since the incorporation of the territory into the body of the Russian Empire was rather nominal and economic than cultural: the Sakha retained their societal culture in its full range till the XIX century, and Russian newcomers (*prishlye*) were in the position of immigrant ethnic groups as they had to integrate into this existing culture⁶.

The situation changed dramatically from the beginning of the Soviet era and especially from the outset of industrial ‘development’ of the territory. As documented in demographic surveys, since a significant inflow of Slavic population in 1950s, the Sakha population never made up an absolute majority. (See table 1). Russian engineers and industrial specialists were needed for the booming extracting industries of the republic – coal, gold and especially diamond industry. Insufficient numbers of indigenous elites to fill the urban jobs explains a significant flow of Russians into administrative jobs in the republic.

Table 2. The portion of Sakha in the Sakha Republic in 1926, 1939, 1959, 1970, 1979, and 1989, 1992, 1997 and 2002 years, %

Years	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	1992	1997	2002
Portion of the population	82.0	56.5	46.4	43.0	37.0	33.4	38.9	36.6	45.5

Source: “Itogi vseoyuznyh perepisei naseleniya. Natsional’nyi sostav naseleniya Yakutskoi ASSR. Moscow 1962, Moscow, 1973, Moscow 1990, Respublika Sakha v Tsifrah I faktah. Statisticheskii Sbornik, Yakutsk, 1998. and others.

Russian Soviet culture became dominant and was imposed upon all indigenous people of the region in all forms of its ‘thick’ aspect. As stated by Kolstoe, the percentage of Russians living in Eastern regions went up from 3% in 1897 to 7.6% in 1959, ‘significant eastward movement of the centre of gravity of the Russian population’, ‘distinct centrifugal migration from West to East was one of the main factor behind the large population shift’. This trend was even more pronounced in the Sakha republic: within 60 years since the launch of industrialisation the share of Russian population soared from 10.4% in 1926 to 50.4% in 1979. Even more impressive than the increase of the Russian share of population at large was the growth of the Russian population in urban areas. In a few instances (eg. Mirnyi, Aldan, Neryungri) these cities took on a Russian quality from the very beginning for only by the arrival of Russian migrants were they transformed from small towns or even villages into big industrial cities. The more Russians moved into the cities, the more the indigenous rural population perceived the cities in their own homeland as ‘alien’.

The growth of Russian population has significantly declined since the beginning of the economic transition. Among the reasons for this, the main one is that migration of Russians had reversed: inflow from the central parts had radically declined while the outflow of Russian population to the central parts of country rocketed. During the Soviet times, many Russians were attracted into the republic by relatively high salaries and social benefits, which compensated for the extreme climatic conditions and other disadvantages of the remote location. Since the start of liberalisation program, due to the diminishing of state compensation, inequality of the living standards between the republic and the other regions of the Russian Federation has gradually increased –salaries are not much higher than in nation average, while prices are double or triple that of the mainland (due to transportation costs). The other cause of increased emigration was the closure of a number of the industrial enterprises, leading to high unemployment. Outmigration of youth should be also mentioned – the children of the newcomers would seek education in the central universities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, or at least in the Urals, with no intention of returning, but rather settling there. MAP. The last but not the least was national re-identification – more children from interethnic marriages have become inclined to identify themselves as Sakha than before. The next section will explore how these demographic changes corresponded to a change in intensity and character of the Sakha-Russian interethnic relations.

2. Roots of the conflict

The outbreak of interethnic conflict between the ethnic Sakha and Russians in the Sakha Republic in 1986 was the first interethnic clash in the Soviet Union since the post-war period. Due to this event the republic was marked as a ‘hot spot’ of interethnic tensions, preceding nationalistic fights of Kazakhstan, Tuva, and Nagorny Karabakh.

The incident started on March 14, when a group of Russian militiamen, in attempt to terminate the fight between Russian and Sakha students, consciously took the side of Russians and used guns, wounding several Sakha women. In the aftermath of the conflict, only the Sakha students were arrested and charged for a crime. The unfairness of the event stirred a massive street demonstration three days later, resenting the failure to punish

Russians, both the fighters, who initiated the conflict, and the militiamen⁷. This incident immediately attracted attention of the public all over the Soviet Union and was categorized as ‘nationalist’ in the majority press. Nevertheless it was not the only one; several cases of the outbreak of interethnic tensions took place before or after the 1992 incident. Street riots in 1979, a street fight in summer 1990, which sparked a demonstration, as well as the later incidents of 1993 and especially 1994 gun fights are examples of the issue of ethnic conflict in the region.

In tracing the development of interethnic relations and conflicts between the two nations from the outset of the Soviet era, it is important to mention that even though the total *Sovetisation* of all aspects of societal structure during the 70 years of the Soviet period eliminated diversity in moral values and perceptions, political assessments and ideological orientations, the Russians and Sakha were still deeply divided in linguistic and cultural terms. Adding to this, important differences in the living standards, economic and political opportunities will be discussed below as the possible factors that explain the roots of the conflict.

It is obvious that the state policy in respect to national minorities⁸ is different from that of majority population or immigrant groups. A state sets up a particular language for public education, court proceedings and other government activities, chooses the history of a particular people into curricula of education. By doing so, the state is involved in promoting the majority language and culture at the expense of minority language and culture. As Kymlicka puts it, “The state is inevitably involved in recognizing and reproducing particular ethnocultural groups, and so the politicization of cultural identities is, to some extent, inevitable”⁹. As all proceedings are conducted in an official majority language, there is a great danger for minority groups to be marginalised from major societal functions in the society. Central Soviet policies towards minority ethnic groups were exceedingly coercive in their character, including deliberate redrawing of territories (between Osetia, Chechen-Ingush republic and Staropol’skii krai in 1956), hierarchical ranking of regions, forcible expulsion of entire ethnicities in 1937-1944, and exclusionary educational and linguistic policies. In the Sakha republic such measures were chiefly directed at subjugating expressions of Sakha nationalism: mass media and education continuously downplayed Sakha identity; displays of the Sakha culture, traditions, language, and customs were discouraged and partially banned. Sakha ethnic religion was aggressively suppressed while Orthodox Christianity was, albeit with limitations, allowed to be practiced.

Probably the greatest threat to the preservation of Sakha culture was the suppression of the Sakha language. Soviet language policy prohibited the use of the non-Russian languages in public space: the Sakha language, as well as any other non-Russian language, was not used in public institutions and lingered as a language of the private life of Sakha families. Sakha language and its speakers were victims of what Phillipson calls *linguicism*¹⁰, which took forms of, for example, arbitrarily neglecting and ignoring Sakha in schools, higher education, courts,

⁷ The incident evidently demonstrated the inequality in a treatment of Russians and Sakha, and the claims of demonstrators were rather moderate than chauvinistic: to restore justice. Nevertheless, the further action of officials was even more fraudulent and accurately suits the logic and the communist’ ideology of Soviet ‘internationalism’. The republic’s Communist Party leader called for a special Commission that included central officials and, backed with their support, blamed the Sakha students in fuelling nationalistic sentiments and improper upbringing of interethnic tensions. As a result, nine Sakha student were convicted and arrested, and were officially vindicated only in 1990. A quota system was launched in high education institutions, with a greater proportion of Russian students. The measure worked against the Sakha applicants, since the vast majority of students who applied to Sakha universities were the Sakha youth from rural areas, who preferred not to go to the central universities, while Russians, devoted to acquire higher education, mostly went to Moscow, Sankt Petersburg and others. Not surprisingly, the admission chances for Sakha applicants became much lesser than for Russians after introducing the quota system. In this case, the reaction of officials, rather than the incident itself gave rise to ethnic prejudices and ethnic tensions.

⁸ Any multiethnic state consists of one majority and several minority groups which numerically construe a minority. Nevertheless not all the ethnic communities can be called *national minorities*. For example, the population of the Sakha Republic consist of 120 nationalities, including Russians, as well as ethnic groups from all former republics of the former SU, China, Korea, Poland, Sweden, and other countries (see Table 3), only Sakha and other indigenous people of the North can claim minority status.

⁹ Kymlicka Will, *States, Nations and Cultures* :Van Gorcum, Amsterdam, 1997, p.21

¹⁰ Phillipson, Robert *Linguistic imperialism* Oxford University Press, 1992, p.47

and other public services, or stigmatising Sakha language spoken in public places. Practically, Sakha population was marginalised from major societal functions in the society. The people sought, with minimal success, to protect and attain recognition of its culture in mainstream Soviet society through a small range of newspapers and magazines and a handful of TV and radio programming. But these efforts were inconsequential in a situation where all proceedings were conducted in Russian language, and there were no education in the indigenous language, except of few primary schools in rural areas.

The main points of contention between Russians and Sakha, however, centered on economic issues. Russian newcomers dominated in mining and energy industries, while the vast majority of Sakha, living in rural areas, worked in extremely poorly subsidised agriculture. According to the old cultural division of labour, employment in industrial sectors was granted mostly to Russians and other Slavonic workers. Indeed, the 1989 census revealed that in rural areas, Sakha and other indigenous people made up over 90% of the population, and 87% of the Sakha population lived in less developed ethnic homelands and worked in lower-paying sectors of economy. Sakha also worked as blue collar workers in industry (5% of the ethnicity) and as intelligentsia (7% of the ethnicity)¹¹. Sakha workers were also underrepresented in trade and public services: there were very few ethnic Sakha in militia, courts, public catering, trade and others. In all these areas, as well as in industrial management, the employers were Russians. This distribution of occupations and rewards between ethnic groups coupled with the lack of adequate educational provisions for indigenous peoples created subjective feelings of inequality among the Sakha population. These feelings had a material foundation – statistics suggested significant disparity in living standards: in 1992 agriculture workers (mostly Sakha) received on average 16% of the average pay in energy sector (mostly Russian), 21% of the pay of workers in diamond mining sector and 23% in the gold mining sector¹². Moreover, these disadvantages in employments and wages, which were perceived as unquestionably unfair among Sakha, were exacerbated by dissimilarities in distribution of public wealth via FOP (fund of public consuming) between the two groups. For example, Russian newcomers had privileges in receiving deficit commodities such as housing and cars.

The internal dichotomy in living standards was accompanied by differences between the Sakha Republic as a whole and the rest of the Soviet Union. The fact that the republic has an abundance of mineral resources and was industrially developed did not impact beneficially on the living conditions of the indigenous population, moreover, industrialisation was truly disadvantageous for them, as it broke down the traditional way of life and polluted the land, which was of crucial economical importance, automatically leading to cultural depression. Consequently, the republic for a long time suffered some of the poorest living standards in Russia, one of the economic reasons for grievance. The following indicators, such as the fact that every third family in the republic does not have separate apartment (in Russia every fifth) and that the rate of sickness is 15% higher, and life expectancy 10% lower than in average in Russia¹³, confirm the arguments. Therefore it was mostly economic issues that divided the two groups and increased the political salience of ethnicity. These factors contributed to a growing resentment among the Sakha people, who felt that they had become a marginal and inferior stratum in their own land.

Relations between Russians and Sakha were also complicated by less tangible but nevertheless important emotional issues. These included the perception that Russians lack respect for Sakha people, their traditions and values. Central policies, identified as Russian, such as an aggressive exploitation of the land, and the prohibition of Sakha language in public spaces worked against Sakha interests, and reflected in the assertion of many Sakha on the right to determine their own policies and their own path, free of the Russian domination.

These factors provided resources that Sakha national leaders mobilized to support their aims. Economic hardships of early transition period, unfairness in distributing public wealth between the two groups, and domination of Sakha culture and language by the Russian center stimulated radical views and attracted recruits for nationalistic groups. All indigenous peoples of the republic organized to call for greater attention to the cultural and educational rights of these nationalities. Besides the Sakha nationalist political elite, activists emerged also

¹¹ “Yakutskaya ASSR v Tsifrah I Faktakh”, Yakutsk, 1990, p.39

¹² Sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoe razvitie sektorov ekonomiki v Respublike Sakha (Yakutiia)”. Statisticheskii sbornik, Yakutsk, 1993.

¹³ “Yakutskaya ASSR v Tsifrah I Faktakh”, Yakutsk, 1990, p.67

among Evens, Koryaks, Evenks and Yukagirs. The most substantial ethnic issues in the republic, however, evolved around the titular nationality, the Sakha, who were directly linked to issues of interethnic conflicts between Russians and Sakha. The issue comprises patterns of *both centre-periphery* external¹⁴ and internal relations between the two nations.

The Republic of Sakha gained far reaching political and economic autonomy 1992 by favourable treaties with the centre. Not surprisingly, by 1993 there were signs that political tensions in the republic were easing. The most relevant explanation is related to a new mass-public's perception, that the goals of Sakha nationalism were generally achieved, as the Sakha people had acquired more recognition on the federal level and attained self-government and representation rights, and the moral climate inside the republic improved significantly. Another plausible reason could be seen in the maturing of political groups and quasi-parties in the republic, which were driving forces and mobilisers of public resentment. The most radical organisations were dissolved, the programs of other groups became more moderate, rather civic than ethnically oriented, and the nationalistic approaches shifted away from the political programs of the most movements.

No one consistent analysis has been conducted to trace the patterns of ethnic attitudes between Russian and Sakha population in period between the mid 1990s and recent times, therefore we have to analyse several sources. In 1997-1998 the Bahry's survey based on self-reported data gave evidence that 10.6% of Sakha and 13.4% of Russians experienced ethnic discrimination, and 24.4% and 21.8% respectively experienced hostile treatment due to nationality (Bahry, 690). This study emphasises that in the Sakha republic indigenous nationality and Russians experienced similar levels of discrimination and hostility (Bahry, 688). In 2006, however, the disparity between Russian and Sakha perception of ethnic tension had grown substantially: while only 6% of Sakha believe that their rights are violated due to their ethnicity, 26 % of Russian counterparts believe so¹⁵. The same survey shows that while only 27% of Sakha admitted the degree of ethnic tension between the two groups, while almost twice as much Russians (47%) did so. Therefore one can conclude that the demographic shift between Sakha and Russian, when the latter ceased to be a dominant ethnic group in the region, and the former has become a dominant group outnumbering ethnic Russians by the same 4.3% in 2002 as compared to the situation in 1970, also led to a sizable dichotomy in evaluation of ethnic discrimination and tension. However, it is important to explore the underlying sources of ethnic grievances.

One of the most compelling explanations involves political 'indigenisation'. After decades of Russian domination in the early years of democratisation, the new Sakha political leaders came under pressure to redress the old inequalities and reward co-nationals in a range of ways. Building on the rise of home rule, ethnic leaders of Sakha were eager to find sources of reward for indigenous people in order to compensate for past inequities. The first President of the republic, Nikolaev, put a great deal of importance into giving the titular nation a new feeling of self-confidence and identity. He declared Sakha as the official state language besides Russian. In his pursuit of sovereignty he managed to ensure a certain degree of political and economic autonomy for the republic. However, concessions gained in the bargain with the centre were predominantly collective goods, and did not privilege the titular nationality within the region (Bahry, 675). Secondly, as Bahry observed, indigenous leaders of Sakha provided for co-nationals by significantly increasing public sector. Government employment in the republic has become 75% higher than the average in the Russian Federation. In the same way, expanding education was in the core of the political agenda at the time, and the data shows that the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions from 1990 to 1997 has expanded by 69% in the republic, compared to just 15% in average in Russia. And while the enrolment in the state secondary special education institutions declined by 11%, in the Sakha republic it grew by 8%.

These policy decisions to a certain degree resemble the public sector model (Esman, 1987), with the exception that Sakha government never envisaged any policy privileging Sakha language in schools and government. Most of the primary and vast majority of university education is still conducted in Russian, the electronic media remained mostly Russophone – while federal TV channels broadcast exclusively in Russian, local TV channels

¹⁴ See Kempton, Daniel "The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia): The Evolution of Centre-Periphery Relations in the Russian Federation" in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 48, No.4, 1996, 587-613

¹⁵ Sociological survey 'Economic separatism of the people of the Sakha Republic'
<http://www.kreml.org/hews/108775450>

broadcast in both languages equally, print media is almost equally distributed between the two languages. More importantly than that, Russian is still one of the two official languages of the republic. Because policies privileging the Sakha language have never been adopted, Esman's model has important limitations for the case of the Sakha republic. The indigenisation of politics did not lead to differences in economic reward, and therefore the grievances of the Russian population on this issue seem rather ungrounded.

The only sphere where Russians are likely to be underprivileged is access to power. Those who claim Sakha domination can state that indigenous Sakha have disproportionate representation in public office, especially elective (See Table 3). Although Sakha form no more than 45.5% of the population, they have consistently enjoyed greater representation in republican legislature. How can this overrepresentation in favour of titular ethnicity be explained? For the first two convocations of the regional legislature, the explanation can draw on special provisions of the republican election law (which was banned soon after Putin's ascendance to power), namely the clause that required at least 10 years of residence in the republic for the right to elect and be elected. The considerable emigration from the republic during the late 1980s and 1990s was comprised generally of Russians who had lived for a long period on the territory, predominantly retirees. This demographical shift reduced not only the Russian population as a whole, but more importantly from the political point of view, reduced the portion who had the right to vote or to be elected. Although the precise percentage of Russians who acquire the citizenship status, as well as the portion of Russians in the total mass of citizenry has not yet been calculated, one might argue that the 10-year requirement helps the Sakha candidates to enjoy the status of majority during elections. This fact, coupled with the more active attitude of the Sakha electorate compared to the Russian population¹⁶ in political issues, predefined that Sakha MPs formed the majority in two first convocations of the regional legislature.

There is another argument against the proposition of increased overrepresentation. Indeed, Sakha increased their share of seats in Il Tumen from 46.3% in the first convocation to 60.8% in the second. But this trend was not sustainable, already in the third convocation of the republican legislature the share has dropped to 57% (See table 3). Bearing in mind that the Sakha population expanded from 36.6% in 1997 to 45.5% in 2002, the degree of disproportionality is even less pronounced in the last convocation than previously. However, one should take into account other levels of the government: in local legislatures Sakha deputies still vastly outnumber Russians. This fact has attracted the attention of several politicians and experts.

All in all, in order to trace the link between the numerical dominance of Sakha in the regional legislature and the political dominance, and whether it translates into ethnic dominance and suppression, one should take into consideration not only whether the Sakha hold control over the legislature, but the relative strength of the legislative branch over the executive. Moreover, it seems reasonable to evaluate the distribution of powers between legislative and executive branches, and between regional authorities and an industrial lobby, which is represented mostly by the diamond industry. The most powerful and influential diamond mining industry, to be more precise, the company 'ALROSA'¹⁷, occupies a pivotal position in the economy of the republic. The company, with its \$1 billion annual revenue is a main taxpayer of the republican budget, forming 85% of its asset part. Top managers, owners, and employees, who in most cases are Russian or who side with them, determine its policy. In such circumstances, the Sakha majority in the parliament seems to be necessary to strike a balance between Russian and Sakha representation in regional authorities, and ultimately, in redistribution of real power.

Table 3. The portion of the Sakha in the regional legislature and in general population of the Sakha Republic in 1989, 1995 and 2002 years, %

	1989	1995	2002
Share of Sakha MPs	46.3	60.8	57
Share of Sakha population	33.4	36.6*	45.5

**Share of the Sakha population in 1997 year*

¹⁶ The plausible reason for less active political behavior of the Russian population is that most of them perceive themselves as temporary residents of the republic and are not attached to long-run perspectives.

¹⁷ See *Socio-economic background*

3. Mass media and nationalist mythmaking in the Sakha Republic

Such scholars as Patrick H. O'Neil¹⁸ have argued that the greatest spur to aggressive nationalism is state manipulation of the mass media in order to 'infuse the nation with a sense of in-group patriotism and out-group rivalry'¹⁹. Most human rights groups also assert that the most dangerous for vulnerable democratic values is governmental control over the media, because the monopoly enables government to unrestrictedly propagate any myth, whether nationalistic or of other nature, and to manipulate public opinion²⁰. However, one can argue that the economic, educational or political rationale is no less important than the nationalist mythmaking that is believed to be the main cause of interethnic conflict. Nevertheless, the tendency to heat the interethnic tensions is one distinctive characteristic of this myth²¹.

There are several grounds explaining why the nationalist card is a ready tool for mass mobilization. First, nationalism is an enormously malleable and easily constructed political ideology. The adaptability of nationalism for the political mobilisation derives primarily from the elasticity of the category of *the nation*, which is a subject of infinite permutation, contraction, or expansion²². The defining characteristics of membership in a particular ethnic group or nation still do not exist, which makes the determination of belonging to a group a matter of self-identification, and eventually could be a basis for loyalty to one or another nationalistic political movement. The flexibility of the notions of *nationalism* and *nation* provokes political elites to easily use it as a propaganda weapon for promoting their interests.

Second, the ethnic or nationalist line is extremely attractive for new elites as it "allows the aspiring elites to make claims in the name of masses, without necessary committing itself to a policy of sharing power and wealth with the masses"²³. Therefore emerging elites find them more convenient, comparing to the other strategies, such as *liberal*²⁴ or *socialist*²⁵ that unavoidably reinforce political commitments for sharing power.

The dichotomy of the economic opportunities between the two ethnic groups, and pattern of old cultural division of labour were meaningful in incorporating a strong national identity and construing an 'imagined community'²⁶ of the Sakha people. The monopolised Soviet media, both majority and minority, could not provide a forum for articulating these grievances, therefore the intensifying sense of in-group Sakha solidarity and loyalty to the Sakha ethnicity were reflected primarily through informal networks. The sense of belonging to a Sakha ethnicity was secretly cultivated in Sakha families and was emphasised by a resentful acknowledgement of unfairness carried out towards the ethnicity and collective pride on the cultural heritage. Primarily it was the Sakha people

¹⁸ Patrick O'Neil *Post Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe*. Prank Cass, London, 1997

¹⁹ Hobsbawm, Eric "Mass Producing Traditions", in Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The invention* ;

Gaghan, Jr., "Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia", *International Security*, Vol.

19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 130-166, at 163.;

Sissman, Leonard Press Freedom, 1996 New-York, Freedom House , 1996;

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Playing the "Communal Card" New-York: Human Rights Watch*, April 1995

²¹ Snyder, Jack and Karen Ballentine Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas in *International Security* 21:2 February 1998, pp. 5-40

²² Walker, Lee 'Introduction' in Drobizheva L. *Ethnic conflict in the Post-Soviet World: Case Studies and Analysis* . M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, 1996, p.5

²³ Snyder, Jack and Karen Ballentine *Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas* in *International Security* 21:2 February 1998, p. 17

²⁴ The liberal strategy centered on the criticizing of old elites on denial of civic rights, *Ibid*, p.17

²⁵ The socialist strategy centered on the criticizing of old elites on class domination, *Ibid*, p.17

²⁶ Anderson, Benedict *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and spread of Nationalism* New Left Books, London, 1983

themselves who constructed the Sakha national identity as a response to the Russian domination and discrimination.

The Sovietisation of societal culture caused a suppression or even destruction of minority societal cultures and replacing it by majority culture. The right of minorities to restore and build up their own societal culture is liberally legitimate as only societal culture can let individuals have ‘access to meaningful ways of life’²⁷ and support their self-identity. “While the members of a liberalised nation no longer share moral values or traditional way of life, they still have a deep attachment to their own language and culture”. Therefore, even if there are no economic or political differences between majority and minority populations, the national minority has a special right to pursue the goal for greater recognition of their culture and their identity. In the case of the Sakha Republic not only was the societal culture of the Sakha obliterated, but they also had fewer economic opportunities and were deliberately prevented from gaining employment in lucrative industries, as well as often being treated in ways that violated their individual civil rights. One can argue that under such conditions maintaining *status quo* would mean a intensification of ethnic tensions and would most likely lead to interethnic clashes.

The unleashing of *minority nationalism* of the Sakha people at that time was probably precisely the only remedy to relieve interethnic tensions, as it was rationally legitimised and lacked violent and xenophobic dimensions. The mass media, particularly printed media, provide a necessary forum for articulating, expressing and discussing issues of concern. Without such a forum of minority-majority relations, interethnic tensions, would most likely have broken out in an unmanageable hatred, as occurred in Nagorno-Karabakh, Checheno-Ingushetia, or Tuva.

The end of censorship and subsequent plurality of free expression resulting from Gorbachev’s policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika* significantly increased freedom of speech and openness of public debate in the republic. In the case of the Sakha republic the unleashing of the press resulted in *moderate nationalist mythmaking*, which did not lead to nationalist hatred. As Snyder and Ballentine put it, the ethnic elites have incentives to play the nationalistic card for two basic reasons: either to forestall declining popularity, or to pursue the strategies ‘divide-and-rule’. In the case of the Sakha Republic, the main motive was the former, rather than the latter. Moreover, there was no reason for ‘dividing’ the two peoples through out-group rivalry, as the Sakha political elites, pursuing the goal of political power, were not opposed significantly by the leaders of Russian population, which was largely politically inactive. While the ‘marketplace of ideas’ was significantly segmented, the Russian segment of the press was not politicised enough to challenge the discourse of its Sakha counterpart.

There are several reasons why moderate ethnic mythmaking had diminished interethnic tension in the republic in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This can be accounted for by the very nature of minority nationalism of the Sakha people, which was *rationally legitimised* and *non-violent*. The republican mass media, particularly republican press provide a necessary forum for articulating, expressing and discussing issues of concern, without which interethnic tensions would most probably break out in an unmanageable hatred.

As the evidence from the last decade suggests, state control has been reinforced. A chief editor of one local newspaper in 2000 accentuated how the situation changed since the early 1990s: “The situation after the post-coup attempt looked like the press was completely unleashed. But this was not true...The leash did exist, but it was much longer than before or nowadays. We can feel it, it has become much shorter, and is continuously shrinking every year”. The majority of interviewees at the time (2000) held that almost all forms of external control over the media, except censorship, have been revived: financing, the system of appointing chief managers, the system of licensing, and self-censorship as a familiar soviet feature of journalistic culture. Most of them perceive that censorship is nowadays generated by media organizations themselves. As the head of the Department of Journalism of the Yakutian State University put it, “there is no independent press at all, the press were, are and should be limited in their performance. The question is, who set up the boundaries: state or public. I would argue that the genuinely unrestricted freedom of the press is the most dangerous matter in any society. In recent circumstances state control should be exerted, but this control in turn should be scrutinized by democratic public institutions”.

More recent interviews (2005) show signs of the further tightening state control of the media:

The access to the important events in the political agenda of the republican government is often denied to the journalists or reporters from non-governmental media. Refusal to give an accreditation to the press-conferences of the governmental officials, or refusal to answer journalists’ questions are not rare occasions as well.

²⁷ Ibid, p.24

The other striking example of the state control is the case of the private newspaper in the city of Nerungri. The local authorities banned the newspaper from being published in the municipal printing house. Even though the newspaper won cases in two instances, the newspaper still has no access to the printing house and was forced to print in Yakutsk, 800 km away from the city. (K.Alekseev²⁸)

The government of Sakha prefers to subsidise the newspapers from the regional budget. And this puts the journalists into a very dependent position (T. Shamshurina²⁹)

During the last decade, the press in the Sakha republic, which was considered as the most democratic and advanced sector among other regional media, has been brought under state control. The press has become politically controlled, mostly because of governmental ability to appoint chief editors of the national newspapers. The analysis also shows that indirect regulation is also meaningful in delineating the features of modern state domination over the press media in the republic.

One more new feature of the contemporary state control imposed over the media is that it is not stable, but is considered as a fragile balance stemmed from a struggle over the media, where independent media actors are inspired by the historical precedent of pushing the limits of glasnost during the Gorbachev era and remarkable success during the August coup attempt. The press in the Sakha Republic is essentially subordinated to the regional authorities rather than to public accountability. State control over the printed media in the Republic is exercised through two main channels: *direct control* through appointments of boards and editors by republican authorities, and *indirect control* through licensing system and economic instruments. As a bulk of newspapers do not have independent sources of money except for governmental support this provides influential tool of government control over the press.

Freedom of media entails freedom from government control that embraces elimination of pre-publication censorship, applied to newspapers, magazines, books or any kind of broadcasting. Censorship is incompatible with the freedom of expression and right to free access to information, envisaged as basic human freedoms in democratic society. But not only censorship. The principles of independent media also encompass loose entry requirements for new agents, methods of selection of media executives and journalists, and the security of tenure and guarantees for personal security of journalists and decision-makers of the media.³⁰ As the analysis shows, all these principles have been violated in the modern mass media regulation: the media can not be considered as genuinely independent from government and quasi-government control and it seems to be more likely that they directly serve the interests of the state, as it was in the period of Soviet era.

To conclude, nationalism in the Sakha republic was of two distinct sorts: first, ethnically exclusive, which arose during the period of the 1970s-1980s, leading to interethnic clashes, and second, non-violent 'minority nationalism', which focused principally on the redistribution of political powers, greater representation in the federal legislative and executive institutions, language rights, and cultural revival. The fact that the first sort of nationalism took place generally in the time of total government monopoly over the media, and the second sort arose during the liberalization of the mass media was fundamental grounds for the hypothesis, namely that when nationalist resentment was hidden and prohibited from free expression, it realised itself in private life and in face-to-face conflicts. Arguably, this kind of nationalism was likely to be dangerous, as it could have led to more violent and massive ethnic clashes.

In contrast, the openness of the press in 1989-1992 reduced the pressure of nationalist sentiment and allowed a free voice of the ethnic Sakha, resulted in greater recognition of the Sakha identity both at federal and republican level. These facts support the hypothesis that liberalisation of the mass media was one of the important factors of mitigating the interethnic tensions between the Russians and the Sakha in the republic. This work also introduced the arguments in favour of positive influence of the free debate even in an immature 'marketplace of ideas', given the legitimate character of *minority nationalism* of the Sakha people.

²⁸ The director of the regional TV and radio channel 'Stolitsa' (Yakutsk) <http://kreml.org/interview/128665921>

²⁹ The chief editor of the informational portal www.1sn.ru <http://kreml.org/interview/108013916>

³⁰ Eric Barendt (ed.) *Media Law*, Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1993, p.35

Bearing in mind that the state control over the republican media seems to have been tightened during the last decade, as was proven by interviews conducted with editors, journalists and academics, there is appreciable likelihood that this could adversely affect ethnic harmony. One might argue that the control over the media has taken new configurations that encompass not only direct monitoring and regulating of media, albeit in hidden manner, but also indirect control performed particularly by moguls, sympathetic to Vladimir Putin. The recent evidence of restoring the agenda-setting power of the state exposed the revival of the familiar soviet style of propaganda, similar to that of pre-Gorbachev era.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the origins of interethnic conflicts in the Sakha republic, which was perceived as a 'hot spot' of interethnic tensions in the Soviet Union from 1987 incident, - earlier than the ethnic clashes in Tuva, Nagorny Karabakh or Chechen-Ingushetia. This analysis has shown that Sakha nationalism was motivated mostly by economic reasons, along with a greater desire for recognition of the Sakha identity on the federal level and within the republic. Previous surveys illustrated that there was considerable segregation in income and living conditions between the Sakha and Russian populations: the Sakha people were suffering from both legal discrimination and inequality in economic opportunities that provided ready justification for grievances and legitimate claims for sub-nation-state-building.

While ethnic tensions in the Sakha Republic in 1980s and early 1990s were intense, they were not nearly as violent as in other regions, where hostility revealed itself openly. Nevertheless political discourses demanding greater recognition of the Sakha people explicitly mirrored the shift from Soviet, or regional Yakutian to ethnic Sakha identity and, more importantly, from merely cultural to political; and ethnic identity was transformed from contingent to direct, salient distinction. Therefore, the pivotal discourse of the press was centred on the public grievances of the Sakha people and redistribution of political and economic powers from the centre to the republic. The elites used these issues as an influential tool in order to solve an in-republican goal: to win presidential and parliamentary elections, and then, after achieving it, to solve an external goal: to gain more concessions from the federal government. Elections were fought on national grounds, voter turnout increased and more people vote pro-nationalistically. Even though political indigenisation occurred, it did not lead to a substantial redistribution of public goods in favour of Sakha. Many policies adopted at the time faced low odds.

The explanation emphasising the role of the state control over mass media is useful in giving an account for the levels of ethnic tension in general. The period between early 1980s and middle 2000s can be approximately divided into three periods: between early 80s and 1989 – Soviet censorship and state domination, 1989-mid1990s – free media, and mid1990s-mid2000s – tightening of the media control. This periodisation give a useful basis for the understanding the patterns of ethnic response to the restriction of free speech. The paper shows how tight state control can be detrimental for the ethnic harmony and provoke ethnic discontent. It is beyond the scope of this paper, however to explain the dichotomy between the perceptions of ethnic discrimination and hostility of Russians vs. Sakha respondents, an area which offers potential for further research.

The most plausible explanation underlies the pattern - Sakha gained greater representation in public offices, and this suggests that Sakha ethnic group, in comparison to Russians, have greater sources to exercise power to reward their own. Further research can reveal more precisely the mechanisms of patronage and favouritism among Sakha both on regional and local levels of government.

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APPENDIX 1

The first influx of migrants took place during the 1620-1650, when the Russian Empire sent its servants to a newly acquired territory of Yakutian land. The ethnic origin of most newcomers of the first wave was mostly Russian and their professional occupation was governmental officials, whose duty was to perform administrative functions (gathering taxes, *podaty*)³¹. Step by step, traders and commercants, as well as gold-seekers and agricultural workers (*pashennye krestyane*) became the major part of migration masses, which numbered 1000 people annually from 1620 till 1640 and 500 people annually from 1640 till 1650. On the second stage of migration the greatest role was played by political exile. Starting in 1646 with the first Ukrainian rebels, who protested the Russian-Ukrainian Unification, the number of political exiles grew drastically after 1660, when the participants of Moscow riot (1662); 'raskol'niks'; 'strel'tsy', rebelled against Peter the First (late 1690s), 'dekabrists' (1826), Polish revolutionaries (1863), 'karakozovzs' (1866), Sweden war captives and others were sent to a 'prison without walls', as they called Yakutia. By the end of 1870 the territory was considered as a very popular place for a mass exile of Russian anti-tsarist revolutionaries³².

³¹ "Istoria Yakutskoi ASSR" Moscow, 1957, p.56

³² Ibid, p.59