

Commentary

Yves Hamant

The rich text by Roberte Hamayon can be viewed from several angles. I will limit myself to one by noting that this particular case offers a very interesting illustration of the treatment of ethnic questions in Russia following the collapse of the USSR.

In order to follow the analysis, it is useful to have a certain number of facts in mind.

The historical and political context

Remember that Russia is a federation made up of 89 members (called 'subjects') amongst whom 32 originate from territories formed at the beginning of the Soviet period on an ethnic basis around a 'titular' ethnic group.

In 1923 the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was established, whose borders did not coincide with the ethnic and geographic limits of Buryatia, a fact even admitted by the first Soviet encyclopaedia in a volume published in 1927. Moreover, in 1937, at the time of the Stalinist purges, it had been cut off from a part of its territory to the advantage of the neighbouring regions, though at the heart of these regions the Buryat national district of Ust-Ordynski and the Buryat national district of Aguiinskoe had been formed. These two districts had, nevertheless, been drawn up in such a way that they did not share a common administrative frontier with the Buryat-Mongol ASSR. In 1958, at the time of Khrushchev, the authorities changed the name of the latter so that from then on it was called simply the Buryat ASSR.

At present there are thus three districts in the Russian Federation whose title refers to the Buryats: the Republic of Buryatia, the Buryat autonomous district of Ust-Ordynski and the Buryat autonomous district of Aguiinskoe.

The Republic of Buryatia, like the other territories of the same type, is run by a president, a government and a parliament.

Its ethnic composition is fairly characteristic of the majority of administrative divisions of this type: the titular ethnic group is in the minority. Indeed, out of just over one million inhabitants, according to the census of 1989, there were about 726,000 Russians (70%) and only 25,000 (25%) Buryats.

The district of Ust-Ordynski itself comprises 76,800 Russians (56%) and 49,300 Buryats (36%). It is only in the district of Aguiinskoe that the proportions are reversed: 42,300 Buryats (54%) as opposed to 31,400 Russians (40%).

In conditions such as these, the majority of positions of responsibility are occupied by Russians. Moreover, it seems that, apart from a rather short period of wavering following the failure of the coup in August 1991, the power of the former Communist nomenklatura has never really been threatened.

Leonid Vasilejevich¹ Potapov, the present president of the Buryat Republic, is a Russian. He was formerly Secretary of the Party Committee of the Buryat ASSR, First Secretary in 1990–1991,

and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR at that time. After the failure of the coup in August 1991 he held various positions within the Republic of Buryatia, and was elected President in 1994 with 72% of the votes, then re-elected in 1998 with 63% of the votes. On the other hand, the current representative of the Republic of Buryatia in the Duma, Bato Tsyrendondokovich Semenov, elected in 1999 with 35% of the votes, is obviously of Buryat origin.

The district of Ust-Ordynski is also led by a Russian, Valerij Gennadyevich Maleev, elected in 2000 with 53% of the votes, and represented in the Duma by another Russian, Valerij Vladimirovich Kuzin, elected in 1999 with nearly 50% of the votes.

In contrast, a Buryat who was once a member of the Komsomol is at the head of the Aguiinskoe district; Bair Baiaskhalanovich Jamsuev was elected in 2000 with 89% of the votes. This district is represented in the Duma by the colourful character Josif Davidovich Kobzon, elected in a by-election 1997 and re-elected in 1999 with 92% of the votes. A famous singer who claimed to be a member of the Communist Party of the USSR and who boasts about having kept his card, he also set up in business, as a result of which he was suspected of having links with the mafia and has several times been refused an entry visa to the United States. Kobzon is a Jew from the Ukraine and apparently has no ties amongst the Buryats. It is true that the autonomous districts, with their small populations, often offer an electoral constituency which is easily won by businessmen looking for a safe parliamentary mandate.

The results of the federal elections confirmed the establishment of the Communists. During the presidential elections in 1996 in the Republic of Buryatia, it was the Communist candidate, Zyuganov, who won in the second round with 49% of the votes against 45% for Yeltsin, although the national average was respectively 40% and 54%. In 2000, Zyuganov took 40% of the votes (29% nationally) and Putin 42% (52% nationally).

The results were slightly different in the two autonomous districts. In 1996, Zyuganov was beaten by Yeltsin by no more than one point and, with an almost identical result in both districts of around 47%, substantially exceeded his national average. On the other hand, in 2000, he was easily beaten by Putin with figures approaching much more closely the national average.

On the religious level, it should be pointed out that it was in Buryatia that the only Buddhist centre in the USSR was to be found in the Soviet era, in the datsan (monastery) of Ivolga whose opening in the outskirts of the capital, Ulan-Ude, had been authorized by the authorities in 1946, a few years after they had closed all the Buddhist establishments and the majority of the lamas had been sent to the gulag or shot.

As we know, powerful national movements have appeared since 1987 in the republics on the Baltic, in the Caucasus and elsewhere following what has been called a 'parade of sovereignties'. Moreover, they, in the end, were the ones who provoked the dissolution of the USSR. At the same time, an increasingly strong desire to assert their identity developed amongst the non-Russian minorities in Russia itself, above all amongst the intellectuals. Although, in most of the autonomous districts, the 'titular' ethnic group was not in the majority, the local leaders took these demands just as seriously and many of the Communist leaders were seen to adopt them partially with the aim of remaining in power. In this way the autonomous regions in the heart of Russia set about declaring their 'sovereignty'. In doing so, in general, they were not demanding independence, but claiming the same statute as the fifteen federated republics which made up the USSR. And so, on 8 October 1990, the adjective 'autonomous' disappeared from the title of the Buryat ASSR, which became the Buryat Soviet Socialist Republic before calling itself simply the Republic of Buryatia.

Geser, pan-Mongolism and Buddhism

In this context, as Roberte Hamayon has indicated, the decision to commemorate the epic of Geser appears to be a gesture by the mostly Russian leaders of the Republic of Buryatia towards the Buryat intelligentsia. However, one could ask if there were particular reasons for adopting this hero rather than any other. Indeed, two features in the epic are worth noting.

First of all, rather than Geser, they could have chosen, for example, Genghis Khan, a celebrated historical figure, but harking back to the solidarity between the Buryats and the Mongols. But some Buryats were campaigning for the former name, the Buryat-Mongol Republic, which had been taken away from them in 1958, to be restored to their Republic. This is the agenda, in particular, of the small People's Buryat-Mongol Party.² This demand seems to be inspired above all by concern for historical rehabilitation, but it evoked in some Russians the fear of seeing the rebirth of a pan-Mongol movement which might lead to unification of Buryatia with Mongolia. On this issue, the *Nezavissimaia* gazeta of 22 February 2000 published an article written by an author living in Ulan-Ude which took issue with a Japanese university specialist in Buryatia who, during a recent visit to the country, had encouraged the Buryats to go back to their name of inhabitants of Buryatia-Mongolia again. The article was eloquently entitled: 'A Tokyo professor revives the ideas of pan-Mongolism' and concluded:

'If the logic of the Japanese professor is followed, it is not difficult to arrive at the conclusion that the restoration of the name of Buryatia-Mongolia would be just the first step leading to the unification of all branches of the Mongol people and, inevitably, of all their territories. In other words, the issue here is the destruction of the territorial integrity not just of Russia, but also of China, and the creation in Central Asia not of a single Mongol state, but of a hot bed of tension.'

Besides it was in the name of the struggle against pan-Mongolism that the Buryats suffered repression in 1937–1938, although this trend had considerably less impact than the pan-Islam and pan-Turkish movements which were also being opposed.

Insofar as the celebration was partly linked to the campaign to restore to the Republic of Buryatia the two districts which had been taken away from it, it had to be strictly limited to the reunification of the Buryats, thus avoiding signing them up to a much wider unification process.

As for the project of reunifying the two districts, according to Roberte Hamayon's expression, it had manifestly 'sprung from the impetus for freedom brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union'. Indeed, given the smallness of the population, its consequences were limited. Moreover, it seemed to have lost some of its relevance later. The situation no doubt changed when a new federal system was instituted in Russia by the Constitution adopted in December 1993: these two districts, in common with all the other national districts, acceded to the status of 'subject' and each one of them became one of the 89 territories in their own right forming the Russian Federation, with, in principle, prerogatives identical to those of the Republic of Buryatia. Each of them is therefore represented by a deputy in the Duma, the lower chamber, and by two representatives in the Council of the Federation, the upper chamber, and thus has the same influence as much more densely populated districts. It is not immediately obvious what the population of these two districts would gain from becoming part of the Republic of Buryatia. For reasons that were never very clear, Kobzon tried to relaunch the project after he was elected in 1997, but without success.

In the second place, it seems that Geser was indifferent, if not hostile, to Buddhism and belonged more to the tradition of shamanism, whilst, as we have seen, the only Buddhist centre in existence during the Soviet era was in Buryatia. A hero linked to Buddhism would also have harked back to a much wider solidarity which goes beyond the cadres of Buryatia.

In addition, the production of the commemoration may seem to be guided by a desire to create new rites. For, at the end of the Soviet era, to fight against the religious revival which began to

appear, the authorities had encouraged the creation of 'cult' commissions responsible for inventing new rites by borrowing symbols for them from stories, epics and myths.³ Could not a trace of this experience, but doubtless with a different objective, perhaps be found in the celebration of Geser?

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Translated from the French by Rosemary Dear

Notes

1. According to the Russian tradition, which has been imposed on all inhabitants of the USSR, each person is referred to by their forename, their patronymic and their family name. The patronymic is used here as a further indication of ethnic origin.
2. L.L. Abaeva, B.P. Kranev, *Social'no-politicheskij analiz vyborov v respublike Burjatii* [Political and social analysis of the elections in the Republic of Buryatia], September 1994]: <http://www.iea.ras.ru/Russian/publications/applied/69.html>.
3. See, for example, V.A. Rudnev, *Sovetskie prazdniki, obrjady, ritualy* [Soviet festivals, rites and rituals], Leningrad, Leninizdat 1979.