

Security Implications of the Russian Identity Crisis

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Introduction

Western policymakers and their scholarly advisers seem to focus primarily on the oligarchical interests of the Russian elite rather than on long-range societal processes. This memo is an attempt to assess the potential of ideational sources of Russian interests from a broader sociological perspective. It is important to understand that the search for a Russian national identity is not merely driven by cynical elites, but arises from a genuine need within Russian society.

The inefficiency of the Soviet system led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and made the Soviet identity unappealing. Each national republic that had (in many cases due to Soviet policies), developed its own national identity by the 1990s easily shook off the superficial and amorphous Soviet identity that had become odious and irrelevant. For Russians, however, national identity still remains uncertain. Weak before the creation of the Soviet Union and tightly bound with the Soviet vision, Russia's weak identity became even less clear after the Soviet collapse.

This situation of uncertainty will not last forever. The present time in Russia is of crucial importance as a formative period. Similar processes in turn-of-the-century China and nineteenth century Germany were completed in twenty and fifty years, respectively. Once established, national identities persist: in the case of Germany, its national identity influenced Franco-German relations from the Franco-Prussian War to World War II. The danger of Russia's current formative period is that it coincides with an anti-American and anti-democratic tide in Russian public opinion. It may solidify the image of the West (and in particular the US) as Russia's national enemy, and define Russo-American relations for some years to come. Yet because this is a formative period, some changes in US policy in Russia could turn back the tide. This memo suggests some strategic changes in US public relations policies to further that goal.

Why is the Identity of Ordinary Russians Important?

While analysts often assume that amorphous and immobile masses can be structured and moved only by the elite, it is often the case that various competing elites try to outbid

each other using ideas and rhetoric in their pursuit of power. For instance, the ethnic conflict between Armenians and Azeris over Karabagh was mass-led, rather than elite-led. Different Armenian elites and counterelites successively presented increasingly radical nationalist agendas that soon matched the radicalism of the Armenian nationalist masses (the elite followed, rather than led, society into nationalism).

This situation can be pictured as a marketplace where "masses" are potential buyers with a certain demand and elites are competing sellers whose profit is political power. Those who manage to supply better than other competitors gain the profit. From this perspective, Russian national identity is not only a matter of existentialist Dostoyevsky-style philosophizing about the essence of the Russian soul, but may also become a mass-based driving force for action and for change.

To be sure, sellers may sometimes agree to fix prices, and elites may agree on certain rules that limit the boundaries of competition, such as those in a democracy. But trust is difficult to establish and maintain in an emerging marketplace where there are incentives to break the rules for short-term gain. For example, the Bolsheviki in 1917 outbid other parties in part because they were willing to promise land at no cost and to unilaterally withdraw from World War I, something that all other parties felt inhibited about, but the peasant masses desperately wanted.

Sellers can sometimes shape demand, rather than just passively responding. But once a demand exists, it usually takes on a life and effect of its own. It may well be the case that many current Russian elites would like to maintain friendly relations with the US. However, as rational actors in a competitive situation, they cannot help but notice that lip service to Russian national interests--and increasingly Russian nationalism--pays off because responsiveness to Russian nationalism brings societal support. Taken to its logical conclusion, what began as a rhetorical exercise merely for political positioning in a competitive environment produces increasingly assertive rhetoric that may ultimately result in corresponding actions.

Is There an Identity Crisis?

Immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the term "Russian" was defined in opposition to the term "Soviet." Russia was also defined as a nation in transition to democracy, a prodigal son coming back to the family of Western nations. This anti-Soviet, pro-Western, and democratic ideal was symbolized by former Foreign Minister Kozyrev. However, democratic reforms have not delivered good lives to people, and Russians increasingly perceive the West, and the US in particular, as not exactly an all-forgiving loving father.

Accordingly, there has been a dramatic change in public opinion: "democracy" and "the West" are now seen in very negative terms by increasing segments of Russian society. The change in Russian public opinion has occurred in spite of Western humanitarian aid, financial loans, and a Russian media that is on the whole pro-democratic. What causes

such radical changes? The answer is in the particular form and content of the emerging national sentiment of the Russian people.

Many students of Russian nationalism agree that Russians--as the traditionally dominant imperial group--have had only a vague ethnic awareness and have identified primarily with the state, rather than their ethnic group. This follows from theories that relate the rise of nationalism to the emergence in a modernizing multi-ethnic state of a single standardized culture that allows even perfect strangers to easily get along in formal contexts. Those who, for whatever reasons, cannot easily adopt this new culture or who are simply excluded from it by the dominant group, are put in the humiliating position of a second-rate citizen struggling with hostile bureaucracy. These individuals become acutely aware of the difference between the standard culture and their own--that is, they become nationalists.

Russians have easily identified with standard, dominant Russian cultures--be they Russian Orthodox, Russian Imperial or Russian Soviet. It was other peoples of the empire, in particular Moslem and Western Christian (Roman Catholic and Protestant), who had problems. This is why Russians did not have a strong ethnic identity, whereas their many non-Russian neighbors did. However, this has been changing lately.

Since the end of the Cold War, Russians have encountered a powerful, alien culture that makes them feel powerless, disadvantaged, and inferior. Globalization has nurtured the emergence of a global culture rooted in North-European Protestant ethic and epitomized by US culture. Many Russians who encounter this new standard culture find it alien and exclusionary. Yet because of the nature of globalization they cannot avoid it and are confronted by it every day: on television, in print media, in advertising, and with the appearance of Western financial and economic companies in some Russian cities. This hostile culture is frequently encountered at the entrance to US consulates throughout Russia, which is unfortunate since one would expect those Russians seeking a US visa to be most sympathetic to the West.

The difficulty Russians experience with this new culture can be explained by three factors:

1. The cultures are very different. Among Western nations, Great Britain has few problems with this global culture, while France experiences conflict, as well as some anti-American attitudes. The cultural distance for Russia is far greater than for France: consider how different are Russian and English, Protestantism and Orthodoxy, American suburbia and Russian villages, and American and Russian gender relations.
2. While European countries associate globalization with good economic prospects, military security, and other advantages that may induce even the French to swallow the burger, as it were, Russians associate pro-Western reforms with economic hardship and Russia's loss of global prestige.
3. NATO expansion, followed by the action in Yugoslavia that sidelined both the UN Security Council and Russia makes Russians fear not only a loss of prestige,

but also for the security of their country. How can Russians identify with a culture that does not want them, and seems to threaten them?

Security Implications for the West

While older segments of the Russian population are becoming increasingly nostalgic about the Soviet past, the younger generation of Russians is more prone to look for a nationalist answer. Even Lenin's internationalist Soviet Communist Party has become in the Russian context more and more nationalist. Among the major prospective presidential candidates all but Grigoriy Yavlinsky are using nationalist rhetoric. It makes one wonder if this is why Yavlinsky's chances are slim.

Currently there are two distinct nationalist approaches to the concept of Russian identity. On one hand, there are people with views like those of former Prime Minister Yevgeniy Primakov and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov who may be termed "derzhavniki" or state nationalists. Then there are ethnic nationalists, like Krasnodar Governor Nikolai Kondratenko and the leader of RNE (a neo-fascist party), Alexander Barkashov. While both kinds of nationalism may seem undesirable, there are important differences between the two versions. State nationalism defines Russian identity in terms that are as close to the European idea of a civic nation as one can possibly get in modern Russia. Most importantly, this is an inclusive definition that, projected into the future, gives hope for a peaceful coexistence of the numerous ethnic groups inhabiting the still vast Russian territory. While state nationalists are more assertive and vocal about Russian national interests than Kozyrev was, they would still like to see Russia integrated within a world community ruled by international laws.

The alternative, ethnic definition of Russian identity is by blood. While currently state nationalists have much better chances of coming to power in Russia in the 1999-2000 elections than the proponents of ethnic nationalism, it is not inconceivable to picture the latter's success around 2008 or even 2004, if the derzhavnik leadership were to fail in reversing Russia's economic collapse. Considering the current state of the Russian economy, such a failure is quite likely. Coupled with the trend from a democratic and pro-Western attitude towards its opposite, the 2004/2008 scenario is especially pregnant with security implications for the Western countries, as well as for many of Russia's neighbors.

As the experience of Turkey early this century suggests, even a relatively successful attempt to turn a multi-ethnic empire into an ethnically defined nation-state may have disastrous consequences for numerous ethnic minorities such as Greeks, Armenians, and Kurds. Russian ethnic nationalists in power would probably be no better than their Turkish counterparts. They would make anti-Semitism a formal or informal government policy. They would try to crack down on the ethnic republics' autonomy and possibly implement russification policies. Irredentist policies with respect to the so-called "near abroad" would also be likely. All these policies would likely cause Russia's international isolation. But that would also justify the nationalist prophecy about the inimical West, and push Russia towards alliance with states like Iran. In short, Russia would turn into a

huge, nuclear-armed rogue state with ethnic conflicts simmering within and beyond its borders.

This is why the choice that ordinary Russians will make during the next few years between the two versions of national identity is of crucial importance and long-term significance.

Going back to my market analogy, it seems that Western policies with respect to Russian public opinion--to the extent they exist--have concentrated on their existing supply. Western media such as Radio Liberty offers the Russian public a variety of alternative--but never nationalist--opinions, perhaps in the hope that they can thus reverse the nationalist tide. However, by ignoring the existing and rapidly developing public demand at a time when even mainstream Russian media are turning nationalist, they lose their bid. For the most part, recent efforts of the Western media in Russia have been either negligent or counterproductive. Propaganda can be a powerful tool, but not when it is completely insensitive to its audience.

Rather than continue to ignore the demand or be the last to passively follow it, the West should try and take an active stance to help Russians make the better choice out of the two nationalist alternatives. The potentially huge resources of the West in terms of Russian public opinion may make the difference if the West can present itself as caring for Russian national interests and the moderate version of Russian national identity--state or civic nationalism. While opposing fascism from the platform of Kozyrev no longer makes sense, doing so from the platform of Luzhkov does.

To engage Russian public opinion, a concerted effort is needed with respect to the mass media, especially television. Virtually 100% of the Russian population has access to television, including those living in remote areas that are rarely visited by a Westerner. Television is the major source of news and entertainment for most Russians. Investing in media programs that work to communicate the positive connections between Russian culture with its global counterpart could be effective if sensitive to Russian concerns and perspectives.

Cooperation of Russian elites is crucial to engaging the Russian public. For that reason, the West should consider supporting expressions of civic Russian national identity, and recognize that elites who "sell" this idea are meeting a genuine demand for a moderate nationalism. The best support the West can provide would be sensitivity to Russian national interests and Russian public opinion.