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Security Dialogue 2000; 31; 377

DOI: 10.1177/0967010600031003011

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From Our Readers

PUTIN'S LEADERSHIP STYLE: ETHNOCENTRIC PATRIOTISM

Russian President Vladimir Putin's authoritarian style is well documented. There is, however, another dimension to his leadership that may signify greater danger of political protest. Media have paid some attention to Putin's lack of sensitivity to issues of ethnicity, while the ethnic aspects of his administrative initiatives have hardly been pointed out at all. There is not enough ground for solid academic conclusions, but we have seen several signs that clearly testify to Putin's Russian ethnocentrism.

Russia's population is both homogeneous and extremely diverse. At the most recent census (in 1989) state authorities recognized 128 'nationalities' (ethnic groups), and the 1993 Constitution explicitly describes the country as 'multi-ethnic'. At the same time, ethnic Russians (defined by so-called 'passport nationality') make up some 82% of the population.

For all his faults, Boris Yeltsin was a leader who saw the challenge of Russia's ethnic diversity – after all, he had been a key driving force as the Soviet Union broke up along republic borders. Following the Soviet pattern, among the 15 new-born states it was only the Russian Federation that did not have a pronounced ethnic identity. Yeltsin would always ensure he referred to citizenship, and not ethnicity, when addressing his people. He avoided the term *russkiy* (ethnic Russian) and used the adjective *rossiyskiy* (encompassing all citizens). And he took up the use of the inclusive term *rossiyanin* (citizen of Russia), which was rarely heard earlier.

Yeltsin could not completely get around the fact that ethnic Russians, after all, are predominant in Russia's population. That is evident above all from his making the fate

of ethnic Russians in the 'near abroad' a major foreign policy issue. On balance, still, his successor appears to get along with much less caution in this regard. We can see this from his war in Chechnya, regional-administrative initiatives, reflections on a Russian 'national idea', and from an overt Russocentrism in his public statements.

Chechnya and Islam

In the first statement after the September 1999 bomb attacks in Moscow and other cities, President Yeltsin made certain not to associate the perpetrators with any particular ethnic group: 'This enemy does not have a conscience, shows no sorrow and is without honor. It has no face, nationality or belief. Let me stress – no nationality, no belief.' In other words, the guilty were obviously Chechens, but that would not be held against the Chechen people as a whole. However, nuances like this disappeared quickly as the second Chechen war escalated, and Putin in no way exerted himself to prevent this. 'Chechens' became synonymous with 'terrorists', 'bandits' and Islamic 'fundamentalists'. The warfare has turned half of Chechnya's population into refugees, but the military, the Kremlin, and Putin personally maintain that only 'terrorists' are targeted. There is little evidence that the war in Chechnya generates much anti-Kremlin reaction among Russia's Muslims, but the continuing fighting is a strain on the Muslim republics' relations with Moscow. This could become more evident as the Kremlin begins to implement regional policies that aim explicitly at reducing the sovereignty of Russia's republics.

Targeting the Regions

Administratively, the world's largest state is divided into 89 federal units, or subjects,

of many different levels of formal and real autonomy. The highest degree of autonomy is enjoyed by the 21 republics, which each have their own basic law, elected president, and legislative assembly. The republics are all ethnically defined: Tatarstan as the homeland of the Tatars, Kalmykia of the Kalmyks, and Chechnya of the Chechens. This does not mean that the titular population is dominant in the republic – actually, in a dozen of the republics ethnic Russians are in the majority – but it does mean that ethnic awareness among the titular population is strong. Local nationalistic policies in recent years have made it even stronger.

Under Yeltsin, regional leaders had strengthened their powers to the point that many units today appear as fiefdoms whose rulers are less interested in democracy than in their personal enrichment. That has been tolerated by the Kremlin, where such motives are also not alien. Most regions are ruled in ways that clearly contradict federal laws – and most also have legislation that does the same. Since 1996 governors and presidents have enjoyed new legitimacy, as they are elected locally rather than appointed by Moscow.

Under Putin, the times of tolerance for regional liberties seem to be over. In a series of initiatives he has signaled an intention to dramatically change the current status quo: the regions have been ordered to bring their laws into line with federal laws; Putin has threatened to dismiss elected leaders who fail to comply with this order; he has introduced draft legislation that denies the regional leaders seats in the parliament's upper chamber, the Federation Council, and removes their parliamentary immunity. The State Duma has approved this legislation and broadly supported another Putin initiative: the introduction of seven large administrative districts covering all federal subjects. The authority of the heads of these districts (five of whom are generals) is questionable, but Putin has strengthened their status by making them full members of Russia's Security Council.

What is striking about Putin's administrative initiatives is that they have no provi-

sions for accommodating the ethnic minorities' claim to special privileges within their own territories. Should he pursue his policies to the point where the 89 subjects are effectively subordinated to the seven 'general-governors' (or even dissolved), institutions securing ethnically defined federalism would all but disappear. A more immediate threat to the republics comes from the fact that they have dared to step the furthest from the federal legislation, claiming that their legislation has precedence.

In the beginning most regional leaders were reluctant to challenge Putin head-on and kept a low profile. By early summer the first voices criticizing Putin's regional policies were heard from the leaders of Ingushetia, Khakassia, Bashkortostan – and Moscow. And in midsummer the regional leaders made the first attempt to draw the line, blocking Putin's initiative on changing the composition of the Federation Council. More open confrontation between the center and the regional leaders seems to be on the cards, and republican leaders, having much to lose, may opt to play the ethnic card. That has proven to be a powerful tool of mobilization, but ethnically based protests are hard to control. According to media reports, Tatar nationalists have burnt the new federation map at their rallies, and that might be just the innocent beginning.

A New 'National Idea'

In July 1996 President Yeltsin declared that Russia was in need of a 'national idea' that would unify the population. He gave his aides one year to produce such an idea, but nothing much came out of the process. Not, anyway, until Vladimir Putin arrived on the scene and strongly reiterated the need for a 'national idea': 'Large-scale changes have taken place in an ideological vacuum. One ideology was lost and nothing new was suggested to replace it'; 'Patriotism in the most positive sense of this word' must be the backbone of a new ideology, he said.² In a programmatic article which he posted on the government's website on the eve of Yeltsin's resignation, Putin identified the

'traditional values' of Russians: patriotism, *gosudarstvennichestvo* ('state-ness', a concept with connotations of both centralization and authoritarian rule) and social solidarity. Patriotism he defined as 'a feeling of pride in one's country, its history and accomplishments [and] the striving to make one's country better, richer, stronger and happier'.³

Since becoming president, Putin has several times referred to the national idea, which should answer the country's need for spirituality and moral guidelines, and has linked this directly to *religion* – albeit not specifically to Orthodoxy. What perhaps was just a pose for Yeltsin in his last years in power has for Putin become an explicit wish to associate himself with the Orthodox Church. He claims to have been secretly baptized as a child and to wear a crucifix that his mother gave to him. His friends have told journalists that Putin has become an increasingly religious man after he rescued his two daughters from a burning house in 1997. If Putin is an Orthodox believer, that in itself does not of course make him any less, or any more, suitable as a Russian president. What we nevertheless should look out for are signs that Putin might add such spiritual substance to his 'national idea' that could alienate citizens belonging to other confessions.

Who Won the War?

While it may be argued that the above amounts only to circumstantial evidence of a Russian ethnocentrism on Putin's part, his phrasing in several statements clearly indicates that the new president is not very sensitive to issues of ethnicity. We can look at the question of Putin's choice of words in two important statements, where every word must have been carefully weighed before it was uttered by the president.

One month before the presidential election, several newspapers ran an 'Open letter by Vladimir Putin to the Russian voters', and in fact he never came any closer to an electoral programme. The last paragraph summarized his platform with a message

about building 'a worthy life' – the kind of life most citizens believe in and would like to live: 'How I, too, see our life, being [an ethnic] Russian' [*buduchi russkim chelovekom*].⁴

In one of his Victory Day speeches, commemorating the victory over Nazi Germany, Putin focused on the achievements of the Slavic peoples, and in particular on the ethnic Russians: 'The people's pride and Russian [*russkiy*] patriotism are immortal. And therefore no force can win over Russian arms [*russkoe oruzhie*], or break the army'.⁵ A lone voice to criticize Putin for this phrasing was that of journalist Yevgeniya Albats. Her Jewish father had volunteered to fight in that war and came out of it as an invalid. Hurt by Putin's words, Albats wrote: 'In a way, Putin simply repeated the 1945 speech of Josef Stalin, who proclaimed the victory in the war as a victory of ethnic Russians'.⁶

Perhaps comparing Putin to (the ethnically Georgian) Russian nationalist Josef Stalin is unfair; perhaps it is more reasonable to draw a parallel with Mikhail Gorbachev, who was ignorant of ethnicity to the point where he would travel to Kiev and express his pleasure at traveling in *Russia*. The evidence is thus far too thin to conclude that Putin is calculatedly playing a Russian nationalist card. On the other hand, we may conclude that his ethnocentrism is not merely attributable to political inexperience. It is here to stay, and its presence is ominous. Not least when it is paired with an unbending authoritarianism.

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- 2 Interfax, 3 November 1999. FBIS-SOV-1999-1103.
- 3 V. V. Putin, 'Rossiya na rubezhe tysyachetletiy' [Russia on the Threshold of the Millennium], available at www.government.gov.ru/government/minister/article-vvp1.html.

4 V. V. Putin, 'Otkrytoe pismo Vladimira Putina k rossijskim izbiratelyam', available at <http://www.putin2000.ru>.

5 This speech can be found at <http://president.kremlin.ru/events/32.html>.

6 Yevgenia Albats, 'Putin Forgets Who Was Patriotic in War', *St. Petersburg Times*, 9 May 2000.

FAILURE OF ETHNIC LEADERSHIPS AND AVENUES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CAUCASUS*

The main problem which impedes conflict resolution in the Caucasus is the failure, of the elites in general and of leaderships in particular, to develop and implement exit strategies from ethnic conflicts and economic collapse. This problem is twofold: First, there is the trap of 19th-century nationalism – the elites are caught in outdated concepts of ethnocentrism (particularly self-determination within small states) which are failing their peoples and their societies. Second, there is the inability of national leaders and chiefs of ethnic enclaves to provide for economic development. So far the regional powers, Europe, and the USA have done little to curb competition for influence and ameliorate conditions in the area.

If the regional leaders were Western company executives, outside auditors would have found their business models and management styles outdated, flawed, and failing, and the shareholders would have voted them out. As it is, the 'management' is in place and the 'shareholders' have very little say, so the failure continues, with tremendous cost in blood, poverty, and resultant political radicalism, which makes the political risk of investment in the Caucasus higher than elsewhere.

The challenge at the start of the new century will be to resolve ethnic conflicts, which are the legacy of the previous era – of Soviet imperial collapse and domination by outside powers – and to move on to economic integration. Cooperation in meeting this challenge must have national, regional, and broader international dimensions. It should focus on defusing conflicts and, if

this is successful, on importing Western legal and business models which may make the area attractive for inflow of capital. The alternative is too dire to contemplate: economic decline, poverty, and more conflict.

Currently, the conflicts in the area, with the exception of Chechnya, have run out of steam, but they have enough inertia to smolder without any movement into the stages of conflict resolution. Armenia and Azerbaijan are locked in a protracted conflict which has resulted in destruction of vast areas inside and around Nagorno-Karabakh and massive refugee problems. The parties are pursuing a zero-sum game which cannot end in a lasting peace. But only real peace would minimize negative political risk implications for investment in the area, including projects connected to the Silk Route and the pipeline development.

It is Armenia which is most interested in these investments since so far it could not get its share of the future oil-related revenue flows. But the man who tried to work towards a difficult peace solution, the former Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrosian, lost office amidst accusations of betrayal. Others in top Armenian leadership positions, including Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsian, paid a heavier price: on 27 October 1999 they were assassinated in the building of the Armenian parliament. Today the situation is starting to change, albeit slowly. The leaderships of both Armenia and Azerbaijan are tired of the conflict and do not see a way for an outright victory. The younger generation of Armenian leaders, such as former prime minister Armen Darbinian, is talking about integration into international networks, pinning their best hopes on the EU. Europe needs to extend a lifeline to Armenia in exchange for ending the conflict with Azerbaijan.

Georgia and Abkhazia are seemingly facing a deadlock: Georgia is too weak to attempt a military option, while the Abkhaz leadership cannot expect to gain international recognition any time soon. Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba does not seem to have a solution for the political and economic dead-end into which militant na-