

The New Tribalism and America's Russia Policy

Stuart Kaufman

October 1997

PONARS Policy Memo 17

University of Kentucky

Since the end of the Cold War, analysts have been grasping for a way to characterize and understand the new security situation--both in Europe and in the rest of the world. While there is a shared general sense that "the rules have changed," there is little consensus on how much they have changed, or in what ways.

My argument here is that the rules have changed far more than is commonly thought. The central fact of contemporary world politics, and the central dilemma of US security policy toward Russia, is the rise of the "new tribalism"--the weakening of existing states and the transfer of people's loyalties to narrower, "tribal" groups. This combination of relatively weak states and strong tribes creates a security situation fundamentally different from that of the Cold War, a situation in which the old paradigms of realpolitik and economic integration are obsolete. The greatest current threat to European stability is the rise of violent dissident tribalism within states, and the greatest threat of war involves the problem of fighting between states and tribes. Weaker states leave more room for non-governmental institutions to operate, often destructively, as Cossacks or gangsters provide "security" while "mafias" replace lawful businesses.

The first and most obvious consequence of the new tribalism is that many of the main security threats in Europe are threats of "tribal" separatism or irredentism. These threats include a large proportion of the list of US concerns regarding Russian foreign and security policy, and the stability of the post-Soviet space more generally. The Armenian-Azerbaijani war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the conflicts between Georgians and their Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists, the war in Moldova's Transdnister, and the Chechen war were all straightforward cases of "tribal" conflict. The possibility of these conflicts flaring up again, or of new ones emerging--e.g., in Russia's Tuva region or the ethnically Russian north of Kazakhstan--remain high on the list of US foreign policy headaches.

These "tribal" conflicts provide US-Russian tensions as well. The Russian Army openly intervened in Moldova's Transdnister conflict to support the culturally Russian separatists. More covert but equally important Russian military interventions occurred in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and, to a lesser extent, South Ossetia, all to the discomfort of the US. Furthermore, Russian diplomacy, and even more the activities of Russian parliaments, have kept open the possibility of more separatist conflict in the Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, northeastern Estonia, and to a lesser extent northern Kazakhstan. Even when the Yeltsin government has made conciliatory moves in these conflicts--such as the agreement to withdraw from Moldova--Russian parliaments, reflecting the overwhelming opinion of Russia's political class, have tended to block the implementation of the agreements.

Military interventions of this sort, which work with the new tribalism, are extremely dangerous and can be highly effective. There is, however, a critical corollary: military force is increasingly ineffective if it is employed against the new tribalism. Russia's experience in Chechnya illustrates the point: military force was not effective for asserting political control over an unwilling population. The Russian use of force looked illegitimate not only to the Chechens, who fought hard for their tribal loyalty, but also to the Russian people, who did not support the war effort and whose sons did not fight with determination. Thus the use of force to impose state authority is less and less effective because it is less and less legitimate. Western acquiescence in that Russian policy was assumed to be cynical but at least effective: the Russian army could be counted upon to "solve the problem", even if it did so brutally. In retrospect, of course, the war clearly harmed the prospects for unity and democracy in Russia, thus harming Western interests as well as the Russians and Chechens. Old-style realpolitik thinking led Russia into a disaster, and prompted the West to encourage it.

One complication is that in the new world of tribalism, the key question is not just "who are we," but also "what does that mean?" The fate of Yugoslavia, for example, was determined by two decisions by the Serbian people about their national identity. The first was that they are Serbs rather than Yugoslavs. The second, equally important, was that they would return to the traditional notion of what it meant to be a Serb--chauvinistic, militaristic, and insistent on political dominance over other South Slavs. These decisions were not inevitable--before the rise of Milosevic, Belgrade was also a center of liberalism in Yugoslavia, with many alternative and more liberal ideas about what Serbian or Yugoslav identity could be. But it was those choices that made war inevitable.

Russia today faces the same kind of choice. Part of the issue is the commonly made distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism: will non-ethnic Russians be granted full equality and first-class citizenship in Russia, or will they be barely tolerated minorities with second-class status? Related is the question of chauvinism: will Russian national identity be rebuilt on some sort of messianic "Third Rome" ideal asserting Russian moral superiority over others, or on a new militaristic imperialism--or on the goal of sovereign equality in Europe?

The ambiguity is nicely captured by the different fates of Russia's two most autonomist republics, Tatarstan and Chechnya. Ordinary Tatars and Russians are uncommonly apt, at least in one poll, to resist accepting any sort of stereotypes about each other. Not unrelatedly, the Tatar and Russian governments amicably agreed to a more or less workable division of authority. Chechens and Russians, in contrast, hold extremely negative stereotypes of each other, and partly as a result their governments led them to fight a war. Whatever current polls might say, the issue for Russia's future is still fundamentally undetermined: will popular attitudes toward Tatars or Chechens become the rule in relations with others? Will foreign policy increasingly reflect Russia's "divide and rule" policies toward Georgia or Moldova, or will it increasingly embody the sort of cordial competition shown in its relations with the West?

In the long run, the decision will be that of the Russian people, not of any particular Russian government. The analogy with Weimar Germany illustrates the possible danger. Germans in the 1920s generally agreed that Germany's new eastern borders were unacceptable, so the "moderate" government of the time worked to keep Germany's eastern options open,

accommodating its powerful western neighbors while refusing to offer any sort of guarantee to its eastern or southern neighbors. Today, similarly, Russia has an accommodating policy toward the West, but keeps open its options in the south by maintaining or re-introducing its military forces in southern CIS states. The question is whether, over the medium term, the Russian people will decide to pay the material costs of attempting to expand, or the psychic costs of accepting a loss of influence. In the meantime, until Russians reach some consensus on the meaning of their national identity, the Russian state will be weak. Its legitimacy can only be based on some notion of Russian self-determination; but that notion, to be effective, must reflect a consensus about what it means to be Russian.

The way all the forces of the new tribalism interact--the narrowing and redefining of national identities, the weakening of states, the rise of non-state actors, the changing value of military force--is illustrated by the way the problem of nuclear security has changed. The source of the problem is no longer the military strength of the Russian state, but its administrative weakness, which leads to the fear of "loose nukes." And the most-feared possible users of loose nukes are non-state actors motivated by some sort of "tribal" grievance: renegade Russian chauvinists, or Muslim fundamentalist terrorists, for example. It is understood that nuclear weapons are not useful for conventional military purposes; but as weapons of terror employed against states by shadowy non-state actors or tribal fanatics, they are potentially fearsome.

If the major contemporary security threats do indeed stem from the new tribalism, what are the "new rules" by which they can be addressed? A few suggestions follow:

1. Aid the fight against tribalist ideas.

While each nation defines its own national identity, the US can support those people who promote tolerant, inclusive nationalism against the purveyors of chauvinist tribalism. This is the most important issue for America's Russia policy, since all other issues become more manageable if Russians devise a benign nationalism. One means of encouraging this outcome is to aid in the provision of relatively unbiased news information. Providing direct information about Western policy throughout eastern Europe via an expanded Radio Free Europe and even Television Free Europe--i.e., broadcasts in the local languages, where technically feasible--might be helpful for undermining myths that portray the West as a bogeyman. Even more helpful would be support for local media outlets which consider multiple viewpoints, to undercut the influence of narrow single-viewpoint media. Such support might be best funneled through non-governmental organizations.

2. Moderate tribalism's effects.

Even if people choose loyalty to narrower groups, they can be prodded toward tolerance and non-violence. Europe's international institutions have been relatively successful in adapting to this problem. OSCE's human rights provisions, and the Council of Europe's actions in pressuring the Baltic states to respect the rights of their Russian minorities, are steps in the right direction, as is the insistence of NATO and the European Union that candidates for membership settle disputes with each other and their national minorities. Foreign interventions that promote violent conflict or prop up nasty regimes in illegitimate statelets--e.g. Russian support for the Transnistrian region of Moldova--should be opposed with more vigorous and concerted diplomatic pressure.

3. "Reinvent" government while rebuilding it.

If part of the problem is a weak, and weakly legitimate Russian government, part of the solution is to help build a stronger, more effective, and therefore more legitimate Russian state.

"Reinventing government" means creating flexible, effective administrative systems which can work in the context of the global marketplace and the new tribalism. This is typically done by setting measurable standards, including "customer service" requirements, for the performance of each government agency, then giving the agencies autonomy in how they will meet the standards. Agencies that fail can have their tasks reassigned to another agency or a private contractor. Since Russian government agencies tend to resist technical advice that is contrary to their interests, these improvements may be best promoted by supporting societal groups which defend the interests of Russian citizens and support administrative reform.

4. Promote helpful NGOs.

The new tribalism opens up more opportunities for non- governmental organizations, which are increasingly carrying out tasks governments cannot or do not wish to do. These include both locally based NGOs, including religious organizations, and Western-based international NGOs, which are providing social services all over the world. Nurturing local NGOs, including Catholic or Orthodox Christian churches, to take on social services in Russia and central Europe, can reduce the burden on overburdened governments while building a stronger civil society. NGOs such as human rights organizations which act as a check on state abuses, rather than an alternative to state action, can also help create a healthier political system. Renewed efforts should be made to identify and assist such NGOs in Russia, to help rebuild the Russian state and reduce the appeal of chauvinistic tribal appeals.

The critical issue for the US is not, however, any of these specific initiatives, but to rethink the assumptions underlying America's Russia policy. Following realpolitik or sphere-of-influence thinking is tempting, especially because Russian officials usually rely on it, but it leads to disastrous bleeding wounds like Chechnya. Building on the most common alternative approach--promoting economic interdependence--may or may not help the economic situation, but it is mostly irrelevant to the challenges of the new tribalism. Only by keeping squarely in view the fact that the new tribalism is the main challenge can US policymakers effectively meet that challenge.