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Russia's 'Little Slav Brother'?

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The Western press has touted the "traditional alliance" between Russia and Serbia as reason to fear that NATO's strikes against Yugoslavia might cast a shadow on post-Cold War cooperation. That fear has had immediate effect, driving Western bankers to ignore Russia's dismal economic state and press for extension of a new International Monetary Fund loan. "If Russia were not an unstable, global power, the international financial organizations would have a very different view," Charles Blitzer, chief international economist at Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette, and a former World Bank official, told The Financial Times. "This is political. Yugoslavia has made it all the more important not to push Russia out of the tent." (1)

Russians have no need for historic grievances with the West, however, since there are plenty of contemporary reasons to be angry. The cultural justifications for their frustration have only allowed Moscow to portray the Clinton administration as naïve adventurers, best restrained by stronger European institutions. If the Russian government has fulfilled any historical destiny, it has been to use trouble in the Balkans as a means to strengthen its hand in European affairs.

Rarely in history has the Russian state been so driven by intellectual dreams of pan-Slavism that it has lost sight of its own interests. Russian expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries led the Kremlin to support Balkan populations, but also to manipulate them towards its own ends. Peter the Great did indeed call on the region's Christians to rise up against their Ottoman rulers as his armies marched towards the Pruth River, but the "liberation" of Christians was always a means for destabilizing the Ottomans rather
than an end in itself. Catherine the Great won the right to represent Balkan Christians vis-à-vis the Ottomans in 1774, but her program merely fit into a larger plan to destroy the Turkish empire and seize its territory. The first Serbian nationalist uprising, in 1804, was rebuffed by Moscow for two years until Russia's war with the Ottomans made the Serbs a useful irritant; the Serbs were promptly abandoned a year later when Russia sought peace. When the Serbs won autonomy for their province in 1830, Russian diplomats meddled in its internal affairs. At the height of the Crimean War, Russia looked with disfavor on the Serbian government of the Karadjordjevic prince Alexander. In the 1885 Balkan War (immortalized in G. B. Shaw's Arms and the Man), Russia actually supported Bulgaria against Serbia's Obrenovich king, Milan IV.

Although the tsar supported the Serbs at the beginning of World War One, the independent Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was only founded after the Bolsheviks, hostile to Yugoslavia's royal government (intermarried with the Romanovs), had seized control of the Russian state. During World War Two, Stalin supported the Partizan movement fighting Nazi occupation. Three years after the war's end, however, Stalin broke decisively with Marshal Tito.

Today, of course, Russia has the luxury of sitting on the sidelines while its primary competitor for diplomatic influence, the Western alliance, itself traipses deeper into the Balkans. The troika atop the Russian state -- Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, Duma Speaker Gennadi Seleznev and Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov -- instead sits back and carefully exploits NATO's mistakes. If the West would like to believe that the Russians are animated by primeval instincts to defend Slavic brethren, then so be it. The more their mischief is interpreted as mandated by history, the less responsibility they must take for what they do.

The Russian public is, no doubt, genuinely enraged by NATO's attacks. According to a poll conducted by the All-Russia Center for Studying Public Opinion, the percentage of Russians holding a favorable view of the United States has fallen from 67 percent in December 1998 to 33 percent today, while the percentage harboring negative feelings
for the US has risen from 23 to 53 percent in the same period. (2) Reportage from Moscow indicates, however, that mounting frustration with Russia's helplessness in the face of the West, rather than strong fellow feeling for the Serbs, is behind the anger. The nations united in bombardment of the Serbs are, after all, the same countries who have tied their hopes for Russia to radical economic reform undertaken by an incompetent and corrupt government. Aleksander Lebed', governor of the Krasnoyarsk region and perennial presidential candidate, attributed the anger in Moscow to the sense that "we are a humiliated and offended nation." (3)

A Russian government genuinely driven by pan-Slavism would have responded to such an outcry by embracing Yugoslav and Belarusian demands for a Slavic "Political Union" enveloping all three states. Instead, all major players in the Russian state have downplayed the proposal. Primakov and Seleznev have both cited "numerous legal nuances" that must first be taken into account. (4) When could such a union be founded? It will "require thorough analysis," Ivanov told the press. "The Foreign Ministry is working on it." (5)

In the meantime, however, the Russian government has been actively pursuing the far more important, and more self-interested, project of increasing Moscow's influence in Europe at the expense of the United States. Six days after the bombing began, Primakov was in Belgrade promoting a settlement; shortly thereafter he landed in a Western capital -- not Washington, however, but Bonn. Although Primakov's first attempt to mediate a peace via Europe was rebuffed, the prime minister nonetheless returned to Moscow to assure the Russian public that German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder "specifically pointed out that Russia must continue its positive mediating role in the future." (6)

The alternative, Ivanov had earlier suggested, was a world in which the United States ignores the restraints of the Russia-NATO Founding Act and "seeks to impose a unipolar order under which the destinies of peoples would be decided in Washington." (7) After a meeting with Knut Vollebaek, chairman of the Organization for
Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Ivanov stressed the need for a European security system "which could prevent the occurrence of such conflicts in the future."(8) Such overtures led the French daily Le Monde to speculate on Primakov's Soviet-style motives. The Russian premier, the paper noted, "is convinced that the Europeans, divided concerning continuation of the operation, will seize on the first gesture made by Milosevic, and he sees this crisis as an opportunity to reposition Russia at the center of the international stage."(9)

To diminish US influence and promote pan-European security structures, the Russian government has played on continental fears of Islamic fundamentalism. The naïve Americans, it is suggested, do not understand that with the end of the Cold War the threat has shifted from Moscow to points south. Ivanov and company have, unfortunately, had help in this regard from Washington. Having forced moderate Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova to side with the radical Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) at the Rambouillet talks, the US State Department is easily portrayed as a friend of extremists. Ivanov has since said that the US and NATO directly supported the creation of the KLA in order to separate Kosovo from Yugoslavia. "In this way," Ivanov said, "a center of Islamic extremism is being created in the heart of Europe with the help of Europeans themselves and this center will no doubt spread like a cancer across the continent."(10) The self-consciously more sophisticated Russians, on the other hand, have supported Belgrade's every use of Rugova as a negotiating partner. (Whether Rugova has been negotiating of his own free will has become irrelevant, since he is as interested as any Serb in the reduction of the KLA's influence).

The Russians have therefore picked apart an alliance the US cobbled together, and come off as the more erudite negotiators for their trouble. It is perhaps most ironic that the world power most easily convinced of Russian diplomatic skill is the country -- the United States -- against which its government's efforts have been most urgently deployed. The New York Times reported on April 20 that President Bill Clinton had called Russian President Boris Yeltsin to seek Russian diplomatic help resolving the Kosovo crisis.(11) The US, in other words, had gone in one month from hoping IMF aid
would buy Russian silence on the crisis to hoping instead for Russian help in finding a way out of it. The Times attributed the American overture to the realization that "any solution requires Russian cooperation, because of the nation's special relationship with the Serbs."

If such an accolade is a tribute to Russia's dexterity with its own past, it does not address what is perhaps Prime Minister Primakov's greatest political accomplishment -- securing his own position as the inevitable heir to the presidential throne. All State Duma factions, from the liberal Yabloko and Right Cause parties to the extreme Communists and nationalists, have thrown their support behind his diplomatic initiatives. Outspoken opponents of Primakov such as Boris Nemtsov today call for the refusal of US aid and boycott of Western products.(12) "Our active work to oppose NATO's aggression against Yugoslavia," Ivanov noted, "is consolidating rather than separating us in internal policy."(13) A few brave Russian journalists have wryly noted that the sleazier elements around Primakov's administration have been given a new rallying cry, as if pan-Slavism were "the last refuge of the scoundrel." "The government," Aleksandr Budberg notes, "has gained an opportunity to switch the population from the blunders in the economy, from the unpaid wages and pensions, and from the rising dollar exchange rate and towards an outside enemy."(14) Yel'tsin has been given a reprieve from controversies, such as the appointment of Aleksander Voloshin as his chief of staff, which had threatened to widen the gulf between him and the Duma. Such newfound unity is not only in Yel'tsin's interest, of course, since Primakov's hopes of replacing Yel'tsin in elections next summer depend on prolonging the cease-fire between the Kremlin and parliament. Brave will be the politician who challenges the architect of peace in Europe and unity at home.

Notes:
(1) "World Bank to Resume Russia Programme," The Financial Times (London), 16 April 1999, p. 2.

(3) "Lebed Prescribes 'Tough Stand' on NATO," Radiostantsia Ekho Moskvy in Russian, 0819 GMT, 1 April 99; FBIS-EEU-1999-0401.

(4) "Primakov to Meet Seleznev Around 20 April," Interfax in English, 1548 GMT, 12 April 99; FBIS-SOV-1999-0412.

(5) "Ivanov Views FRY Wish To Join Russia-Belarus Union," ITAR-TASS World Service in English, 1313 GMT, 9 April 99; FBIS-SOV-1999-0409.


(12) "Russian 'Right Cause' Chiefs on Kosovo," Radiostantsia Ekho Moskvy in Russian, 1415 GMT, 1 April 99; FBIS-SOV-1999-0401. The Serbian government, however, seems
to have stuck with Primakov as opposed to such converts: It refused to meet a
delegation of Right Cause deputies who traveled to Belgrade. See also Miriam Lanskoy,

(13) "Ivanov Claims NATO Actions Uniting Country," ITAR-TASS World Service in
English, 1550 GMT, 2 April 99; FBIS-SOV-1999-0402.

(14) "End to Hysteria Over Kosovo Urged," Moskovsky komsomolets in Russian, 30
March 99; FBIS-SOV-1999-0330.

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