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Russia's Ethnic Relations: Problems of Policy and Practice

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Summary

The "nationalities question" remains an acute problem for the Russian government, both in its relations with the other CIS republics and with ethnic minorities in the Russian Federation. The Russian leadership does not yet have any consistent policy on these issues, nor is there any long-term strategic planning. Principles and goals are neither elaborated, nor pursued in any clear way. Different foci of power in Russia advocate and try to follow in practice their own differing approaches to the problem of the inter-republican and inter-ethnic relations in the country. More often than not, these approaches are inspired by their group interests and personal ambitions than by a genuine concern for the fate of the Russian Federation and the CIS. As a result the nationalities question has become one of the trump cards in the ongoing power struggle in Russia and one may expect that in this political crisis nationalities policy will become even more haphazard and unpredictable.

Three Approaches to the Russian Nationalities Policy.

Risking oversimplification, one may say that at present three major approaches to the problem of inter-republican and inter-ethnic relations have been formulated and still are being debated by Russian politicians, mass media, and the general public. The first approach may be tentatively called "liberal democratic," the second "moderate nationalistic," and the third "extreme chauvinistic." They reflect different political ideologies and different views on Russia's future. All go back to the last years of the "restructuring" period when, for the first time, the dissolution of the Soviet Union became a real possibility and came to the fore on the political agenda.
The liberal democrats argue that Russia and Russians should be ready to pay a certain price for their imperial past, i.e., the dominating positions that ethnic Russians occupied in the former Soviet Union, because many non-Russian ethnic groups and CIS countries still regard Russia with deep suspicion. They also point out that the declared federative character of Russia should imply serious concessions to non-Russian ethnic groups and political formations on its territory -- otherwise, the Russian Federation may repeat the fate of the Soviet Union. Correspondingly, they exclude the threat of using force in Russia's relations with other republics of the CIS, even in preventing conflicts between these republics (e.g., the Armenian-Azerbaidjanian dispute over Nagornyi Karabakh) or inter-ethnic conflicts on their territories (e.g., the Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation). Force may be used only as a last resort to prevent inter-ethnic bloodshed within the Russian Federation; in such conflicts the Russian government should be completely impartial (contrary to its policy in the Ossetian-Ingush conflict). In their opinion, it is inadmissible for Russia to raise territorial claims on other CIS countries and all problems in their inter-relations should be settled only through negotiations and compromise. Likewise, the democrats are against pressure methods -- such as those used in Moldova or those now being used in the Baltics -- to "protect" the interests of Russians living in non-Russian republics of the CIS.

The democrats' attitude towards these Russians is fairly ambiguous. They have limited sympathy with their plight, keeping in mind their past colonialist behavior and the fact that they always tend to ally with the conservative forces in Russia. At the same time, they do not welcome their re-emigration to Russia, not only for economic reasons but also because they do not wish to increase the support base of their political opponents. Hence, the opinion is widespread that the democrats betray the interests of some 25 million Russians and Russophones outside Russia.
The liberal democratic approach to inter-ethnic relations is, with its implied moral principle, still shared by a significant sector of Russian public opinion and is basically supported by the most influential newspapers of the liberal camp like Izvestiia, Nezavisimaia gazeta and Moskovskie Novosti. However, it is receiving a less sympathetic response in the Russian corridors of power. Significantly, many of its most prominent adherents -- Starovoitova, Shelovkovediaev, Burbulis, and Poltoranin -- were recently ousted from their positions in the Russian government, while some others, like Foreign Minister Kozyrev, are hurriedly trying to amend their positions on the issue.

The moderate nationalists (the "demo-patriots" or "etatist democrats" in the Russian political parlance) are advocating the principle that the main goal of Russia's policy in CIS inter-republican and inter-ethnic relations should be a "civilized" promotion of her national interests, which in practice means the interests of ethnic Russians. They favor the restoration of Russia's great power status and consider Russian nationalism to be a positive factor in the political development of the country. They tend to support the CIS only if its existence is beneficial to Russian's interests and insist that Russian policy towards the other republics should follow a Real-politik principle and respond exclusively to their attitudes to and relations with Russia, irrespective of the nature of their political regimes. In any case, they do not exclude territorial claims on other republics and insist that the Russian government take a hard stand against infringement on the rights of Russians and Russophones living there. They are also adherents of the "Russia single and indivisible" principle, which opposes any concessions to Japan in the Kuril Islands dispute and is hostile to separatist trends in non-Russian regions of the Russian Federation. At the same time, they claim that they do not wish a restoration of the Soviet Union in any form and that in principle
they support liberal reforms in Russia.

The influence of the moderate nationalists in the Russian political arena is growing. In the government their line is pursued by such influential figures as Vice-President Rutskoi, Vice-Premier and Chairman of the State Committee for Nationalities Shakhrai, and Yeltsin's adviser for public relations Stankevich. Their ideas and attitudes are shared by a majority of the members of the Russian Security Council. It is these people who recently pushed the government to take a pro-Ossetian stance in the ongoing Ossetian-Ingush conflict in the North Caucasus only because the Ossetians are traditionally considered pro-Russian. This has been done against Starovoitova's recommendation that the government must be neutral with regard to both sides of the conflict. For the same reason they favor the Abkhazians in their conflict with the Georgians. Former Chairman of the State Committee for Nationalities, Tishkov, who is often allegedly characterized as belonging to the democratic camp, actually did not have any serious dispute with these people. His resignation was connected not with his policy but with the fact that he never belonged to, nor was admitted into, Yeltsin's "inner circle."

Foreign Minister Kozyrev, who has been accused of failing to encouraging CIS members to favor Russian interests or to provide sufficient protection for ethnic Russians in other republics of the CIS, is currently also gravitating towards the "demopatriots" in an apparent attempt to avoid dismissal. Just before the last Congress of People's Deputies, the Russian Foreign Ministry made public a Russian foreign policy doctrine. This 58-page document unambiguously formulates the intention to defend Russia's national interests, if necessary, by forceful methods. The document stresses that Moscow does not intend to pay for the development of relations with CIS countries "with unilateral concessions to the detriment of its own state interests, or with restrictions on ethnic Russians' rights."
In the Russian parliament the moderate nationalistic course is championed by such politicians as Rumiantsev (Managing Secretary of the Constitutional Commission), Travkin (leader of the Democratic party), Lukin (Russian ambassador to Washington), Ambartsumov (Head of the Supreme Soviet Foreign Policy Committee), and many others. The main opposition block, the Civic Center, is also advocating demo-patriotic views on issues connected with Russia's inter-republican and inter-ethnic relations. In this respect, the positions of many in the Russian government and in what is considered a centrist opposition in the Russian political spectrum are at present practically identical.

The extreme chauvinists count on Russian nationalism as the key to opening the door to power. The Cold War defeat and the disintegration of the Soviet Union painfully wounded the national pride of many Russians. The essentially revanchist programs of the extreme right appeal to those people who aim for the restoration of the Soviet (i.e., Russian) empire, including its xenophobic, particularly anti-Semitic and anti-Caucasian, slogans.

Until recently, the extremist movement suffered from disunity, being represented by three major groups: unconverted national Communists ("Reds"), overt Russian chauvinists of anti-Communist persuasion ("Whites"), and neo-fascists ("Browns"). However, in many recent practical actions they are demonstrating their capability to overcome ideological differences (in this connection Russian observers write about the "Red and Brown coalition"). With the creation of the National Salvation Front, which Yeltsin unsuccessfully tried to ban, the Whites and the Reds have also decided to end their grievances. Since these forces remain in an irreconcilable opposition to Yeltsin, their direct influence on the policy of the Russian government remains rather limited. However, they have many sympathizers, even supporters, in the Russian parliament. Along with the block "Democratic Choice," and the Civic Union, the National Salvation
Front is already becoming an active party in the political process.

Who Formulates and Directs Russian Policy on the CIS and Nationalities?

"Nobody in particular" is the paradoxical answer to this question. Russia currently lacks a consistent and coordinated policy both vis-à-vis the CIS countries and the ethnic minorities within the Russian Federation. Last year two important memoranda were submitted to Yeltsin and his cabinet. I had the opportunity to read them both. The first one, which was signed by First Deputy Foreign Minister Shelov-Kovediaev, was devoted to Russia's relations with other CIS countries. The second one, which was signed by Chairman of the State Committee for Nationalities Tishkov, dealt with ethnic minorities within the Russian Federation and with Russians living outside Russia. Both memoranda insisted on expanding long-term strategic planning aimed at the regulation of inter-ethnic and inter-republican relations. Both pointed out that many conflict situations could be anticipated and diagnosed in advance, providing an opportunity to slackening and diffuse them. However, no serious attention was paid to these memoranda and soon afterwards their authors had to resign.

The growing crisis and paralysis of power in Russia have resulted in inability or postponement of solution to many problems. Moreover, Russian foreign policy considers relations with the CIS countries of only secondary importance in comparison to her relations with Western and some Asian countries. Thus, the prevailing political and bureaucratic routine does little to cope with immediate problems in this sphere, sweeping potential conflicts under the rug.

At present, there are several agencies and individual politicians, often with ill-defined authority, who claim their right to intervene and direct Russian policy on inter-republican and inter-ethnic relations in the CIS. Often they blame each
other for exceeding their authority. Consider the following eight actors:

(1) The Russian Foreign Ministry is officially in charge of political relations with the CIS countries. Its influence, however, is rather limited. Some of its top-level officials complained to me that many important decisions were made during Yeltsin's meetings with other CIS leaders without taking into account, or even consulting the opinion of, the experts from the Foreign Ministry.

(2) Vice-Premier Yarov is in charge of the government's relations with regional and republican authorities within the Russian Federation. He is not considered a particularly influential figure and his authority is not clear compared to Shakhrai's.

(3) Vice-Premier and Chairman of the State Committee for Nationalities Shakhrai is responsible for keeping the nationalities question in Russia from flaring up. His well-known personal loyalty to Yeltsin makes him more influential than his predecessor Tishkov.

(4) Head of the State Security Council Skokov is considered a gray cardinal in Yeltsin's power structure and advocate of a hard-line policy in this sphere. His responsibilities are (deliberately?) defined in very vague terms, and relatively little is known about the process of recommendation and decision-making in the Council. However, there are many indications that Skokov's influence is growing.

(5) Vice-President Rutskoi, who has ambitions to become Russia's next president, is an overt hard-liner. Although relations with the CIS countries and the nationalities question are outside his responsibilities, Rutskoi likes to intervene. It was Rutskoi who, by the end of 1991, had provoked Yeltsin's ill-fated decree promulgating a state of emergency in the Chechen-Ingush republic in the North Caucasus, and then insisted on sending a Russian military force there. These actions have marred Russia's relations with Chechnia. Furthermore, Rutskoi
instigated the Russian population in Pridnestrovie to confront Moldova's government in Kishinev. Rutskoi's demarches also appear to have influenced the Russian military's decision to provide support to the Abkhazians in their conflict with the Georgians. Recently Rutskoi again called for the revision of Russia's borders with other republics.

(6) The Council of Heads of the Republics of the Russian Federation was created at the end of 1992. The Council tends to support Yeltsin in his confrontation with the parliament, but in return demands more concessions for the republics.

(7) The Russian parliament is where the hard-liners have a clear majority concerning Russia's CIS policy. On these issues the moderates in the parliament usually ally themselves with the extremists. Thus, by sustaining territorial claims on the Crimea, the Russian parliament has contributed to the deterioration of Russia's relations with the Ukraine.

(8) Finally there is president Yeltsin, who sometimes does not demonstrate a clear understanding of the problem and often simply oscillates between different approaches to it. His attitudes to other CIS countries and to the non-Russian republics of the Russian Federation are biased by his personal relations with their leaders. His attitude towards ethnic minorities in Russia is also inconsistent. As one Russian politician, who know Yeltsin fairly well, explained to me: "He is not a Russian chauvinist, he simply does not understand non-Russians, their problems, and grievances. He complains that they are a headache. That is why he would not object if one day he awoke and found that there were no ethnic minorities in Russia."

Yeltsin's impulsive and spontaneous actions -- such as his decree that promulgated a state of emergency in Chechnia; or his unhappy statement in Saratov, in January 1992, on the future of the autonomy of Russian Germans which practically violated previous agreements with Germany; or his recent order to toughen Moscow's position regarding the Baltic states and to establish a linkage between the withdrawal of troops and the observance of
the Russian minority's rights there -- often embarrass even his close political allies. They complicate the task of those who are responsible for conducting Russia's nationalities and CIS relations.

Conclusion

Long-term strategic planning in the sphere of inter-republican and inter-ethnic relations is non-existent in Russia. It is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to predict the outcome of the disputes over any particular issue between the proponents of the tough line and the supporters of the liberal. In this situation, Managing Secretary of the Constitutional Commission of the Russian parliament Rumiantsev insisted on an economic blockade against Tatarstan if it refused to dovetail its constitution with that of the Russian Federation. Burbulis, on the contrary, who headed the Russian delegation at the talks with Tatarstan, favored giving Tatarstan special status in the Russian Federation. Although Burbulis was recently dismissed from all of his positions, it seems that his stance still dominates Russian policy toward Tatarstan. One may expect that in the current political crisis in Russia its nationalities policy will become even more haphazard and unpredictable.