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# RUSSIAN EMPIRE AND NATIONAL TERRITORIES (XVIII - XIX CENTURIES)

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### *Abstract*

From the initial stage of its development, Russian statehood received its features as a multinational identity. This is confirmed by the presence of sufficiently clear contours of the Finno-Ugric component in the territory where the Eastern Slavs lived. The authors proceed from the fact generally accepted in historical science that during the reign of Ivan IV, Russian statehood reaches the level of an imperial power. However, in the internal political development, in the process of forming the self-consciousness of the ruling elite, this imperial threshold was reached only by the time of Peter the Great. It was during his reigning that the official title of the ruler of the state was modified. Such a transition from exclusively geographical awareness of the state status of the Russian political elite to the recognition of a new political level took, in fact, a century and a half. The article deals with the problems associated with the attempts of the imperial power of Russia at the turn of the XVIII - XIX centuries to change the system of governing a multinational country through substantial easing for the development of the country's confessional climate, and then guaranteeing the special status of certain regions of the country where non-Orthodox population predominantly dominated. That is the time when we observe the retreat from an exclusively centralizing understanding of the internal problems of the state development of Russia, which is characteristic of Peter I and his closest followers on the throne.

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**Keywords:** Denominations, ethnic groups, statehood, the Constitution.



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## **1. Introduction**

The specific features associated with attempts at reforms in governing the multinational Russian Empire receive additional acceleration with the advent of Catherine II. Her attempts to change numerous spheres of government were not fully developed. The positive aspects should undoubtedly include the granting of the maximum possible freedom of worship to the population of a multinational country.

Alexander I, despite the resistance not only from the political elite of the states of the “Holy Alliance”, but also from his own family, decided on a radical step - the creation of the Kingdom of Poland with its own constitution. The authors note the presence of a significant psychological factor that contributed to the adoption of such a decision by the emperor. Actually, the Russian autocrat tried to overcome the negative consequences of the events of the last quarter of the XVIII century, when Austria-Hungary and Prussia dragged Russia into the struggle for a territorial solution of the “Polish question”. On the other hand, the slogan of Poland’s liberation was actively exploited by Napoleon I during the military campaign against Russia. Against this background, the desire of the Russian emperor to permanently close this problem was obvious. Its successful solution would allow the authorities, as planned by Alexander I, to start reforms in Russian provinces adjacent to Poland. Such intentions provoked a negative reaction even among the nobility, which claimed their own vision of possible, and, mostly radical, ways of implementing democratic reforms in Russia.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The problems study of the multinational empires’ development is considered traditionally against the background of geopolitical processes taking place in a given period. Internal factors also get their assessment solely on the basis of foreign policy factors. It is advisable to pay appropriate attention to the analysis of the reasons that get their explanation from domestic political circumstances, including the role of the personality factor. The history of the Russian Empire allows us to draw certain conclusions in this direction.

## **3. Research Questions**

The contours and parameters of the internal politics of a multinational empire are undoubtedly affected by a specific historical person who heads the state. The desire to overcome the legacy of the past, to move away from certain prevailing stereotypes are factors that encourage the rulers of a multinational empire to propose their own reforms in the field of governance in regions where representatives of "non-titular" peoples predominate. A strong evidence of such actions is the efforts of Catherine II and Alexander I, who proposed their own options for changes in various areas of life.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The authors’ attention was drawn to the studying the content of the proposals of Catherine II and Alexander I, who tried to overcome a certain pressure of the religious factor in realizing the possibilities

for more free worshipping to Russia's multinational population. Alexander I took a step aimed at providing a special, constitutional status of the westernmost part of the Russian Empire - Poland.

## 5. Research Methods

When article writing, narrative and historical methods were applied. Estimates of both contemporaries, eyewitnesses to attempts to carry out transformations in the management of a multinational empire, and modern researchers were studied.

## 6. Findings

The results obtained allow us to argue about the significant impact of the personality factor in the field of reforms in managing those particular territories where representatives of the non-Orthodox population of multinational Russia predominated at the turn of the XVIII - XIX centuries.

## 7. Conclusion

Russian statehood was formed under conditions where factors of multinational education played a significant role. Against this background, certain forms of relations between the central government and local governments were built. Starting from Ivan IV reign, the population of every newly part of the Russian state was given some autonomy in resolving internal issues. However, the policy vector of Peter I and his followers began to take on strict lines of direction towards the creation of a state where, on the outskirts of the empire, the principles of power relations under the "overlord-vassal" scheme were finally consolidated. It can be argued that the beginning of the process of the Russian Empire's formation was accompanied by strengthening of strictly centralized foundations of statehood.

However, at the end of the XVIII century, state power began to transform the traditional scheme of relations between the state and the regions, where representatives of different peoples prevailed in number (Safonov, 1988, p. 76). This is evident from the following fact. Catherine II, after her ascension to the throne, announced new principles of governing the country, the basis of which were the articles of the "Order" given by the empress on July 30, 1767 to the Commission for writing the draft of the new code. Of particular interest is article 494, which reads as follows: "in that great state that spreads its dominion over so many different nations, it would be a very harmful for the peace and security of its citizens vice – prohibiting or not allowing their various faiths" (Tomsinov, 2006, p. 95).

According to the researchers, after the ascension to the throne of the new empress, "the tendency to weaken religious oppression, outlined in previous years, had taken concrete shape. Under her rule, there happened a significant turn in the state's policy towards Islam, which after many years persecution received official recognition and a status of tolerated religion" (Nogmanov, 2005, p.120).

For the first time in Russian practice of conducting internal and foreign policy, the Empress tried to thoroughly introduce the principles of a liberal approach in the field of creating broader parameters for the formation of confessional identity of various ethnic groups' representatives, while taking into account specific features of the development of individual territories. In particular, Catherine II clearly understood that the well-being of a multinational state is largely based on sectarian stability. To achieve this goal,

representatives of various faiths should have been given the opportunity to practice their religious rites freely.

During her trip along the Volga in May-June 1767, she visited Kazan, where she “visibly became convinced of the ethno-confessional diversity of Russia, and that Islam is a reality that doesn’t bother anyone from living, that one doesn’t have to be afraid of it and uproot it, but recognize as a given”(Nogmanov, 2005, p.122).

Thus, it can be argued that it was Catherine who was inherent in an approach that linked issues of confessional policy with problems of state policy regarding representatives of non-Russian ethnic groups. This policy orientation had its own external vector - the Russian state proceeded from the recognition of the need to develop new territories (Okun, 1974, p. 53). In the works of Russian scholars, it was emphasized that the autocracy began to rely on Islam as a force that could contribute to strengthening the influence of the Empire in the Asian region. In this regard, it was impossible to achieve the desired result by violent methods alone. In similar circumstances early 1780s the government adopts a “double standard” policy. By limiting by all means the influence of Islam in the Middle Volga region and other “civilized” regions of the empire, at the same time, it by all means contributes to its propaganda in the “Asian” territories, seeing in it an effective means of involving the local population in Russian citizenship and keeping them in obedience. The construction of mosques was to play an important role in this. It is no accident that Catherine II, having received from Baron Igelstrom, the Orenburg governor, a message about the opening of such structures in Orenburg and Troisk, was convinced that “such a construction of places for public prayer would also attract others in the vicinity of nomadic or living to our borders peoples; this can serve in the course of time to abstain from willfulness better than any strict measures” (Nogmanov, 2005, p.126-127).

In this case, the central authority in the person of the empress consciously follow the ideas of the foreign policy “cover” attempts at a liberal approach in the field of taking into account the ethnic and religious characteristics of the population of the vast areas that became part of the Russian Empire after the invasion campaigns of Ivan the Terrible, and the gradual entry of the peoples of the Urals and Siberia into the state.

The name of Alexander I is associated with the first attempt to create a specific form of governing in certain regions (Mironenko, 1989, p. 62). Going actually against the convictions of his inner circle, he announces the creation of the Kingdom of Poland with a special status of government, with its parliament. The emperor brings the design of a plan for the “constitutionalization” of Poland to completion (Ekshtut, 1994, p. 97). The appearance of such plans was preceded by the following circumstances.

The completion of the anti-Napoleonic campaign was characterized for Alexander I by the wish to adhere to a rather cautious political course. At the same time, the Russian emperor, unlike his European colleagues, clearly realized that the status quo in post-war Europe could disappear as a result of the new upsurge of the revolution and as a result of the dominance of reaction. Alexander I believed that moderate European monarchical liberalism would be optimal for European states, with limited constitutionalism as the ideal form of monarchical rule.

The Polish lands that relatively recently entered the Russian state acquired the status of an autonomous Kingdom of Poland, which received registration on May 9, 1815 in the manifesto “... On the accession to the Russian Empire vast part of the Duchy of Warsaw under the name of the Polish Kingdom”

(Davydov, 1994, p, 87). The next step of Alexander I is the introduction of a constitution in the Kingdom of Poland. By his decision, the Russian emperor actually challenged Austria-Hungary and Prussia, who had initiated the process of dividing the Polish state. It is possible that Alexander I decided on a similar step for several reasons, including psychological ones.

The emperor was aware that the “Polish card” was actively used by Napoleon during his campaign in Russia. In memory of many representatives of the Russian political elite for a long time there are memories of that enthusiastic reception rendered by the Polish aristocracy in Warsaw and in other cities to the French Emperor. But among the inner circle of the Russian autocrat there were also a few supporters of the restoration of an independent Polish state. It is no coincidence that among those whom Alexander I instructed to prepare the text of the constitution of the Kingdom of Poland was Adam Czartoryski, who belonged to a very narrow circle of the emperor’s proxies.

There was also an obvious desire of the Russian emperor to distance from Austria-Hungary and Prussia. It is known that it was these two states that prompted Russia at one time to active action against Poland. This explains the categorical rejection by Vienna and Berlin of the last steps of Alexander I, who, in the opinion of the representatives of the power structures of these two countries, sought to play to the end his role of the “liberator of Europe”.

On May 13, 1815, the people of the Kingdom of Poland were granted a constitution, self-government, their own army, and freedom of the press.

The constitution of the Kingdom of Poland has become one of the most liberal, in its content, in Europe. The Russian emperor was proclaimed the Tsar (King) of Poland, with his powers legislatively restricted in the constitutional charter. The emperor as the King of Poland retained important prerogatives. Despite the obvious fact of class limited basis of the constitution, its adoption was an important event for the population of the Kingdom of Poland. Moreover, the fact of the proclamation of the Polish constitution gave hope that drastic changes are possible in the state system of Russia. The very existence of autonomies with constitutions in Russia allowed Vernadsky to state the following:

The autonomous constitutional provinces of Finland and Poland were a striking contradiction to absolute and autocratic Russia. It was possible to overcome this contradiction only by repealing these legislative features (as Nicholas I and Alexander II did) or by extending the constitutional arrangement to the rest of the Russian Empire, and to overcome the autonomy of the outskirts internally by restructuring the Russian Empire on a federalist basis. It was precisely the way Alexander I sought after 1815. (Mironenko, 1990, p. 214)

In his speech at the opening of the Polish Sejm, Alexander I emphasized that his plans included an undoubted ambition to start implementing reforms in Russia itself (Mironenko, 1990, p.216). In the autumn of 1820, Alexander I visited Warsaw, where the preparation of the final constitution draft, in two copies, in French and in Russian, was completed (Vallaton, 1991, p. 46).

The constitutional draft was originally named as “Lacharte constitution pelledel’Empirede Russie” (Tomsinov, 2006, p. 132). Subsequently, Alexander I decided to rename the document as "State Charter of the Russian Empire." The word “constitutional” had evidently disappeared from the name. It should be

noted that there was no such term in the text of the document itself. However, most researchers are inclined to believe that the "Charter" actually provided for the transformation of Russia into a constitutional monarchy.

The indicated document proclaimed the principle of popular representation in the form of a bicameral parliament - the State Sejm (State Duma), composed of "the sovereign and two chambers" (the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies (Ambassadorial Chamber)). The Polish roots of the name of the representative body are striking. Actually the lower Chamber included "county ambassadors and deputies of district urban societies." It was also envisaged the creation of viceroys of Sejm, which, along with the All-Russian Sejm, were called upon to assist the emperor in his legislative activities. All this shows the obvious ambition of the emperor to create such a structure of representative institutions, in which the monarch would invariably maintain the status of the autocrat.

Thus, the political system in Russia got the form, which in fact was a symbiosis of Western European parliamentarism and an unlimited monarchy. According to the opponents of the emperor, everything in the proposed scheme contradicted the real functioning of the mechanism of the absolute monarchy in its purest form. For example, in their opinion, all formal concessions made in favor of representative institutions, in the distribution of powers, should have led to the inevitable curtailment of the institutions of autocratic power. The loss of the strategic position of the autocracy was also proved by granting the State Sejm with certain rights in the field of legislation. This was clearly indicated by the relevant provision, according to which no law could pass avoiding the Sejm and without its approval. In the document under consideration, the emperor's right to legislative initiative proved the emperor's special prerogative. On the other hand, the system of election of deputies proposed in the "State Charter" significantly expanded the number of participants-representatives of social strata participating in them. In particular, in addition to the nobles, representatives of urban communities could go to the Chamber of Deputies as candidates.

If we proceed strictly from the external parameters of the proposed constitution, it in a certain way repeated the contours of an attempt to reform Russian statehood, offered at one time by M. M. Speransky. Outwardly, the emperor retained the leadership of the executive branch, and the reformed State Council and ministries were also subordinate to him. The Council of State, in turn, was to consist of the Government Council and the General Meeting of the Council. At this level, a return to the above-mentioned ideas of Speransky is obvious – he actually led the emperor to perform mostly representative functions due to the expansion of the role of the State Council in the general structure of the central administration (as cited in Mironov, 1994, p. 65).

The purely constitutional provisions of the proposed document were evidenced by the provisions contained in the special chapters of the Charter proclaiming civil liberties: freedom of speech, religion, equality of all Russian citizens before the law, inviolability of the person, freedom of the press.

The draft of the constitution clearly shows the intention of the initiator of the proposed changes to invite Russia to take the path of federal development. This was evidenced not only by the creation of the State Sejm, but also by the presence of a Sejm in each vicegerency, which could have consequences favorable for the country. In this historical segment of the country's development, according to the initiators of the proposed constitution, a predominant tendency towards decentralization would undoubtedly contribute to the development of economic potential in various regions of Russia.

During the years of 1816-1818 Alexander I also repeatedly declares his intention to grant certain constitutional status to the Russian provinces adjacent to the Kingdom of Poland. It is appropriate to recall in this connection the fact of the existence of a “softer” approach to resolving the issue of granting certain autonomy to the Principality of Finland.

It should be noted that a certain atmosphere of free search for new ideas in the field of public administration in the regions where the non-Russian population dominated was created around the emperor. As an example, we refer to his closest associate M. M. Speransky. As a result of palace intrigues, he was sent to political exile. At this time, he had to govern in Siberia. Here it is appropriate to recall the project of M. M. Speransky, who first introduced the concept of "aliens" and his plans to rule them in Siberia

The first document, testifying to the new approaches of the Siberian governor, dubbed the “Charter on the management of Siberian aliens”. A notable feature of this document was the fact that it provided for the division of the indigenous population of Siberia into various categories according to their lifestyle — settled, nomadic, and vagrants. According to this division their rights and the order of ruling them were determined. Previously, the local inhabitants of Siberia were brought by the tsarist government under one common characteristic and were called Gentiles or Yasash. Speransky called them a new word – “aliens”.

Among other projects compiled directly by Speransky or under his leadership were: “Charter on the management of Siberian Kyrgyz people”, “Regulation on debt obligations between peasants and aliens” (Tomsinov, 2006, p.328).

Earlier, Mikhail Speransky actively participated in the process of determining the status of Finland, which became part of the Russian Empire as a result of the war with Sweden. In his projects on the political structure of Finland, which in its volume made to a whole volume, Speransky proceeded from the fact that “Finland is a state, not a province”. He contributed significantly to the preserving local authorities in this country and “native traditions”, as it was written at that time. For these services to Finland Speransky was offered a letters patent of Finnish nobility, but he refused it (Tomsinov, 2006, p.430).

In this case, it is characteristic to indicate the following circumstance: the term “federations” appears for the first time in the projects of the Decembrists, however, it is filled in the draft of N. Muravyov, as it seems to us, with a purely “European reading”. In this case, it is about creating a counterweight, according to the Decembrists, to a purely or unnecessarily centralized state. The pinnacle of these proposals was the idea to divide Russia into lands, territories.

In this case, the principle of taking into account ethnic characteristics was observed - but only in relation to Poland, Finland and Ukraine. N. Muravyov proceeded from the recognition of the obvious fact that these were places of compact residence of ethnic groups, which at a time gave the name to these territories. At other respects, the project of “administrative reform” was reduced to partial decentralization. The proposal to transfer the capital of the future state to Nizhny Novgorod can be considered the peak of those attempts. It is curious that this is where the geographic and political schemes of reorganization of the state system of free Russia by “federalist” N. Muravyov and “unitarian” P. Pestel come together.

P. Pestel in his program document clearly limits the ability of certain territories inhabited by various ethnic groups to obtain special status within the Russian state. In particular, he emphasizes that territories such as Finland, Georgia, Crimea and other areas inhabited by representatives of non-Russian nationalities

“never used and never can use their independence and always belonged either to Russia itself or, if not Russia, then Sweden ... or any strong state in general” (Gogolevskiy & Kovalev, 2000, p.270-271).

Only in relation to Poland did P. Pestel provide for the obligatory representation of state independence. However, the revolutionary spirit of the constitutional draft rests on a rigid scheme of the future state system of free Poland. It, according to Pestel, must be identical to Russia after the impending overthrow of the autocracy. It was not only about the similarity of the principles of the structure of the higher governing bodies, but also about the procedure for the appointment and selection of officials to government posts. In addition, the author of this project attempted on the inviolable rights of that category of the population, which played an exceptional role in the history of Poland - tycoons. The following proposal of P. Pestel came to this: “any aristocracy, even based on wealth and property, even based on privileges and tribal rights, should be completely rejected forever” (Gogolevskiy & Kovalev, 2000, p.272).

As can be seen from the above, the offered version of the independent state system of Poland was under such conditions that it could not cause a positive reaction of the majority of the the future independent state’s population. A similar imposition of exclusively administrative methods is also characteristic of issues on the “internal” aspect of solving the problems of the territorial structure of the future, free from the autocracy of Russia in Pestel’s projects (Ananich, Ganelin, & Paneyah, 2006, p. 84). He suggested that the “violent” Caucasian peoples “be forcibly resettled into the interior of Russia, crushing them in small numbers across all Russian volosts”, and distribute the liberated lands among Russian immigrants, “in order to blot out in the Caucasus all the signs of its former (that is, present) inhabitants and to turn this land into a calm and comfortable Russian region” (Gogolevskiy & Kovalev, 2000, p. 299). Such a forceful approach to resolving the issues of the resettlement of representatives of individual ethnic groups became a kind of algorithm for the actions of the authorities, which was realized in the further development of the Russian state. We are talking about the actions of the state in cases where individual peoples did not “fit” into the paradigm of adequate behavior in relation to the Center from the point of view of the authorities. It should be recognized that one of the theorists of republicanism in Russia became the founder of this approach. Thus, we can say that the legal and territorial possibilities of a practical approach to resolving the issue of the national-administrative structure of Russia in some cases were predetermined in advance.

It should be noted that a purely administrative approach, characteristic of P. Pestel in this issue of the implementation of the tasks of the revolutionary government, also manifested itself in matters of language policy. He emphasized the need for “first, only the Russian language should dominate the whole territory of the Russian state; all relations are thereby extremely facilitated; concepts and way of thinking will become more homogeneous; people who speak the same language will take up the closest connection between themselves and make up the same people more uniformly” (Gogolevskiy & Kovalev, 2000, p.305). Thus, the doctrine of a unitary state, as suggested by P. Pestel, is necessarily combined with a simplified approach to the issues of language policy.

It is characteristic that in this part the views of the republican Pestel coincide with the draft constitution of the supporter of the constitutional monarchy N. Muravyov. He established a rigid standart that determined strict compliance with the constitution (Charter) of the Russian citizenship’s norms. The Muravyov project emphasized: “20 years after enforcing this Charter of the Russian Empire, no one who has not studied Russian literacy can be recognized as a citizen” (Gogolevskiy & Kovalev, 2000, p.385).



Thus, we can conclude that there existed a certain amplitude of approaches of the Russian political elite (both representatives of the ruling circles and the opposition) on public policy issues in regions where it was necessary to take into account the peculiarities of socio-economic, cultural and political development of the predominantly indigenous population. At the same time, it is worth noting that a certain orientation of liberal politics, where Catherine II stood at the origins, and then brought to a logical conclusion by Alexander I, began to meet with a negative attitude even among representatives of political groups that were opposed to the doctrine and practice of the Russian absolute monarchy. To a large extent, this concerned the sphere associated with the peculiarities of implementing the tasks of state policy in national regions.

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