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# The Russian Problem

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## RUSSIA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY PROBLEM

As much after the Soviet collapse as before it, the "Russian Problem" remains Europe's single biggest security issue. The collapse of the Soviet Union did, of course, end the threat of continental war in Europe, making the world a much safer place. The retreat of Soviet power also unmasked a broad range of other security threats—ethnic and nationalist conflicts; unstable governments and concomitant crime and terrorism; unrest due to economic collapse; and a power vacuum in East-Central Europe. Yet it is Russia itself that has dominated the attention of Western policy makers, and for good reason: it is Russia's attitude toward these issues, and toward the West in general, which will have the most decisive impact in shaping the political atmosphere in Europe in the coming years.

What is under debate is how to understand what the Russian Problem is. Three decades ago, Ralf Dahrendorf formulated the German Question, with all of its foreign policy implications, as primarily one of political ideology: "Why is it that so few in Germany embraced the principle of liberal democracy?"<sup>1</sup> The Russian Problem can usefully be formulated in similar terms. While the Russian Problem is, as the German Question was, expressed largely in aggressive foreign policies, it is not merely an issue of the particular policy choices of Russian leaders. Nor, in spite of the suggestion of "Realist" scholars, is the Russian Problem the inevitable result of Russian power; that power could be used in less disruptive ways. Russia's historic backwardness contributes to the problem, but is not the core of the issue. Rather, the key motivating force which ties these phenomena together is the way Russians see their national identity.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Russian Problem can be summed up in the question: Why have so many in Russia continued to conceive their national identity in ways that threaten their neighbors?

The view that contributes most to Russian aggressiveness asserts that Russia is in essence a multinational gathering of peoples—or, to put it less charitably, an empire—and has been so ever since Ivan the Terrible annexed the Tatar kingdoms in the 1550s. For those who take this view, the worth of the Russian people is expressed in their state's power, and they see no natural boundaries for its expression. In this way of thinking, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's vision of Russian soldiers washing their boots in the Indian Ocean is clearly preferable to liberal Atlanticists' effort at drawing a border on the featureless steppes where the current Russian Federation meets Kazakhstan; or to Russian geostrategists' attempt to defend Russia's borders in the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan.

Another approach to Russia's identity problem proposes a moral or ideological mission for Russia. In early Tsarist times, Russian Orthodox clerics saw Russia as the Third Rome, the center of Christian purity in the world, with a mandate to proselytize its unique

moral vision. In the nineteenth century, the "Slavophiles" revived this approach, while the "Westernizers" proposed a new mission for Russia, a *mission civilisatrice* to promote Western civilization in Eurasia. The peculiarly Russian quality about the latter idea was less its specific content than its extravagant idealism, requiring as it did a complete rejection of Russia's past. Today, the heirs of the Westernizers are reviving this idea, proposing that Russia be the democratizer of Eurasia. But as attractive as this vision may appear from the West, it requires the abandonment of the tens of millions of the Russian diaspora not an attractive prospect to most Russians. At best, building a democracy in Russia will require a long-term, inglorious effort which may well not be what the Russian people want.

A third approach to Russia's identity problem is the nationalist or Slavophile approach, which puts Russia at the head of the family of Orthodox Slavic nations in Europe. Though many people confuse Russian nationalism with imperialism, the ideas are distinct: nationalists want to establish an ethnic Russian or East Slavic nation-state excluding Russia's non-Slavic neighbors; imperialists want to rule those neighbors. The trouble with the nationalist view is that it inevitably opens the door to ethnonationalist chauvinism. The minimal nationalist program requires the annexation of Russified areas on Russia's borders, such as eastern Ukraine and northeastern Kazakhstan. The Slavophile vision requires the annexation of those entire countries, and Belarus as well. The position of national minorities can only be tenuous in such a Russia: other Slavs are "little brothers," while non-Slavs are essentially foreigners.

More to the point, ethnically-defined nationalism works as much exclusively as inclusively: the nation defines itself against others. If Russia chooses the Slavophile path, Samuel Huntington's nightmare of a "Clash of Civilizations" could become a reality, with Russia at the head of Europe's Orthodox Slavs, aligned either against Russia's Muslim Turkic neighbors, or against the West, or both.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Russian academics and not only nationalists and Slavophiles are fascinated by Huntington's idea.<sup>4</sup> The similarity between the Bosnian imbroglios of 1914 and 1994 provides a hint of the horrors that await Europe down that path.

In short, how Russia defines its national identity affects everyone else in Europe. An imperialist Russia must expand or rot; a Slavophile Russia is by definition irredentist; and a democratic Russia must, for the medium-term, remain unstable. In any of these cases, the result is unavoidably a security dilemma for both Russia and its neighbors: Russia's size and goals make it threatening, while its backwardness and instability make it feel threatened. How this dilemma is handled will have a powerful influence on how Russians address their identity problem in the twenty-first century and how much of a threat they will pose to the rest of Europe.

## **NATIONAL IDENTITY AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY**

The idea of national identity is a complex one, and has given rise to an enormous and growing literature.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this article three points from that literature are crucial. First, national identity is created: a nation is, in Benedict Anderson's memorable

phrase, an "imagined community." Consequently, the intellectuals who create national identity have alternatives for shaping or reshaping that identity though they are constrained by the willingness of their would-be countrymen to accept the identity they suggest. Finally, in a world of nation-states, national identity defines not only the political community, but also the state: the political legitimacy of a government depends on its association with national identity, and its political character is determined by the nature of the nationalist ideology its people accept.<sup>6</sup>

Historically, Russians have attempted to blend all three approaches outlined above the imperialist, the idealist, and the nationalist in conceptualizing their identity. In the nineteenth century, that attempt was summed up in the legitimizing slogan "Autocracy, Orthodoxy, Nationality." The blend, however, was self-contradictory: the Orthodox faith was being used to justify autocracy i.e., imperialism over Catholic Poles, Protestant Finns, and Muslim Tatars, while the solidarity of Orthodox Slavs was promoted as the "national" basis of the empire. This formula could hold the empire's disparate peoples together only if they accepted Russification and the Orthodox religion. But they would not: after a millenium of religious conflict, the Russian Empire's Muslims, Catholics, Protestants and Jews were largely immune to pressures to Russify as, it turned out, were most Ukrainians.

When the Bolsheviks came to power, they reformulated the old ideas, trying to create a new Soviet identity for the peoples they ruled. They rejected the mystical, millennial Orthodox religious justification for autocracy and empire, replacing it with a mystical, millennial communist ideological justification. They resolved the logical contradictions in the old Tsarist policy by subordinating nationalism to imperialism, and by subordinating both to ideology.<sup>7</sup> The new Soviet communist identity was open to everyone. The trouble was that none of the Soviet nations including the Russian nation was satisfied with the subordination of their identity to the rapidly tarnishing ideal of Soviet man.

By the time Gorbachev became Soviet leader, the communist ideological justification for Soviet policy was dead, so most Russians had fallen back on a less complicated imperialist way of thinking. The entire Soviet Union was their country, they felt, not just Russia.<sup>8</sup> The complete economic integration of the Soviet republics and the dominance of the Russian language in most of them made this view credible. Russians felt at home anywhere in the union, and they vastly underestimated the resentment their dominance caused among the other Soviet nationalities. Russians viewed foreign policy in simple nineteenth century sphere-of-influence terms; if the Soviet claims about bringing progress through spreading communism were not wholly accurate, neither were American claims to be spreading democracy. The Soviet Union's role was to maintain the balance of power and prevent unchecked "American aggression."

Mikhail Gorbachev's "New Thinking" tried to change all that, essentially from the imperialist to the moralist approach. Instead of thinking in balance of power terms that they must oppose the West, Gorbachev's reformist ideologues proposed a focus on cooperating with the West to promote "universal human values."<sup>9</sup> Harking back to images of Russian moral purity, Gorbachev cast himself as the apostle of peace and

disarmament against the militarist industrialists driving Ronald Reagan's policy of arms racing. Russia, Gorbachev tried to argue, was the advocate of arms reduction, human rights improvements and environmental protection.

Eventually, Gorbachev extended this humanitarian ethic to a restructuring of the Soviet Union itself. Once the dimensions of the nationality problem became known, Gorbachev proposed the recasting of the Soviet Union as a more-or-less voluntary confederation, as envisaged in his Union Treaty. This attempt was aborted by the August 1991 coup attempt. Gorbachev's enduring effect, however, and one of his stronger claims to greatness, was to make humanitarian criteria important in Russian thinking about foreign and nationalities policy.

Boris Yeltsin's first attempt to address the Russian Problem was embodied in the original concept of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a sort of democratic Slavic confederation of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Yeltsin understood that the idea of "sovereignty" for Russia was popular not as a move toward independence from other Slavic republics, but as a move toward independence from the despised central government of Gorbachev. Thus, when Yeltsin moved to eliminate that central government, he did so by creating a bond with the other Slavic republics which he considered to be, along with the Russian Federation, part of the greater Russian heartland. Yeltsin's vision was impossible: the Central Asian republics were clamoring to join the CIS, while Ukraine was determined to emasculate it, so it inevitably evolved toward its current, ramshackle form. But the impulse behind the attempt an impulse that remains strong was a Slavophile as well as a democratic one.

Today, different views on all three dimensions ideological, national, and imperial are competing for dominance in Russia's new self-conception. Liberals, clerics and mystics compete to define Russia's core ideology. Nationalists, Slavophiles and liberals compete to define Russia's nationhood. And all of these groups compete with imperialists to define the proper expanse of the Russian state and the proper direction of Russian foreign policy. Meanwhile, because of the lack of agreement on Russia's national identity, the Russian state lacks a commonly accepted basis for its legitimacy: its borders, both in the geographical and the functional sense, are in dispute. Partly as a result, the state itself is weak, incoherent, and poorly institutionalized; it cannot become coherent until agreement is reached on a national identity to define the state's boundaries and political ideology to define its purpose.

### **Russian Liberal's Dilemma**

The liberals' core principles are that Russia should continue reforms aimed at democratization, market privatization, and an open concept of "Russianness" based on citizenship, not ethnicity. If applied in foreign policy, such concepts would lead to the conclusion that Russia can and should cooperate with the West, and that it should pursue voluntary agreements on integration with the other former Soviet states, rather than extracting such agreements coercively. Sophisticated liberals realize that attempts to impose nineteenth-century-style spheres of influence do more harm than good to Russian

interests.<sup>10</sup> They also realize that it is not in Russia's best interest to re-integrate the entire former Soviet space, arguing that Russian interests in Central Asia, especially, do not require closer economic or military ties.<sup>11</sup> Most of all, these analysts realize that continued Russian democratization and restraint in foreign policy is the best recipe for avoiding a new spiral of insecurity in Europe. As Vladimir Lukin, a leader of the reformist Yabloko party, has pointed out: "if we don't show that we are continuing on the path of democratic development, I think the result will be an acceleration of the process of expanding NATO. . . [and] an attempt to eject us from regions in which we still have some influence."<sup>12</sup>

The problem facing Russian liberals, difficult but not hopeless, is the same one that faced their nineteenth-century forerunners, the Westernizers: how can promoting Western rationalism find resonance with a Russian public that has neither a Western nor a rationalist tradition? Those who try to graft liberal stock onto Russia's traditional nationalist root generally end, like Yeltsin's erstwhile ally Ruslan Khasbulatov (a leader of the 1993 coup attempt), by jettisoning liberalism altogether and joining the nationalist camp.

The answer to this dilemma is the humanitarian strain Gorbachev tapped in his policy. Russia has a deep wellspring of humanitarian impulses founded, as Western liberalism is, on the basic concepts of Judeo-Christian morality. The Russian Orthodox church has sometimes supported such impulses in politics: during the 1991 coup attempt, for example, Patriarch Alexii II sided with Yeltsin, deploying loudspeakers to warn Soviet soldiers on the streets that attacking the "White House" would mean committing the "horrible sin of fratricide."<sup>13</sup> Thus, at its best, Russian liberalism can combine hardheaded appeals to Russian interests with emotional appeals to the humanitarian principles which have, since Gorbachev's reforms, acted as a real restraining influence in Russian foreign policy.

### **Nationalists and Slavophiles**

The appeal of the competing nationalist-Slavophile camp is based on its promotion of cultural, moral and political unity. The Slavophile variant of this program emphasizes the establishment of an Orthodox Slavic state uniting Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and (usually) Kazakhstan. The idea has enormous appeal for Russians, even the most liberal of whom have trouble accepting that Ukraine the cradle of Russian civilization in the medieval Kievan Rus' period is really the home of a separate Ukrainian nation.

Russian Orthodoxy is important for Slavophiles less because it defines their beliefs than because it shapes their identity. After seven decades of indoctrination in atheism, few Russians proclaim any religious faith. Nevertheless, the idea of religion remains important: in one poll, 61 percent of respondents who were *not* religious believers still felt that "religion is essential for the preservation of national identity."<sup>14</sup> Being from an Orthodox background, in short, helps define the identity even of those Russians who never set foot in a church. This tendency powerfully influences Russians' sympathies (e.g., for Orthodox Serbs, and against Bosnian Muslims).

Visions of the exact nature of the projected Slavic state vary among the idea's supporters. But even the most territorially limited project, for a Russian national state rather than a broader Eastern Slavic one, requires substantial border revisions. Advocates of the nation-state idea argue that Russia should exclude Muslim regions such as Chechnya, but should annex "large chunks of historically Russian territory," such as the Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and northeastern Kazakhstan.<sup>15</sup> Slavophiles, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in contrast, argue for a more inclusive idea of nationality. In his 1994 speech to the Duma, Solzhenitsyn proposed a voluntary union of the three Slavic states and Kazakhstan, a revival of the nineteenth-century *zemstvo* system of local self-government, and a spiritual renewal of Russian politics.<sup>16</sup>

More extreme Slavophiles add to these ideas an antisemitic bent and a partiality to conspiracy theories. One group led by former KGB General Alexander Sterligov and ex-Army General Valentin Varennikov advocates a "single state based on Russia, Ukraine and Belarussia" and "the need for Orthodoxy and a monarchy in Russia," while also denouncing "Yids" and imaginary CIA plots.<sup>17</sup> The antisemitic ravings of such groups are supported by some Orthodox church leaders as well: one Orthodox priest cursed the Yeltsin government as "Yid authorities" during the October 1993 coup; and the recently deceased Metropolitan of St. Petersburg was circulating the antisemitic forgery, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>18</sup>

### **Imperialist Nostalgia**

The programs of the Slavophiles should be distinguished from those of a separate group, the imperialists. The Slavophiles, as noted above, are interested in a spiritual renewal and unification primarily of Orthodox Slavs with varying degrees of unpleasant consequences for those in the future Russia who are neither. The imperialists, in contrast, are concerned with re-establishing the Soviet-era borders and reasserting Russia's "great power status." The crucial difference is that the imperialists want to conquer Russia's Muslim neighbors, while the Slavophiles want to exclude them. Slavophiles appeal to traditional Russian mysticism; imperialists appeal primarily to Russia's imperial nostalgia. Slavophiles are both nationalists (advocates of a state based on a particular nationality) and chauvinists (advocates of repressing other groups); imperialists are not nationalists (they do not want a nation-state), but are primarily chauvinists (advocating an empire in which their group Russians dominates).

This distinction helps to explain the factionalism of the Russian right wing: what seems from afar to be a red-brown coalition is in fact a diverse collection of people advocating various combinations of nationalism, fascism, communism, imperialism, monarchism, mysticism and Slavophilism. These groups disagree about everything from privatizing industry to the relative merits of free elections versus dictatorship, not to mention Russia's national identity. While Gennady Zyuganov was remarkably successful in uniting these people in 1995-96, the internal tensions in his coalition make it constantly vulnerable to fracture.

A purer politics of imperial nostalgia is that of Vladimir Zhirinovsky. The core of Zhirinovsky's program is the frank construction of empire: first, reduce the autonomy of nationalities inside Russia; then incorporate the other former Soviet republics into the new, unitary Russian state; and then, finally, the "last thrust south" to conquer Afghanistan (as revenge) and Iran.<sup>19</sup> The rest of Zhirinovsky's program is a clever compilation promising something for everyone: bread (a socialist safety net) and circuses (including Zhirinovsky's own performances) for the masses; privatization for the "businessmen" and "mafia"; a strong hand to provide order and promote the interests of the bureaucracy; and the occasional antisemitic appeal to provide a scapegoat when convenient. Nevertheless, inside all of this there is a distinct notion of the identity of the Russian: not a "civilized democrat" (the liberal vision) or an Orthodox Slav (the Slavophile version), but simply a person who speaks Russian and lords it over those who do not. Zhirinovsky's threats about retaking Alaska are symbolic statements of his intention to "stand up to the United States."

The so-called "centrists" of the Russian debate are actually moderate imperialists, asserting that the re-establishment of the USSR is "inevitable." These "centrists" do try to distinguish themselves from the imperialists: "industrialist" Arkady Volsky and former Soviet premier Nikolai Ryzhkov, for example, claim to support a voluntary union modelled after the European Union, rather than a true federation.<sup>20</sup> The logic of their argument is that the former Soviet states are so economically and strategically interdependent after centuries of union that re-integration is both necessary and inevitable. In practice, however, their fondness for coercive measures suggests that the union would not be wholly voluntary.

## COMPETING IDEAS FOR A NEW SYNTHESIS

The strength of the appeal of these different groups is difficult to measure, since people's views cut across categories, often resulting in self-contradictory stands. This is especially true because superpower nostalgia, combined with heavy-handed tactical thinking, gives an imperialist tinge to many liberal and nationalist viewpoints. One poll found, for example, that only 11 percent of Russians believed Russia was still a great power, but two-thirds of them wanted Russia to regain great power status.<sup>21</sup>

These widespread feelings cause an extreme sensitivity, even in liberal circles, to symbolic slights that impinge on Russian prestige. Thus, Russians react sharply when NATO acts against their Serb friends over their objections, or without their being consulted—less because their interests have been harmed than because their *amour propre* has been damaged. The result of Russian disappointment on such issues, as contrasted with a nostalgically viewed past, is a pervasive use of emotional language about how Russia has been "shamed," "humiliated," reduced to a "second-rate state," and so on. A common theme is for threats to Russian prestige to spark psychological denial—for example, the Russian government's persistent unwillingness to admit that Russia was the source of any of the radioactive materials smuggled to central Europe in the mid-1990s.<sup>22</sup>



In this tangle of concerns, the politics of Russia's identity is by necessity a politics of competing attempts to synthesize competing concepts. One of the most popular of these attempts is the work of Gennady Zyuganov, the nationalist politician turned Communist Party leader who was Boris Yeltsin's chief opponent in the 1996 presidential election. Zyuganov's platform resurrects, in updated form, the old Tsarist synthesis of imperialism, Russian nationalism, and Russian Orthodox mysticism. As Zyuganov put it in one formulation, "Two basic values lie at the foundation of the Russian idea Russian spirituality, which is inconceivable without an Orthodox Christian outlook and a realization of one's true purpose on Earth, and Russian statehood and great-power status."<sup>23</sup> Zyuganov's idea of Russian nationalism is based on "language, culture," and "a unique type of civilization that inherited and developed a thousand-year long tradition of Kievan Rus,' Muscovy, the Russian Empire, and the USSR."<sup>24</sup> Zyuganov clarifies the imperialist aspect of his ideology elsewhere, borrowing the "centrist" formulation: "the restoration of the union of the former Soviet peoples based on voluntary association [is] a historical necessity dictated by Russia's needs and those of world security."<sup>25</sup>

Zyuganov's synthesis is, however, inherently unstable. He appeals to extreme nationalists because he is one of them, complete with a penchant for conspiracy theories: he claimed, for example, that reformers such as Anatoly Chubais are part of a Western conspiracy to destroy Russia.<sup>26</sup> Zyuganov appeals to communist imperialists by praising Stalin and promising to reassemble the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup> But while the appeals to Russian spiritual culture and civilization may serve to bind ethnic Russians together, they hardly justify the imperialist mission. Furthermore, his claims that "Orthodox spirituality" includes "the traditions of tolerance and respect for neighboring peoples," especially Muslims, merely confuse the issue.<sup>28</sup> Zyuganov's extremism is too clear for Muslims and Russian moderates to take such reassurance seriously, but his moderate rhetoric undermines his credibility with extremists.

## **DANGERS OF THE YELTSIN TEAM'S SYNTHESIS**

Part of the explanation of Boris Yeltsin's victory in the 1996 election is that he offered, though he did not quite articulate, a concept of Russian national identity both more popular and more politically coherent than Zyuganov's. Yeltsin's trick has been to use selected bits of nationalist rhetoric and imperialist policy without entirely abandoning the original liberal foundations of Russian policy established by his first foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev.

Yeltsin's new synthesis begins with style. New Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov yields nothing to imperialists and nationalists in his assertion of "great power" status for Russia, forcefully asserting Russia's position on such issues as NATO expansion and arms control.<sup>29</sup> Russia's avowed policy toward the CIS, furthermore, is overtly imperialist, stating that "matters must be driven toward the creation of a collective security system" and toward a "Customs Union" for all CIS states with coercion implicitly among the driving forces.<sup>30</sup> And Russia's treaty on political and economic integration with Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan provides concrete evidence that the policy is not purely rhetorical.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, one of Zyuganov's foreign policy aides

"conceded that Yeltsin had already co-opted much of Zyuganov's foreign policy program."<sup>32</sup>

Other Yeltsin policies are also imperialistic. Russia has facilitated if not organized coups in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Tajikistan, replacing hostile nationalist leaders with former Politburo members (or, in Tajikistan, unreconstructed communists) who are more friendly to Russia. Russia has also exploited ethnic conflicts in neighboring states, providing the military power for Russian-speaking separatists to secede (at least *de facto*) from Moldova, and for the Abkhazians to escalate and win their long-running conflict with Georgia. There were also Russian troops fighting on both sides of the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave.<sup>33</sup> All this is in addition to the economic pressure and veiled threats used against other neighbors. Russia's heavy-handed efforts to control Azerbaijan's and Kazakhstan's oil export routes exemplify this last policy.<sup>34</sup>

The Slavophilic and nationalist tendencies in Russian policy also go beyond rhetoric. The category of "Russian-speaking" populations, which primarily includes Russians and Ukrainians, is a Slavophilic concept, though it is used to serve imperialist aims. The old Russian parliament's resolution that Crimea is Russian territory (as it legally was until 1954) was a nationalist gesture. And the disputes with Ukraine over the Black Sea fleet are largely about the Slavophilic desire to pressure the balky Ukrainians into agreeing to military, political and economic reintegration with Russia.

Yeltsin's appointment of General Alexander Lebed as his national security advisor further strengthened both his nationalist and his imperialist credentials. Lebed's fame comes from his period as commander of the Russian army that intervened in Moldova's civil war, making him a walking symbol of Russia's imperialist policies. And Lebed's nationalist rhetoric opposition to the activities of foreign religions such as Mormonism, for example strengthens his appeal with that constituency.

Yet even with all of these policies, core elements of the liberal approach also remain at the heart of Russian policy. Yeltsin's starting point, sincere if not unqualified, is "that only a democratic state system can ensure a suitable future for Russia," a commitment he proved by submitting to a free election.<sup>35</sup> Acceptance of the internationally recognized borders of the Russian Federation remains a fundamental principle of Russian policy. Nationalist rhetoric and nationalist attacks have not prevented continuing cooperation with Western financial institutions. Russian pursuit of integration with the West has not stopped, and Yeltsin cites proudly Russian inclusion in the Council of Europe as a success of his policy. Finally, Russian policy has encouraged the employment of liberal civic criteria for citizenship both in Russia and the other former Soviet states. Even the relatively hard-line Primakov explicitly rejects the idea of re-establishing the Soviet Union, aiming primarily for economic reintegration.<sup>36</sup>

Yeltsin's overall synthesis strikes a skillful balance between the divergent and often self-contradictory preferences of Russian mass and elite opinion. As one survey showed, many liberal foreign-policy elites believe that Russia must democratize and integrate with

the West economically, but also that Russian military intervention in other former Soviet states is legitimate;<sup>37</sup> the Yeltsin government pursues both. On the other hand, polls consistently show most Russians are disinclined to use force in the former Soviet states,<sup>38</sup> so imperialist goals are more typically pursued by proxy, or with humanitarian cover as "peacekeeping" operations. One 1994 poll also showed that most Russians considered human rights, democracy and "good-neighbor relations" with CIS countries to be more important than re-establishment of the old Soviet borders.<sup>39</sup> Pressure on CIS countries is therefore typically justified by appeal to such issues as human rights, especially for ethnic Russians, while "voluntary" reintegration some of it genuinely voluntary is pursued to establish "good-neighbor relations."

Still, the Yeltsin synthesis is contradictory, and the contradiction creates a trap for Russian liberals. Wanting to give in to their own imperialist nostalgia or to pander to others' nostalgia they will often advocate Russian imperialist moves, such as military intervention in support of groups like Abkhazian separatists in neighboring Georgia. The trouble is that by doing so, they are leaving their principles, especially their principled opposition to chauvinism, undefended. Calling such intervention "peacekeeping" ultimately makes matters worse, since it means abandoning the real content of the peacekeeping idea, leaving Russia with the options of military expansion defined as peacekeeping, or no military action at all, in cases where real peacekeeping might be Russia's best choice.<sup>40</sup>

It is this rivalry between imperial and humanitarian impulses often in the same people which explains the uneven nature of Russian foreign policy. Russians who are attracted to imperial ideas, for example, are often repelled by the brutal means necessary to implement them as they are learning in Chechnya. Liberal elites, as noted above, are simultaneously "Westernizers" and imperialists. And much of the Russian foreign policy debate is carried out on humanitarian grounds, with imperialists justifying their policies by appealing to the need to protect Russians abroad. The danger is that liberals will define away their core beliefs, or else that the imperialist dimension of Russian policy will create a foreign backlash which makes the pursuit of cooperative foreign policies impossible.

## **CONTRADICTION IN ACTION IN MOLDOVA**

The Moldova case illustrates how all three ideological strands Slavophilic, imperialist, and liberal combine with cognitive bias to influence Russian policy. The justification for Russian policy is Slavophilic: Ukrainians and Russians together form a majority of "Russian speakers" in Moldova's Trans-Dniester region, and they were for a time subject to some ethnic discrimination, so Russia was naturally sympathetic. Russia's real policy goals, however, and the means it used, were imperialistic. The Trans-Dniestrians were able to launch a separatist war only because Moscow organized, armed, and funded them.<sup>41</sup> When open war broke out in 1992, Russia's locally stationed troops, the 14th Army, intervened in the fighting to impose a ceasefire favoring the separatists. As the price of restraining the Trans-Dniestrians and the 14th Army from further attacks, Russia forced the reluctant (non-Slavic) Moldovans into joining the CIS. Yeltsin has also

blocked the promised withdrawal of the 14th Army, since without the Army's protection the separatist Trans-Dniester region Moscow's best source of leverage over Moldova would collapse. Imperialists also see the 14th Army's bases as a platform for extending Russian influence in the Balkans, and as leverage against Ukraine.

But there is more to the story than this. Liberal Russians argue that they are merely defending their co-nationals' "human rights." Furthermore, they genuinely believe General Lebed, the former commander of the 14th Army, when he says that withdrawing the troops would lead to chaos or renewed war. And officially, Russian policy toward Moldova looks fairly liberal: Russia sent "peacekeepers" separate from the 14th Army to police the truce; and it has not recognized the self-proclaimed independence of the Trans-Dniester, much less moved to annex it. One relatively liberal commentator even managed to convince himself that the Moldovan government really wants the 14th Army to stay in the region to maintain local stability, in spite of repeated Moldovan demands that it leave.<sup>42</sup>

These claims are the result of what one might call honest cognitive distortion: the beliefs are mostly false, but they are genuinely held. To start with, the "peacekeepers" are not peacekeepers in the internationally understood sense of the word they are partisan, not impartial. Russians can, of course, make the claim that their partisan "peacekeepers" have successfully kept the peace in Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan, while the UN's impartial ones failed in Bosnia and elsewhere. But more to the point, they simply cannot understand why Russian "peacekeeping" in Moldova or Abkhazia is considered imperialism in the West, while American peacekeeping in Somalia, or its invasion of Panama, is not. Convinced of their own goodwill, they overlook the fact that Russia caused the worst of the violence by arming the separatists in these areas, and that it now pursues its interests by preventing peaceful settlements of those disputes.

## **FEAR AND NATO EXPANSION**

These cognitive distortions are important because they drive the security dilemmas now unsettling the eastern half of Europe. Russians, sensitive to the past excesses of nationalism in places like Moldova, refuse to believe that the conflict can be settled peacefully if they withdraw their troops. In fact, nowhere is the peaceful settlement of an ethnic conflict more likely than in Moldova; Russians do not know this because their media, including government-run television, has been distorted by a pervasive pro-Dniestrian bias. Central European states, already sensitive to past Russian expansionism, react to this Russian interventionism so near their borders by clamoring to join NATO. Russians, in turn, react with fear and suspicion to the prospect of NATO's expansion to their border (Russia's Kaliningrad enclave shares a short border with Poland).

Russians are not convinced by NATO assurances that the alliance is not aimed against them, mostly because this is a transparent lie: why else do the Central Europeans want to join? In a worst-case scenario for Russia, in which Poland and the Baltic states joined NATO, the Kaliningrad enclave would become a sort of reverse Berlin, with the Russian outpost surrounded by NATO territory. Furthermore, as one liberal Russian analyst has

noted, an expanded NATO would represent a security threat to Russia even if it were not explicitly aimed against Russia, simply because it is a large nearby concentration of potentially hostile power which was in fact hostile not long ago.<sup>43</sup>

Other policy disagreements reinforce Russian perceptions that NATO is already hostile. Given their sympathy for the Serbs, their fellow Orthodox Christians and (according to Russian nationalist mythology) their historical allies, few Russians can accept that the Serbs may be the aggressors in the former-Yugoslav conflict. Again, distortions in the Russian media are partly to blame. But the result of these and similar perceptions is that most Russians see Western opposition to the Serbs as blind hostility. Polls show that most Russians believe cooperation with the West is possible and desirable; but a majority sees current Western policy as aimed at "turning Russia into a colony."<sup>44</sup>

## **THE WRONG SIGNALS**

The effect of Western policy on Russia's future foreign policy orientation can only be at the margin. Just as German aggression before 1945 was rooted in Germany's militarist ideology, and was tamed only by the Federal Republic's liberalism, so Russian aggression is rooted in Russia's identity-driven imperialism, and can be tamed only by the victory of liberalism in Russia. Western behavior matters, but only in the degree to which it supports the arguments of one side or the other in the Russian debate. Essentially, Russian liberals argue that expansionism will harm Russian interests while cooperation with the West will further those interests. Imperialists and nationalists argue, in contrast, that cooperation with the West cannot aid Russia, while expansion is a vital Russian interest.

To date, Western policy toward Russia has too often supported the anti-liberal arguments. The West's appalling performance in 1992-93, repeatedly promising economic aid for Russia's reforms without delivering the sorts of aid needed most, seriously undermined the credibility both of Western promises and of pro-Western Russian liberals. Russia withdrew its troops from the Baltic states, but failed to gain Western support for guarantees of civil rights (such as voting and citizenship rights) for ethnic Russians in Estonia and Latvia. For several years, Russia generally complied with the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, but was unable to gain agreement on modifications it considered necessary. Finally, Russia simply refused to observe the disputed "flank requirement," whereupon the US simply accepted most of the Russian demands without extracting a *quid pro quo*. Meanwhile, Russia has paid essentially no price in the West for its interventions in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan and elsewhere: even its savaging of Chechnya elicited hardly a peep from the West. Given this Western track record, it is reasonable for Russians to conclude that cooperation with the West does not pay, while expansionism and assertiveness do.

The tough line against Russia now being promoted by US conservatives would exacerbate this situation. Reacting primarily to the aggressive elements in Russian foreign policy, these neo-hawks argue for tough responses, such as reductions in aid to Russia, to punish Russian brutality in Chechnya. Some reaction is called for, but a

primarily punitive approach offers little positive if Russian policy changes. Thus, instead of supporting the Russian liberals' arguments, a hard-line policy would suggest that the imperialists and nationalists are right: cooperation with the West offers no benefits to Russia. Calls such as Zbigniew Brzezinski's for an expanded NATO and "geopolitical pluralism" in the former Soviet space the worst nightmare of Russian strategic thinkers seem to confirm the impression. Brzezinski would offer Russia participation in upgraded European security institutions, but this hardly compensates: Russians fully understand the weakness of such institutions, so the offer looks more to them like bait in a trap designed to isolate Russia still further.<sup>45</sup>

Western liberals' suggestions for primary reliance on international institutions and collective security agreements have the opposite flaw. As the failure of the League of Nations and of the UN in Bosnia should have taught us, institutionalized collective security arrangements are unreliable at best: countries try to "pass the buck," since determined action is always inconvenient, and aggressors can stymie the counteraction of organizations of which they are members.<sup>46</sup> For these reasons, the limited involvement of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in places like Moldova has failed to address the central cause of Moldova's division Moscow's military involvement. When Russian clients are not inclined to compromise, Russian "peacekeepers" merely provide a smokescreen behind which to consolidate gains from aggression. Thus liberal policies alone do not refute the Russian imperialists' suggestion that expansionism is easy and cheap.

## **HOW TO HELP RUSSIA'S LIBERALS**

Boris Yeltsin's victory in the 1996 Russian election does not guarantee the victory of a liberal concept of Russia's identity. As noted above, Yeltsin's policies are heavily tinged with nationalism and imperialism, and they could move further in that direction. If Western policy is to help arrest that trend and support the case of the Russian liberals, it will have to take Russia's interests more seriously, and offer effective cooperative routes for Russia to pursue them. At the same time, aggressive Russian moves will have to be met with a firmer response than has been forthcoming to date.

One modest route to promoting cooperative security policies in Europe would be for the Council of Europe to take a more understanding position regarding the interests of the Russian minority in the Baltic states. Estonian or Latvian policy toward ethnic Russians is occasionally heavy-handed and discriminatory, and a more sympathetic international stance would lessen Russia's need to rely solely on heavy-handed unilateral measures in response. Similarly, Western countries should mobilize institutions such as OSCE and the UN to protect the populations of the Trans-Dniester region and Abkhazia, in order to deprive Russia of its justification for intervention in those regions. If Russia agreed to remove its troops from the Trans-Dniester and Abkhazia, the troops could be replaced at Western expense by mutually agreeable peacekeepers.

The review conference on the CFE Treaty presents another opportunity. American concessions to Russia's demands to revise the treaty's "flank" force limits were probably

premature, but they did have the positive effect of reassuring Russia that its views and concerns are taken seriously, providing it with a much-desired diplomatic victory (soothing Russians' aching self-image) at limited cost to the West. Still, the conference might provide an opportunity for some horse-trading on related issues: formalizing the American concessions might be made contingent on Russian recognition of its 1920 treaties with Estonia and Latvia, for example. Alternatively, Russia might be pushed to reduce its forces in the Kaliningrad region (a boon for the Baltic states and Poland) in return for changes in the status of the Russian minority in the Baltic states.

Furthermore, the very process of negotiations would help the Russian government reassert civilian control over its military. Especially early on, the assertiveness of the Russian military in the "near abroad" was the result not only of Russian government policy, but also of the preferences of poorly controlled Russian armies or their commanders. Formal, long-term negotiations on political-military issues could help, forcing Russia to create institutions capable of making trade-off decisions and imposing them on military loose cannons. During the SALT I negotiations, for example, the Soviet Union created a special high-level arms control commission that provided a forum in which some military interests (e.g., the Air Defense Forces' desire to build an anti-ballistic missile system) were sacrificed to Brezhnev's desire for a "peace offensive."<sup>47</sup> New CFE negotiations might have a similar effect, confronting the Russian government with a reason to assert more effective civilian control over its army.

Indeed, given the reviving concern in Russia about American ballistic missile defense programs, formal negotiations about revisions to the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty might also be appropriate. The proliferation of ballistic missile technology and the rising ABM capability of American air defense weapons (such as the Navy's Aegis system) probably require some adjustment of the ABM Treaty in any case, and discussing such adjustments with Russia is far preferable to scrapping the treaty altogether, as some American conservatives have proposed. Conducting the negotiations would also contribute to improving Russia's civilian control over the military.

Side by side with these cooperative initiatives, NATO must also do more to raise the cost to Russia of aggressive policies, especially in the other former Soviet states. The key distinction Western countries must make is between Russian interventions which help resolve their neighbors' conflicts, and interventions which prevent conflict resolution but help Russia gain political leverage. Russia's policy of subsidizing and protecting intransigent separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and the Dniestr region are in the latter category, and the West should step up diplomatic pressure on Russia to promote genuine conflict resolution attempts in those areas. Certainly the record of Russian mendacity in these conflicts is an international issue: Russia has broken promises to withdraw troops from Moldova, to apply sanctions against Abkhazia, and so on, raising serious issues about Russian credibility in international negotiations. Since the lies have to date been cost-free, however, Russia continues to proffer them, most blatantly in Chechnya, where Russian ceasefire agreements have been worthless. If diplomatic pressure does not suffice to change such Russian policies, NATO could step up the

pressure in other ways. It could, for example, begin offering security assistance for Georgia or Moldova through the Partnership for Peace.

NATO expansion is also available as a threat, but it ought to be carried out only as a last resort. Since NATO expansion into East-Central Europe is *ipso facto* a threat to Russian security, an early decision to proceed with it would decisively undermine efforts at promoting cooperative security policy in Europe. Once Russians learn that they cannot avert NATO expansion through cooperation, they will feel a need to respond by creating a countervailing coalition, probably by coercing their CIS partners even more. But if NATO expansion is postponed, and its possibility maintained as a threat to stop Russian expansionism, the Russian liberals' hand would be strengthened. As quoted above, some Russian liberals argue that Russia can avoid NATO expansion by being more cooperative with the West; only by postponing expansion can NATO show that their argument is valid.

This does not mean "giving the Russians a veto" on NATO's membership, since the postponement of NATO expansion would be conditional on cooperative Russian behavior. If the Russians can be persuaded to restrain themselves, the Partnership for Peace would offer the best balance of reassurance to both Russia and the Central Europeans. Early NATO expansion, in contrast, would quickly result in increased security threats for everyone. Postponement, therefore, is not capitulation to Russia, but the frank pursuit of NATO's and Central and Eastern Europe's best interests.

Another crucial issue for Russia is economic integration, both in the East and between East and West. The Russians are not merely being imperialistic when they argue for the economic re-integration of the former Soviet space: the inefficiencies of Soviet-era trade notwithstanding, the former Soviet states still conduct most of their trade with each other, so economic cooperation among them could aid enormously in their recovery.<sup>48</sup> One way for the West to promote such re-integration would be to make future economic aid to the CIS states, including aid from multilateral institutions, contingent on their economic cooperation with each other. The greatest flaw of the economic aid packages offered to CIS states by the West was the neglect of one of the great successes of the Marshall Plan: compelling the plan's participants to cooperate, and integrate their economies. Such a measure, if handled delicately, is most of all a carrot to Russia, since it would make clear that the West does not oppose such economic cooperation, and does not oppose the exercise of Russian influence in areas obviously of vital interest to Russia as long as that exercise is benign.

A related interest, shared by all of the former communist states, is access to markets in the European Union and North America. Political stability (and resistance to the national chauvinist virus) is dependent on economic growth, and economic growth is dependent largely on success in generating exports. The countries of the developed North have gotten away for decades with excluding inconvenient imports from the Third World because the security consequences of that exclusion were remote, both in time and space. The security consequences of continuing the same policy toward the eastern half of Europe will be more immediate.



Ultimately, the solution to the Russian Problem is in the hands of Russians. Russia's democratic tradition is weak, but its humanitarian and moralistic traditions are strong, and those traditions make a liberal solution to the Russian Problem possible. The imperialistic aspects of Russian policy are attributable more to superpower nostalgia than to a real dominance of imperialist ideology in Russia. The task for the West is to deter and oppose Russian aggression, while energetically pursuing cooperative solutions to Russia's economic and security problems. In short, the West can do no more than maintain balance in its own policies, and hope that balance helps Russia find its own.

## Endnotes

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4. These themes are surveyed in Ben Goldsmith, "Russia as a Regional Power: Civilization or Civilizations?," University of Michigan, unpublished manuscript, April 1995.
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7. See Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).
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11. Aleksei Arbatov, "Real Integration: With Whom and What Kind?," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 24 June 1994, tr. *CDPSP*, 46, no. 25 (20 July 1994), pp. 5-7.
12. Vladimir Lukin, "We Find Ourselves in a Very Bad Geopolitical Situation," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 14 March 1995, tr. in *CDPSP*, 47, no. 11 (12 April 1995), p. 25.
13. James W. Warhola, *Russian Orthodoxy and Political Culture in Transformation*, The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 1006 (University of Pittsburgh, 1993), p. 37.
14. Warhola, *Russian Orthodoxy*, p. 36.
15. *Sevodnya*, 15 December 1995, tr. in *CDPSP*, 46, no. 50 (11 January 1995), pp. 8-9.
16. *Pravda*, 1 November 1994 and 2 November 1994, tr. in *CDPSP*, 46, no. 46 (14 December 1994), pp. 12-14.
17. *Moskovskie Novosti*, 23-30 October 1994, tr. in *CDPSP*, 46, no. 42 (16 November 1994), p. 15.
18. *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 28 September 1994, tr. in *CDPSP*, 46, no. 39 (26 October 1994), pp. 14-15.
19. A summary of Zhirinovskiy's ideas is in Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, "Homespun Socialism with the Faint Odor of Boot Liners," *Izvestia*, 23 April 1994, tr. in *CDPSP*, 46, no. 16 (18 May 1994), pp. 14-15.
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21. See David Remnick, "Yeltsin's Tightrope," *The New Yorker*, 69, no. 12 (10 May 1993), p. 77.
22. See, for example, *CDPSP*, 46, no. 33 (14 September 1994), pp. 1-5.
23. *Pravda Rossii*, 5 October 1995, p. 2, tr. in *CDPSP*, 47, no. 41 (1995), p. 4.
24. Gennady Zyuganov, St. Petersburg stump speech, 27 April 1996, reprinted in Open Media Research Institute (OMRI), *Russian Presidential Election Survey no. 2*, 10 May 1996; and Zyuganov, quoted in Aleksandr Tsipko and Maryanna Ozernoy, "The New Communist Patriotic Ideology," *Prism*, 1, no. 26 (22 December 1995).
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28. Gennadi Zyuganov, "The Path of Goodness and Righteousness," *Pravda Rossii*, 5 October 1995, tr. in *CDPSP*, 47, no. 41 (1995), p. 4.
29. See, for example, *Moskovskiye novosti*, 14-21 January 1996, p. 13, tr. in *CDPSP*, 48, no. 2 (20 March 1996), p. 11.
30. "Strategic Policy of the Russian Federation Toward CIS Member States," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 23 September 1995, p. 4, tr. in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 28 September 1995, pp. 19-20.
31. *Kommersant-Daily*, 30 March 1996, tr. in *CDPSP*, 48, no. 14 (1 May 1996), pp. 1-4.
32. OMRI, *Russian Presidential Election Survey no. 3*, 16 May 1996.
33. On Russian policy in the Transcaucasus, see Thomas Goltz, "Letter From Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand," *Foreign Policy*, 92 (Fall 1993), pp. 92-116.
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35. *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 24 February 1996, tr. in *CDPSP*, 48, no. 2 (20 March 1996), p. 6.
36. Statement by Yevgeny Primakov, tr. in *CDPSP*, 48, no. 2 (20 March 1996), pp. 11-12.
37. William Zimmerman, "Markets, Democracy and Russian Foreign Policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 10, no. 2 (April-June 1994), pp. 103-26.
38. One January 1995 poll showed 66 percent of respondents in Russia "negatively evaluating" the use of force in Chechnya, and 52 percent condemning the (brutal) actions of the Russian troops. *Sevodnya*, 19 January 1995, tr. in *CDPSP*, 47, no. 3 (15 February 1995), p. 17.
39. *Sevodnya*, 26 May 1994, tr. in *CDPSP*, 46, no. 21 (22 June 1994), pp. 14-15. A differently worded poll found only one-third of Russians supporting incorporation into Russia of neighboring regions inhabited by ethnic Russians; 46 percent of respondents opposed such expansionism. *Ogonek*, no. 19 (1995).
40. Andrei Kozyrev, "The Lagging Partnership," *Foreign Affairs*, 73, no. 3 (May/June 1994), pp. 59-71.
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42. Pavel Felgengauer, in *Sevodnya*, 12 August 1994, tr. in *CDPSP*, 46, no. 32 (7 September 1994), p. 16.

43. Vladimir Lukin, in *CDPSP*, 47, no. 11, p. 25, op. cit.

44. One nationwide 1994 survey showed 60 percent of Russians believing that relations with the West could be friendly, and 67 percent agreeing that cooperation with the West was in Russia's interest, while 56 percent also believed that Western countries "really want to turn Russia into a colony." *Sevodnya*, 6 December 1994, tr. in *CDPSP*, 46, no. 49 (4 January 1995), p. 10.

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47. Stuart Kaufman, "Organizational Politics and Change in Soviet Military Policy," *World Politics*, 46, no. 3 (April 1994), pp. 355-82, details how this process worked.

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