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Belarus', Ukraine and The Russian Question: A Comment

Roman Szporluk¹

Belorussians and Ukrainians have one important thing in common which sets them apart from all the other non-Russian nationalities of the former USSR. While few Russians would deny that Georgians are Georgian, Estonians—Estonian, and Chechens—Chechen, many Russians question the very existence of those two nationalities, Belorussians and Ukrainians, that are the subject of David Marples's and Roman Solchanyk's articles in this and the previous issues of *Post-Soviet Affairs* (Marples, 1993; Solchanyk, 1993). In imperial Russia these nationalities were considered subdivisions of a larger Russian nation, of which the Great Russians formed the third component. The Bolsheviks rejected this idea and, throughout the Soviet era, officially acknowledged the existence of three East Slavic nations. Given the rhetoric now ascendant in Moscow, however, it would appear that, in post-Soviet Russia, we are witnessing a return to the pre-1917 perspective. For many influential Russians today refuse to accept Ukrainians as a *bona fide* nationality; and, if an opinion poll Solchanyk cites is to be trusted, the general public in Russia today agrees on this score. The same people, presumably, refuse to recognize Belorussians as anything but a branch of the Russian nation.

This kind of confusion—the lack of a clear and mutually accepted answer to the question “Who is Russian and who is not?”—suggests that the processes of modern nation-formation among the East Slavs may still be in train. While Marples and Solchanyk raise many important issues, I will devote this “Comment” to this particular aspect of relations within the “East Slavic Triangle.”

RUSSIA'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Relations within this triangle are not only products of ethnic identity concerns. They are also intertwined with a central theme of modern Russian history that is currently also up for redefinition: the question of the relationship between the Russian people or nation, *russkiy narod*, and the Russian state, *rossiyskoye gosudarstvo*. Those who define the Russian nation as inclusive of Ukrainians and Belorussians also tend to think that

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the Russian state should extend its authority over the non-Slavic nations of the former USSR. While Vladimir Zhirinovskiy claims Finland, Poland and the Caucasus, many other public figures, including prominent "democrats," also think that the Russian nation requires, as its proper living space, an Empire within the boundaries of the former USSR.

The issue at hand is not academic. Many foreign observers of the post-Soviet scene tend to expect, *a priori*, better relations between the "closely related Slavs," as if shared "ethnicity" guaranteed peace. The case of Yugoslavia, and especially Bosnia, where all parties to the conflict speak the same language, should caution those who conclude that, because Russian and Ukrainian are closely related languages, Ukraine and Russia are predestined, as it were, to have better relations than do Russia and Estonia or Ukraine and Moldova. For the linguist, Ukrainians and Russians may be very close relations, though not nearly as close, of course, as the Serbs and Croats. But politics is not a by-product or reflection of philology; and philology is not a good guide to either Yugoslavia or the USSR.

The case of Yugoslavia, where war and massacres were preceded by polemics among poets and historians, should be a warning to those who watch the East-Slavic part of the USSR. The Ukrainian-Russian dispute is about Ukraine's identity, but by its very nature it is at the same time also a dispute about Russia's national and political identity. The way Russians resolve the latter challenge will bear directly on how they deal with the other issues on their current political agenda: private property, market, democracy, civic and human rights.²

While Communists and radical nationalists advocate restoration of the Union and/or Empire, not every Russian democrat is *ipso facto* an opponent of imperial restoration and a supporter of a democratic Russia within its present borders. Some Russian democrats, too, speak the language of Empire, even when their vocabulary is less brutal or less candid.³ Those democrats, too, say that the present-day Russian Federation is not Russia, and they do not limit their territorial claims to Ukraine and Belarus'. Rather, leading figures in the pro-Western camp are calling for the creation, or restoration, of a *Russian* state within the boundaries of the USSR in 1991.

Not coincidentally, the editors of *Izvestiya*, on December 31, 1993, printed their "Happy New Year" greetings over the masthead, welcoming the imminent arrival of 1994 in the fifteen languages of the fifteen ex-Union republics. They obviously expected that the "Near Abroad" would become this year less "abroad" and more "near."⁴ In the former Soviet Union nobody needs to be reminded that "Workers of All Lands Unite," in the same fifteen languages, and in the same order, used to occupy the same place in the same newspaper.

²For a magisterial analysis of Russian politics after the Soviet Union, see Dunlop (1993).

³Perhaps this should be called "Zhirinovskiy with a human face"?

⁴"Near abroad" is the term routinely used by Russians to characterize the foreign policy status of the former republics of the USSR.

Lest any doubts remain about what the newspaper meant to say, the next issue of *Izvestiya*, the first in 1994, carried an article entitled "The Russian (*russskiy*) Question in Russian (*rossiyskoy*) Politics of 1994." Its opening sentence read: "The Russian question—that's the most important problem facing Moscow's diplomacy in the new year." The article went on to say that "the opposition" has been using the question against President Yel'tsin with unfailing success. The "Russian Question," it noted, is about Russians who live outside Russia.

Note that defining the problem in this way inevitably means downgrading the relative priority of what one would think was the *real russskiy*, or should we say *rossiyskiy vopros* ("question"): the condition of the 150 million citizens of the Russian Federation. Inter-ethnic relations within that vast country, after all, are among the more difficult problems *they* have to face. There is in Russia a still "Nearer Abroad"—such as Tatarstan. Why this obsession with Ukraine when there is so much to worry about in the Russian Federation? There are several answers to this question.

Russia's "Ukrainian" Question

First of all, to repeat, one must recall that most Russians apparently never took seriously the "Ukrainian Question" and, accordingly, regarded the Ukrainian SSR as a fiction. They continued to think of Ukraine as part of a larger and more real Russia. Indeed, for them, the RSFSR itself was also a fiction, never really standing for Russia *per se*.⁵

Secondly, few Russians noticed that this was not the Ukrainian view of things. For Ukrainians, the formal status of Ukraine as a constitutional equal of Russia within the USSR signified the recognition of Ukrainian nationhood, although, depending on whether they were Soviet or emigre, Communist or anti-Communist, those Ukrainians disagreed among themselves on whether Soviet Ukraine was a truly independent state. Because the Russians were unaware of this common Ukrainian view, they were shocked by the Ukrainian "secession" in 1991. They were surprised to learn that, from the Ukrainian perspective, the Russian Republic's supplanting of All-Union institutions in Moscow connoted more than simply the overthrow of *Soviet* power; it also implied that, had the Ukrainians not declared their independence, they would have tacitly found themselves under *Russian* jurisdiction.

It somehow did not occur to Yel'tsin's followers, basking in the euphoria of the defense of the White House, that, for Ukrainians, being ruled by Russian democrats was not an attractive alternative to the USSR. In shocked response to Kiev's action, President Yeltsin's press secretary mentioned the possibility of Russian territorial claims against any independent Ukraine. Had these Russian politicians paid closer attention to

⁵Zhirinovskiy expressed it in precisely these terms: there is no Ukraine, there is no Russian Federation, there is one big Russia.

political discourse in Ukraine, in particular after Chernobyl, they might have been less surprised.

But the "misunderstanding" of 1991 is only one example of how conflicting have been the Russian and Ukrainian perceptions of the whole Russo-Ukrainian nexus. Even the most basic "facts" are perceived differently, beginning with the Russian "fact" that "Ukraine" has been attached to "Russia" since the middle of the 17th century. Ukrainians question this "fact," both by arguing that the relationship established by the "Union of Pereyaslav" was not what the Russians say it was, and by placing the "Pereyaslav 1654" event next to "Andrusovo 1667," which stands for the Russo-Polish deal partitioning Ukraine between Moscow and Poland along the Dnieper River. Such grave disagreements extend to such seemingly simple factual questions as what happened in Austrian Galicia in 1848. Yet that "fact" bears directly on the very nature of the Russo-Ukrainian relationship today, as viewed by no less an authority than Solzhenitsyn (Himka, 1992).

It is obviously pointless to debate history and historiography in terms of "what really happened" (*Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, as Ranke put it) when the issues are political. The issues at hand, and even the parties involved in them, are not defined by some "objective" facts of history or obvious and visible markers of identity; rather, they are a product and a reflection of certain historical *relationships*.

Russian Identity in Relation to Europe

In a recent article, Iver B. Neumann speaks of "Russia as Central Europe's Constituting Other." In developing his argument regarding the identity of Central Europe, Neumann offers his own, "a radically different perspective." Identity, he says, should be seen "not as something to be had, but as something to be done." Neumann calls for treating identity "as a *relation*, always forming and reforming in discourse, rather than as a possession" (Neumann, 1993, p. 349). Let us see if Neumann's approach can help us better understand our "triangle."

What is the "Other" that constitutes Russia? Surely there has been more than one. We have been discussing Ukraine. But, since the times of Peter I, Russian intellectual and political history have been preoccupied with the "Russia and Europe" problem. The subject is too well-known to justify even a summary here, but Ken Jowitt's reflections on the meaning of Eastern Europe to the Soviet leadership provide a revealing contemporary twist that helps to address the question we are trying to explore here. Early in the Gorbachev era, in 1986, Jowitt wrote:

Eastern Europe isn't simply territorial "booty"; it is an integral and concrete expression of a political generation's revolutionary credentials and achievements, its revolutionary "patrimony." That explains Brezhnev's blunt assertion to the Czechoslovak leadership in the late 1960s that the Soviet Union would never give up Eastern Europe (Jowitt, 1992, p. 217).

For this reason as well, in Jowitt's view, attempts by West European Communists to develop an alternative socialist model threatened to condemn the Soviet regime to "ideological marginality" (p. 218).

Jowitt speculated that, as Soviet ties to the non-European world became stronger (he was writing when Moscow was deeply engaged in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Vietnam), the Soviets would intensify their attention to the "eastern part of Europe." As Jowitt well understood, Eastern Europe was "a vital component of the Soviet leadership's conception of itself as a European political and ideological, not simply military and economic, force." Because of this, Jowitt expected Gorbachev's "commitment to Eastern Europe" would be "exceptionally strong" (p. 218).

In a note added several years later, Jowitt explained that even the act of giving up Eastern Europe in 1989 reflected Gorbachev's commitment to the idea that the Soviet Union was a European power. Gorbachev wanted to secure, in one way or another, the Soviet presence in Europe. At first, the USSR had been a "European" power in the sense that while Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany were "Marxist-Leninist" states, they formed, together with the USSR, one of the two Europes then existing: one capitalist, the other socialist. In this construction of the "Europeanness" of the USSR, a special place belonged to East Germany, which was often referred to in Soviet writing as "the first socialist country in the West," revealing the deep-rooted belief that East Germany was a more real Europe than its Eastern neighbors.

Thus, throughout modern Russian history, the relationship between Russia and Europe has helped to condition Russian identity and sense of place in the world, while the content of the Russian perspective on this relationship went through many fundamental changes. While Peter the Great and his successors saw joining Europe as remaking Russia in the image of a Europe that was "The Other," their Soviet successors made Russia "European" by creating a Europe in the image and likeness of Soviet Russia. This construction worked for several decades, from 1945 to 1989. Then there was the brief moment when, after giving up its socialist Europe, the Soviet Union hoped to be included in a much larger "common European home." But the Soviet Union ceased to exist shortly after the collapse of the socialist Europe, of which it had been the central, constituting part. What followed was the return of the old, pre-Soviet theme of "*Russia and Europe*." Now it was a non-Communist Russia's challenge to define itself with reference to Europe on new terms and, because of the collapse of the "Union" as well, in a new geographical form.

The firm opposition of Moscow to the Vysehrad Group's joining of NATO can better be understood by taking into account Russian problems with national self-definition, such as those raised by Jowitt, than by pointing to any real military considerations. Incorporation into NATO of the Czech Republic, and even more so of Poland, would further marginalize Russia, not in reality of course,⁶ but in the eyes of many Russians who

⁶A good argument can be made that such a move would bring all of East Europe, including Russia, to "Europe."

are uncertain of their identity. In contrast, an Eastern Europe that remained a zone of transition between the West and Russia would make Russians feel more comfortable as a nation.⁷

All of these considerations help us understand what being a Russia without Ukraine and Belarus' may now mean to the Russian public. These two nations are commonly perceived as being Russian not only by imperial or statist but also by historical and cultural/ethnic criteria. Their leaving is felt very strongly because of the emotional, not the economic cost. Many Russians have believed that the Western East-Slavs, because of their centuries-long association with the West politically (Poland) and religiously (Catholicism), are more European than the core "Muscovite" lands. Their union with Great Russia in the 17th–18th centuries, therefore, contributed to the Westernization of Russia from within, as it were, since they became internal elements of the Russian body national. Conversely, the departure of Ukraine and Belarus' makes the post-1991 Russia *less* European than it was before, and more distant from Europe.⁸

Was there any historical moment during the break-up of the USSR when these three East Slavic nations might have, or could have, remained together; if so, on what terms? If such a moment existed, it was extremely brief: when the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus' met in Belavezha, near Brest, on December 8, 1991. There, "the family of Rus" seemed to be on the verge of establishing some sort of partnership, an East Slavic Commonwealth, that might have been viable if it recognized its three participants as equals. With Minsk as its meeting place, but with no common capital, the rivalry between Kiev and Moscow could have become a matter of the past.

While this might have been the minimal condition for sustained, exclusive association, it was not to be. The leaders in Moscow did not pay heed to Solzhenitsyn's call for Russia to jettison the Caucasus and Central Asia. Instead, within days, the would-be Slavic Commonwealth was replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States, formed in Alma Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan. The Commonwealth was to be a far more inclusive association, consistent with the aspirations and identities of most Russian politicians. To put it in the simplest form, for Russia to have refused to go to Alma Ata would have required abandoning the Asian component of her identity, and this no politician in Moscow could possibly advocate.

Russia, Asia, and Eurasia

In the 18th century, Russian schoolchildren read in their geography textbook:

⁷There are issues that Russia inherited from the USSR that relate to its status as a great global power, but they fall beyond the scope of our discussion, even though they too are relevant to the Russian national self-image.

⁸Russians do not write much about it publicly, but they are aware, as are some foreigners, that the mass emigration of Jews and Germans has contributed to what Kapuscinski calls "Asianization" of Russia, and I would call its "de-europeanization." See Kapuscinski (1993, p. 327).

Q. What is Russia?

A. A vast empire, located in Europe and Asia.

Q. And how is Russia generally divided?

A. Into two main parts: European and Asian (Bassin, 1991, p. 8).

Thus, even though Russia had not yet annexed the Caucasus or Central Asia at the time this textbook was published, it already no longer considered itself simply a Christian or Slavic, *i.e.*, European power.

But the more Russia is "Asian," the less will it be convincing as a European power, and this will drive it further away from Ukraine and Belarus', which are seeking to establish themselves as residents of an East European neighborhood. In his article, Marples (1993) notes that the Belorussians do not want to fight outside Belarus', which concretely means Tajikistan and/or the Caucasus. The same can be said almost certainly about the Ukrainians. It is doubtful that the border of Tajikistan with Afghanistan is also considered by Ukrainians to be their country's border. Yet many Russians claim to view it as Russia's border.

In his remarkable book on Russia's Asian connection, the title of which repeats a question asked by Dostoyevsky, Hauner (1990) cites those Western commentators who have ironically remarked on how many "common homes"—European, Asian, Eurasian, Arctic, Pacific—Russians have claimed to be living in at the same time (Hauner, 1990). But irony aside, it is enough to take a look at St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow to realize that while Russia is indeed situated both in Europe and in Asia, "The East" happens to function also as an authentic "constituting other" of Russia: it commemorates and honors the conquest of Kazan.⁹ Acknowledging the enormity of this Eastern connection, one of the most interesting ideological currents in 20th-century Russian thought, the Eurasian School, proposed to redefine Russia as a power that was both European and Asian, both Christian and Islamic (Szporluk, 1990).

To do this requires at least some self-distancing from Europe, which is indeed what the Eurasians advocated. And herein lies a dilemma for Russian politicians. Within the post-Soviet space, the more Russia engages itself with the East, Central Asia, the Pacific region, or even the Caucasus, the less will it be able to attract Ukraine and Belarus' as potential partners in one or another form of association with Russia. Ukraine and Belarus' are seeking to define their external, post-Soviet relations, and their geographic horizons are narrower than those of Russia. Ukraine, Belarus', as well as Lithuania, have been turning to their immediate Western neighbors, and have been encountering some positive response, especially in Poland.¹⁰

⁹How well this memory plays in the capital of Tatarstan today is another matter.

¹⁰One may speculate that, as a result of the December 12, 1993 Russian election, Warsaw will be even more sympathetic to concerns of the three nations with whom so much of Polish history has been tied (Burant, 1993; Burant and Zubek, 1993).

But the closer Ukraine and Belarus' come to East Central Europe, the less near will their part of the Near Abroad be to Moscow. The increasing role of religion in politics has been demonstrated in former Yugoslavia, while Samuel Huntington (1993) takes religion as a major marker of civilizations in what he sees as the coming era of inter-civilizational confrontations. If he is right, Ukraine and Belarus' will face some tough internal problems arising out of their religious dualism between Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, but Russia will be even further alienated from Europe.

The essays of Marples and Solchanyk invite a comparison between Ukraine and Belarus' in terms of their success, or lack of success, in their respective nation-building and state-building efforts. It is to be hoped that such a comparative investigation will be undertaken by those qualified to do it. It is warranted to observe even now, however, that there is clear evidence that both Ukrainian and Belorussian national identities have been strengthened very substantially in recent years. The approach proposed by Neumann, focusing on identities in terms of relations, would show how each of the three new states—for an independent Russia is new, too—has been defining itself in the process of developing new relations with others.¹¹ Moreover, there are signs that many of the ethnic Russians in those two states, whom some people are determined to transform into the counterpart of the Sudeten Germans in pre-Munich Czechoslovakia, feel themselves to be members of, respectively, "the people of Ukraine" or "the people of Belarus'." There is no historical inevitability that will inexorably result in the "Bosnia-ization" of either of these two new states. Much will depend on political decisions made in Kiev, Minsk, Moscow and Washington, D.C.

POSSIBILITIES AND LIKELIHOODS

The Russian nation is not bound to opt for the imperial way. Russian politics contains a broad spectrum of views, with competition among different visions of Russia. There may well emerge a Russian national consensus that will reject imperial restoration simply because the good of Russia and its people calls for attention to matters at home, in the Russian Federation.

Since no outcome can be excluded, however, we need to allow the possibility of Russia's reestablishing its control over the two East Slavic nations. It can certainly be said that such an undertaking would be extremely costly. All three Slavic nations have moved far ahead in the formation of their distinct identities. They can work together again, but the possibility of an arrangement with Moscow in the role of an *acknowledged* elder brother is out of the question. Lenin understood that only Communism, not Russian superiority, can legitimize Moscow's rule over Kiev and Minsk. What universal principle or idea will legitimize the inclusion of Ukraine in an avowedly Russian state? And what kind of Russia will Russia have to be if it will need to keep the Ukrainians and

¹¹The studies by Burant are a useful first step in this direction.

Tajiks, the Belorussians and Georgians together, in some future "common home"?

There is only one possible answer: an imperial Russia would have to be a dictatorship. Even if some ex-republics are brought under Moscow's control economically, this would have to be done by command-economy methods, which in turn would also strengthen the command-economy forces in Russia proper. Put differently, the surest way to shift the balance of Russian politics in favor of the reactionaries is to bring the Central Asians and others back into Moscow's politics as an enlargement of Russia's internal problems. What kind of a democracy can one expect in a polity that combines, includes and rules both Belarus' and Tajikistan against their will?

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