1998-11

'Creating' a Russian Nation

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3556

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The disintegration of the USSR intensified the debate among intellectuals and politicians on where the "just" borders of the Russian state should be and who should belong to the Russian nation.

The attitude of the Russians towards their state and their view of themselves have traditionally been shaped by the existence of the empire. Some argue that Russians have failed to acquire a properly developed ethnic national identity, as opposed to an imperial "Soviet" personality. In turn, in the absence of necessary political freedoms and civil society, civic identity, based on inclusive citizenship, also could not emerge among different peoples of the empire.(1) This peculiarity of the Russian situation was well understood by pre-revolutionary and emigre Russian thinkers, who argued that Russians managed to create a new type of a community, different from nations as they existed in Western Europe. According to this position, the Russian empire also could not be compared to the empires created by West European nations. In this new community, the argument went, peoples of different ethnic origin, cultural and religious backgrounds peacefully co-existed, retaining their essential ethnic characteristics. The best members of every group were invited to work in the governing bodies of the state.

After the October revolution, Soviet ideologists continued to propagate similar views concerning "a new community of one and united Soviet people." As a result, some Russians disregarded the fact that they lived in a multiethnic empire and they saw the entire USSR rather than their own Union republic, the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, as their homeland.
Only in the 1960s did some Russians for the first time begin to question whether the maintenance of this multiethnic community was in the interest of Russians. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and others argued that the preservation of the USSR led Russians to make unnecessary economic sacrifices and distorted its culture and religion. Thus, they urged their people to shake off "the burden of Central Asia and the Caucasus," let the Baltic republics go independent, and thus pave the way for the creation of a modern nation-state. But who would be the members of the Russian nation and where would be the borders of a new Russian nation-state? For Solzhenitsyn and those who shared his views, the Russian nation was to consist of all eastern Slavs, i.e., it included Ukrainians and Belarusians. Linguistic and cultural similarities between eastern Slavs and alleged common history, stretching back to the medieval principality of Kievan Rus, were regarded by these Russian nationalists as markers of common national identity.

By the end of Gorbachev's perestroika the idea that the preservation of the empire was not in the interest of Russians penetrated the Russian political establishment, including President Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin argued that the Russian Federation should become a new nation-state for Russians. However, a few years of the Russian leadership juxtaposing the RF and the USSR was not a long enough period to make Russians, including members of the political elite themselves, fully identify with the Russian Federation as a legitimate Russian national statehood. Therefore, after the demise of the USSR, the belief that Russians were ultimately an imperial people and could survive as a distinct community only within some form of a union remained strong. At the same time, politicians and intellectuals who argued that the time had come for Russians to put the "imperial temptation" behind them and build a modern nation-state did not agree on the geography of the state and membership of the nation.

The post-communist imperialists are best represented by neo-Eurasianists,(2) who in 1990 established their own newspaper Den' (renamed Zavtra in 1993). Neo-Eurasianists concentrate their efforts on trying to foresee Russia’s future, which they picture as an imperial one. As the philosopher Yuri Borodai put it: "I can say frankly and openly that I am an imperialist I believe in the resurrection of the Russian state after
Golgotha." (3) Another imperialist, writer Eduard Limonov, argued that "a single powerful state within the borders of Russian civilization" would reemerge. Where are those borders? Limonov continued: "1. Minimal: Where Russian people live, there is Russian territory 2. Maximal: Where people who regard themselves as belonging to Russian civilization live, there is Russian territory, protected by Russian might." (4) According to the imperialists, the majority of former Soviet citizens felt they belonged to "Russian civilization."

The program minimum of imperialists and the first step towards the re-creation of a full-fledged union on the territory of the USSR is to incorporate into the Russian state those areas of non-Russian newly independent states where Russians and Russian speakers constitute a majority. The view that all Russian speakers are of special concern to the Russian government is not limited to extreme politicians and ideologists. In 1993-1995, the idea that all Russian speakers regarded the Russian Federation as their homeland and that, therefore, the Russian government should use a wide range of measures to protect them from discrimination constituted a core of Yeltsin's foreign policy. Various members of the government made statements in which they included Russian speakers outside the borders of the RF into the Russian nation.

Many ordinary Russians in the RF also supported this view. According to the Moscow-based Public Opinion Foundation (renamed the Institute of Sociological Analysis in 1997), in 1995 up to 33 percent of those polled supported the view that Russia should incorporate territories of other newly independent states where Russian speakers lived in a compact majority. (5) Yet, Russian speakers themselves did not share this view. According to the polls conducted in 1992-1995 by the Institute of Ethnography in Moscow, a maximum of 10 percent of Russian speakers viewed the RF as their homeland, whereas the majority still regarded the defunct USSR as such. (6)

The view that Ukrainians and Belarusians also belong to the Russian nation is, in turn, very popular among intellectuals, politicians and average Russians. Indeed, when by 1993 it became clear that the quick re-creation of the union was not forthcoming, some
Russian intellectuals abandoned their pro-Soviet sentiments and limited their claim to the East Slavic lands. For instance, in the summer of 1993 a significant split occurred in the National Salvation Front (NSF), which was at the time an important opposition group. Its leaders--Nikolai Pavlov, Ilya Nikolaev and Yuri Belyaev--left the ranks of the NSF to set up their own National Opposition. They denounced the NSF's adherence to the re-creation of the USSR and pledged their commitment to the creation of a Slavic state that would incorporate Ukraine and Belarus.

In the political establishment, the idea of special ties between eastern Slavs enjoys a great popularity. In May 1997, the idea of Slavic unity was used by President Yel'tsin to justify signing a charter on a union with Belarus. In turn, in his book Derzhava, the Communist Party leader and a member of the State Duma, Gennadi Zyuganov, unequivocally included Ukrainians and Belarusians in the Russian nation.

Polls by the above-mentioned Institute for Sociological Analysis have also established that the idea of a Slavic unity finds a broad resonance among the Russian population at large. A poll in the spring of 1997 demonstrated that 64 percent of the respondents supported the idea of merging Ukraine and Russia into one state. In April 1997, 75 percent endorsed a union with Belarus. (In turn, all the nostalgia for the USSR notwithstanding, in 1997, only 7 percent of RF citizens polled by the institute endorsed the re-creation of the full-fledged union.)(7)

The post-communist period also has witnessed the proliferation of purely racist groups, whose leaders appeal to popular resentment against the growing influx of refugees and exploit people's frustrations over economic hardships. Those advocating racial definition of Russianness argue that, in order to survive, Russians should safeguard themselves from harmful influences of other "ethnoses," especially the Jews and peoples of Central Asia. The leader of the Russian Party, Nikolai Bondarik, states: "In Russia, there must be only a Russian government, a Russian parliament consisting of ethnic Russians belonging to the Great Nation by blood and spirit."(8) Some of the racists found their way into the mainstream political institutions. For instance, Nikolai Lysenko of the
National Republican Party of Russia was elected to the 1993 Duma. Racist statements can also be found in official statements of Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party, whose platform, on the whole, is imperialist. And yet, despite the fact that the activities of racist groups attract a lot of media attention, they exist on the margins of Russian politics.

The above-mentioned views on what it means to be a Russian and where the borders of the Russian state should be are rooted in either pre-revolutionary imperial or Soviet past and their advocates apply concepts which have been elaborated under entirely different circumstances.

There is, however, a novel idea concerning Russian national identity which entered Russian intellectual discourse in the late 1980s and gathered some strength in the post-communist period. This is the idea of a civic Russian (rossiiskaya) nation whose members are all citizens of the Russian Federation regardless of their ethnic origin and cultural background, united by loyalty to the newly emerging political institutions and the constitution. (Before the late 1980s, when Western scholarly literature on civic forms of nationalism began to be translated into Russian, only the ethnic definition of a nation as a community of persons united by common culture, religion, language and tracing its history back to a common ancestor, was in use.) The main advocate of a civic Russian nation is the former head of the State Committee on Nationalities Relations and director of the Institute of Ethnography, Valeri Tishkov. He calls on the Russian government to encourage dissemination of common civic values and symbols which would have a meaning for all citizens of Russia, not only for ethnic Russians.(9)

Attempts to forge a compound civic identity among all peoples of the Russian Federation strongly marked the policies of Yeltsin's government in 1991 and 1992. No specific Russian ethnic characteristics are reflected in the 1991 Russian citizenship law, which does not even require a basic knowledge of the Russian language as a condition for obtaining Russian citizenship. Although in 1993-1995, the Russian government defined the Russian nation as a community of Russian speakers throughout the former
USSR, the 1993 Russian constitution mentions a civic Russian (rossiiskaya) nation as a community of all RF citizens.

The supporters of a civic Russian nation are in the minority among Russian political and intellectual elites. This concept is also opposed by leaders of ethnic autonomies in the RF, who regard it as a new attempt at Russifying national minorities. How widespread civic nationalism is among the RF population at large is to be further investigated by scholars. Whether civic Russian nationalism has a future will depend on the success of Russia’s democratization and economic reform. The failure of Russian democracy will inevitably strengthen either imperial or racist views on Russian identity with disturbing consequences for Russia itself and other newly independent states.

NOTES:

1 For the development of this argument, see Geoffrey Hosking, Russia. People and Empire 1552-1917 (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997).

2 These people reiterate the ideas of the émigré intellectual movement of the 1920s, Evrazitsy, who argued that a unique civilization of "Russia-Eurasia" emerged out of different peoples of the Russian empire. This civilization was neither European no Asiatic in nature.

3 Nash sovremennik, no. 7, 1992, p. 130.


5 Polis, no. 5, 1995, pp. 94 and 96.


8 Rech, no. 1, 1994, p. 4.