

QUADERNI DEL CERM



# MINORITIES IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE THIRTY YEARS AFTER THE DISSOLUTION OF THE USSR

EDITED BY  
PAOLA BOCALE, DANIELE BRIGADOI COLOGNA, LINO PANZERI



When the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, the Russian Federation and the newly independent republics of the Baltics, the Caucasus and Central Asia engaged in redefining their national identity in a challenging regional and global context. The stances and policies towards the minorities living in these countries became part of the striving towards national independence and identity formation. Despite vastly different post-Soviet nation-building trajectories, the development and implementation of state policies towards minorities had similar relevance and importance across the region. Thirty years after the end of the USSR what is the situation of minorities and minority issues in the countries that emerged from that multi-ethnic state? How have the former republics – including Russia dealt with their minorities and minority affairs? To what protection and rights are minority communities entitled to?

Studies of the dissolution of the USSR and of nation-building in the independent post-Soviet states have flourished over the past decades. However, despite the relevance of the theme, there is a dearth of specialist publications which address the many issues related to minority communities in the post-Soviet space. This volume attempts to fill this gap by providing a collection of essays covering some of the most relevant aspects of the contemporary status and situation of minorities in the area.

The cover illustration by Daniele Brigadoi Cologna is a watercolor rendering of the Chinese character chū 出 "to exit, to grow out of" in small seal script.

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# Minorities in the Post-Soviet Space Thirty Years After the Dissolution of the USSR

Edited by  
Paola Bocale, Daniele Brigadoi Cologna, Lino Panzeri

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# The Historical Development of Buryat Pan-Mongolism

*Davor Antonucci*

## **1. Introduction**

The first half of the 20th century was a period of great political and cultural ferment for Mongolian peoples. After centuries of division and the loss of independence and autonomy to the Russian and Manchu empires, in conjunction with the political crises that affected these empires the Mongols saw a chance to free themselves from the subordinate condition to which they had been relegated. However, the Mongols were in a position of great weakness; not only they had been always divided into tribes and clans - whose union was made possible by the figure of Chinggis Qan in the 13th century - but they had long been the subjects of two different empires, whose strength and nature were extremely different, but whose will to rule over the subjugated peoples was the same. It is therefore not incomprehensible that the Mongols of Buryatia in the Russian Empire, and those subject to the Manchu Empire, came up with different strategies to achieve their goals. Nevertheless, the idea of belonging to the same ethnic lineage not only united all the Mongolian people, but also directed their aspirations for self-determination, and their claims for cultural and territorial unity in what came to be known as "Greater Mongolia". In this historical context, the pan-Mongolian movement, the first modern nationalist ideology among the Mongols according to Szmyt (Szmyt, 2012), was born and developed; the

events of this movement would have great influence in shaping the fate of the different ethnic groups of the Mongolian people. As a matter of fact, pan-Mongolism can be regarded as a movement characterized by pluricentrism; it was multifaceted as well. Buryat intellectuals, Mongolian nobles and activists from both Inner and Outer Mongolia used it over half a century to build their national identity and pursue their own goals of autonomy or independence. Even foreign powers such as Japan saw pan-Mongolism as a means to achieve their political aims. In this short essay I will focus my attention on the historical events and developments of the pan-Mongolian movement related to Buryatia and its intelligentsia by reconstructing its development from its origins to the contemporary period.

Many scholars have been interested in the events that in the past century led to the emergence of the Mongolian People's Republic and its achievement of independence from China on the one hand, and to those related to Inner Mongolia and Buryatia on the other, clearly paying attention to pan-Mongolism as a historical phenomenon. But what do we mean by Pan-Mongolism? According to S. Chimitdorjev, a Buryat historian, pan-Mongolism "was a movement for national self-determination, political and cultural-ethnic rebirth of Mongolian peoples, for unification of Mongol land. It expressed interests of populations of the all-Mongol world, conduced conservation and consolidation of all-national ethnic, historical and linguistics bonds" (Bugat 2004). This movement originated quite recently, particularly after contacts with ideas coming from the West - especially through Russia - and its development unfolded, with ups and downs, throughout the 20th century.

## **2. Buryats in the Russian Empire**

The Russian conquest of Siberia, considered an almost endless source of fur-bearing animals, was completed with incredible speed between the late 16th century and the first half of the 17th century. The Russian conquest of Siberia was made possible and more secure through the construction of a network of forts (*ostrogs*) located along river networks that served both as centres for colonization and outposts for the occupation of new territories, and for the advance to the east. Located at strategic points, *ostrogs* ensured control of transportation and trade as well as a safe refuge in case of attack. From these forts merchants and officials spread

to the surrounding areas to exploit the indigenous people through the collection of tributes (*iasak*), in furs, mainly sable (Mancall 1971)<sup>1</sup>. In 1628, the first encounter with the Buryat Mongols took place along the Oka River, where the Russians had gone in search of silver mines. The Buryats were defeated, women and children taken prisoner. In the following decades there were several clashes between Russians and Buryats generally favouring the former who boasted in firearms the main factor of superiority on the battlefield. A similar fate befell the tribes settled east of Lake Baikal. A common strategy of all Buryat tribes was to escape Russian control and *iasak* payment by fleeing south and seeking refuge in Mongolia. However, sometimes because of the unstable situation in Mongolia, or because they were fomented by the Manchus to engage in anti-Russian activities, they went back to their own lands.

The Treaty of Kiakhta (1727), between the Russian and Manchu governments, established Russian-Mongolian boundary lines in northern Mongolia, effectively preventing free movement, while providing trade concessions to the Russians, who were granted the privilege of sending trade missions every three years to Beijing. In the 18th century, the Buryats east of Lake Baikal enjoyed wide autonomy, the aristocracy was granted social status, retention of judicial power, and exaction of taxes (Forsyth 1992). For a hundred years, Buryats and Tungus served as auxiliary troops of the Russians to control the borders of the region, becoming the 'Tungus and Buryat Cossacks regiments' of the Transbaikalian region. Some Buryat nobles achieved important positions and became rich through corruption by seizing huge estates. However, the increase of Cossacks and Russian settlers in the region was such that by the end of the 19th century Buryats and Tungus constituted less than one third of the population of Transbaikalia. According to Forsyth (1992), the adoption of Tibetan Buddhism was the most significant new development among the Buryats in the eighteenth century. Thanks to Catherine the Great's tolerant religious policy, not only was the spread of Buddhism not hindered, especially in the Transbaikalian region, but an independent Lamaist Church was created,

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1 The Russian government did not demand the adoption of Russian customs or language or religion. The main interest of the authorities was the collection of tribute in furs and, of course, the subjugation of the tribes. For these reasons, officials were instructed to establish friendly relations with the tribes, and chiefs were often given titles and gifts. However, more often they were victims of abuse and theft by the officials themselves (Rossabi 1975).

and as a consequence the number of lamas rapidly increased (there were 4673 in 1831).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Buryats were still a thriving community, yet Russian government policies led to a gradual loss of autonomy on the one hand, and profound changes in the economy and nomadic lifestyle on the other. Particularly in the regions west of Lake Baikal, the Buryats were forced to abandon nomadism and embrace agriculture; land was confiscated by the state for redistribution between Russian and Buryat settlers. These profound changes pushed the Buryats into political activity: at a meeting held in Chita in 1905 they claimed greater democratic self-government autonomy, as well as the opening of schools where teaching was to be carried out in Mongolian Buryat.

Changes in the international environment offered new opportunities for the Mongols. As a matter of fact, the collapse of the two great Russian and Manchu empires at the beginning of the 20th century opened up space for Mongolian nationalist aspirations. During this period, pan-Mongolian ideas of a Greater Mongolia became more and more pressing. As Rupen pointed out “the Pan-Mongolism espoused by the Buryats was... an anti-Russian weapon and a Buryat expression of separatism, a threat that the Buryats would leave the Russian Empire and join a Greater Mongolia” (Rupen 1964). As a matter of fact, by the second half of the 19th century many Mongolian Buryats, such as Mikhail Bogdanov (1878-1919), Tsyben Zhamtsarano (1880-1940), El’bekdorji Rinchino (1885-1937) and others, had graduated from Russian universities, and they formed a new elite that contributed to the formation of a national ideology supporting and fostering the pan-Mongolian Buryat movement.

### **3. In search of independence, 1905-1921**

Following the First Russian Revolution in 1905, liberal and socialist ideas circulated in the Russian Far East. Due to poor living conditions and the massive arrival of land-grabbing settlers, the Buryats reacted against Russian expansionism with pan-Mongolian political and nationalist claims. In 1905 Buryat nationalists convened in the first Buryat Congress of the Transbaikalia Region held in Chita (another one was held in Irkutsk in December of the same year<sup>2</sup>), presenting a programme of cultural pan-Mongolism with

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<sup>2</sup> This was because the Buryat territories were divided into two administrative units west (Irkutsk province) and east (Transbaikalia) of Lake

Buddhism as a key element of pan-Mongolian identity (Murray, 2012). Several members of the young Buryat intelligentsia, who had received a Western education in Russian schools, attended this meeting, including Batu-dalai Ochirov, Zhamtsarano, Bazar Baradin and others, as well as *noyons* and delegates from Buddhist monasteries. Both meetings focused on claims for self-government, for laws and legal proceedings in Buryat, for religious freedom, and also for popular education in the Buryat language. In addition the delegates demanded the end of Russian colonization (Montgomery, 2011; Sablin, 2017a, 2017b). It is noteworthy that this 'cultural pan-Mongolism' caused the Orthodox Missionary Society a great deal of concern.

A few years later, in 1911, the Manchu Empire fell and the Chinese Republic was proclaimed. Taking advantage of the new political situation, on 29 December 1911 the rJe-btsun-dam-pa Qutuytu of Outer Mongolia was proclaimed ruler (Bogdo Qan) of a new Mongol state independent from China. On this occasion several letters were sent to the Inner Mongolian banners, the Barguts, the Oirats, the Uriyangqans asking to join the new pan-Mongolian state. According to Šima, many Buryats actively participated in the national liberation movement, members of the Buryat intelligentsia had brought revolutionary ideas to Mongolia even before the revolution (Šima, 1974). As a matter of fact, the revolution was led only by the nobility and the clergy, there was no popular uprising, it was primarily guided from above. In a similar way to the Buryats, a strong nationalistic and progressive sentiment animated the rebels who were aware of the need to reform the state apparatus in a modern sense.

This period is also characterized by the emergence of the Buryat intelligentsia in all-Mongol political arena with its idea of pan-Mongolism. Zhamtsarano, who travelled in Inner Mongolia in 1909-1910 and in 1911 moved to Outer Mongolia, was one of the main ideologists of pan-Mongolism. According to his opinion "Unification of Mongolia with Inner Mongolia, Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Mongol people of Xinjiang and Tuva will allow restoring historical region of inhabitation of Mongols, and turn the country into an authentic self-governing and sovereign state, independent from influences of Japan, China and Russia. In this case Mongolia can pursue the neutrality as Switzerland" (quoted in Bugat 2004). Nevertheless, due to the repressive policies of Nicholas II, it was not until the February Revolution of 1917 that the Buryats were

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Baikal.



able to resume their political activities. In fact, the Russian Revolution marks the transition of pan-Mongolism from the cultural to the political sphere. Not only did the more radical Buryats thought they could exploit the Russian crisis to consolidate and expand what they had gained in autonomy in order to politically consolidate the entire Mongolian ethno-cultural community, they also expected to gain a privileged status within it. As Luzyanin observes “the Buryat version of Pan-Mongolism... implied a certain subjugation of the Mongolian tribes to themselves” (Baldano, Varnavskij 2017). The idea that the Buryats should play an important role and stand as the leader of the other Mongolian peoples is clearly expressed by the nationalist and pan-Mongolist Rinchino in a letter to D. Sampilon. He considered the Mongols and other Central Asian peoples to be too backward and consumed by Buddhist clericalism and thus of little use for the creation of a pan-Mongolian state: “Here we Buriats, the relatively more educated nation, would play and apparently will play an important role” (quoted in Kuzmin 2015). Immediately members of the Buryat intelligentsia convened an All-Buryat Congress to be held in Chita in 1917, during which a Buryat National Committee (Burnatskom) was formed. In the chaos of the civil war in Russia, and in the international historical context, several actors tried to play the pan-Mongolian card for their own interests.

On one hand the Russian Bolsheviks saw pan-Mongolism as an opportunity to bring the socialist revolution to the East, and to that end considered the unification of all the Mongolian tribes a valuable support for the emancipation of all the other oppressed peoples of Asia. On the other hand, opponents of the Bolsheviks – such as Ataman Semenov – also sought in the same way to use the pan-Mongol card to pursue their own purposes. Ataman Grigorii Semenov (1890-1946), a half-Buryat Cossack, was obsessed with the idea of creating a pan-Mongolian state under his control. He was born in a small Cossack village in south eastern Buryatia, had served in the Transbaikalian Cossack Army and fought in Europe in World War I. When he returned to the East he began recruiting soldiers and striking the Bolsheviks. When in mid-1918 Semenov’s forces took control of Transbaikalia and Irkutsk provinces with the help of the Japanese, he began to create local governments. His activities aimed at creating a pan-Mongolian state included the creation of national Buryat military formations – something that was supported by the Burnatskom –, military assistance from Japan, as well as the involvement of other Mongolian peoples. To

this end, he had sent Tsydygov to conduct negotiations with the *noyons* and clergy of Inner Mongolia to gain their support for his pan-Mongolian movement especially in the matter of Mongolian self-determination (Kuzmin 2015).

Semenov's aspirations took shape in 1919 when a congress of pan-Mongolists convened in Chita was attended by delegates from Buryatia, Inner Mongolia, and Barga, while Outer Mongolians, though not represented, gave their support to the initiative. The Congress established the creation of a federal Great Mongolian State that was to include Inner Mongolia, Outer Mongolia, Barga and Buryat Transbaikalia. Semenov was invited to become the first adviser to the new government led by Inner Mongolia's Qutuγtu Neisse Gegen. A delegation was sent to the Versailles Peace Conference with the intent of having the pan-Mongolian state recognized, but without success (Kuras 2010). The contingent situation prompted Japan to withdraw its support to the new pan-Mongolian state; another blow to the movement was dealt by the refusal of Outer Mongolia to be part of the new federal state. Why did Outer Mongolia not support the new pan-Mongolian state? According to Rupen "perhaps the dominant reason was suspicion of Semenov and the many Buryats who organized it" (Rupen 1964). Finally, in 1920 the establishment of the Far Eastern Republic controlled by the Bolsheviks marked the end of this pan-Mongolian project strongly supported by Semenov and other members of the Buryat intelligentsia.

#### **4. The Communist period - unity betrayed**

With the advance of the Bolsheviks and the withdrawal of the Japanese, the Buryats sought to negotiate broad autonomy within the Soviet Union, rather than pursue a difficult independence. In return they would help the Soviets in Outer Mongolia. With the end of the civil war and the victory of the Bolsheviks, the two Buryat-Mongolian autonomous regions were united in order to form the Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1923) with Verkhneudinsk (Ulan-Ude) as the capital. It is interesting to note that at that time Buryats were already a minority in Buryatia (43.8 percent of the total population in 1926).

At the beginning, the Soviet leadership viewed pan-Mongolism as a useful tool for exporting the revolution to the Far East. This is why they supported initiatives aimed at unifying the Mongolian tribes. In this sense "the pan-Mongolism of the Buryat-Bolsheviks

served the Comintern well" (Bugat 2004). In fact, several Mongolian Buryats – such as Rinchino and Zhamtsarano who drafted the first platform of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (1921) – played an important role in the founding of the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR, 1924), still others held positions within the government (e.g. Dashi Sampilon was Minister of Economics and Trade). Rupen considers that "this extension of Buriat activity to Outer Mongolia is itself one face of pan-Mongolism" (Rupen 1956). During the 1920s, Ulan-Bator was frequented by Mongols from all backgrounds who had often studied in Russia, China or Japan. They were moved by a sincere spirit of brotherhood and animated by the idea of reuniting all Mongolian tribes with the now independent MPR. This pan-Mongolian sentiment finds expression in Rinchino's words to the Third Congress of MPRP in 1924: "We must be the cultural centre for our races, we must attract to ourselves the Inner Mongols, Barga Mongols, etc..." (Rupen 1964). However, this was not the orientation of the Comintern, which aimed to keep Inner and Outer Mongolia separate. As a result, the pan-Mongolian ideas advocated by Rinchino were attacked and he was charged with 'chauvinist deviation'.

In the same years in Buryatia, an early Soviet policy of *korenizatsija* was carried out for the development of the Buryat language and culture, in the aim of building an inclusive socialist society (Chakars 2014). Basically the economy continued to be based on nomadism, even Buddhism could continue to be practiced. The situation changed radically from 1929 onward. The policies of forced collectivization initiated by Stalin had serious consequences on traditional Buryat society; the creation of collective farms and the forcing of people to reside in sedentary villages found great resistance among the nomads. These economic policies were also accompanied by measures that affected the Buryat culture and language, which from 1939 was written in Cyrillic. Those who opposed directives from Moscow were accused of threatening the country's Soviet modernizing goals. The purges of the 1930s hit the old elite, the lamas, and pan-Mongolist intellectuals. Stalin established a climate of terror where thousands of Buryats were accused of being 'pan-Mongolists', 'Japanese spies' and 'bourgeois nationalists'. Many were arrested, executed, or died in prisons or labour camps (Chakars 2014). Among them Rinchino (1937), the Communist Party Secretary M. N. Yerbanov (1937), and the president of the Buryat Republic Dampilon. In response to Mao's policies, who used pan-Mongolism to try to bring all Mongolian peoples back

under Chinese hegemony<sup>3</sup>, in the USSR, in order to prevent the return of pan-Mongolism, contacts between the Mongolian peoples - i.e. in MPR, Inner Mongolia and Buryatia - were not allowed. The term 'Mongol' was even removed from the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Region (and also from other district names). In the 1970s, the teaching of Mongolian in schools was abolished. The overall aim was to separate Buryat national consciousness from general-Mongolian consciousness, and replace it with Soviet cosmopolitanism (Bugat 2004).

## 5. Post-Soviet period

The fall of the Soviet regime, and the consequent process of decentralization in Russia, gave the opportunity in the territories of the Russian Federation inhabited by Mongols for the rebirth of nationalist and separatist drives. At the same time there was a revival of Buryat culture and language, promoted by institutions and the media. A Centre of Buryat National Culture was created in Ulan-Ude sponsored by Popatov's government (Chakars 2014). Since the late 80s, the newly re-established contacts with the other Mongols led among the intellectuals to the revival of pan-Mongolian aspirations. The high degree of autonomy and decentralization of power allowed the Republics of Tuva and Buryatia to reorient their national culture and re-construct non-Russian identities. As a consequence, from 1990 onwards pan-Mongolian ideas re-emerged in Buryatia, new nationalistic movements were founded like the Buryat-Mongol People's Party (founded with the purpose of independence and unification with Mongolia), and the Negeedel (i.e. Buryat Movement for National Unity), among others. The first All-Buryat Congress for the Spiritual Rebirth and Consolidation of the Nation was held in Ulan-Ude between February 22 and 24, 1991 (other congresses were held in 1996 and 2002). Notably, an All-Buryat Association for the Development of Culture, sponsored by the Republican government, was founded in order to formally coordinate Buryat cultural activities throughout the USSR. However, according to Bugat (2004), its real purpose was to contrast the pro-liberation movements. During the same period in Mon-

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3 The Soviets' position regarding the Buryats is exemplified by an episode that occurred during the visit of the Soviet delegation in Beijing in 1954. When Mao officially asked Khrushchev to reunite the MPR with China, he answered that "there are no Mongols living in the USSR" (Bugat 2004).

golia the Movement for Unity of the Mongol Nation was founded. It had close contacts with the Buryat-Mongol People's Party and Negedel, and also assisted Inner Mongolia dissidents who fled from China. As a consequence, tensions between Mongol nationalists and Chinese authority increased in the 1990s, many Inner Mongols were arrested and put in jail. In Tuva, the Tuva Popular Front asked for a referendum on the independence and secession from the Russian Federation. The re-emergence of nationalist positions in the 1990s made it clear to the Russian and Chinese governments that pan-Mongolism was still alive and could pose a threat to their territorial integrity. Eventually, taking into account mainly economic aspects, Buryatia decided to remain within the Russian Federation (1992) as an autonomous republic. As Humphrey (1996) pointed out, looking at the difficult economic situation of their Mongolian neighbours, the Buryats wondered what advantage they would gain from joining with Mongolia. Eventually, in 1994 the first free elections were held.

During the post-Soviet period, the Mongolian Republic's economic and political weakness in the international context made it impossible for any pan-Mongolian ideas to return. The two big powers, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, have always viewed any Mongolian nationalist initiatives with suspicion. As a matter of fact, the friendship treaties concluded with these two super powers have for the time being decreed the end of any pan-Mongolian aspirations.

Finally, it should be mentioned that during the early 90s nationalist and pan-Mongolian ideas emerged, but they failed to gain the support of the majority of the population, both in Buryatia and in Mongolia. Although widespread among intellectuals, they did not receive the necessary support in political circles.

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