

NATIONALISM AND REFORM in Belarus and Ukraine

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In Ukraine and Belarus political groups can be readily categorized into three groups -- the extreme left (Sovietsophiles, such as Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka; communists; and pan-Eastern Slavists), centrists, and center-right national democrats. The extreme right in both countries have miniscule support; racist and anti-Semitic remarks are more often heard from the extreme left.

The policies of these three groups can be also easily divided according to their support for three parts of a single programmatic package -- national revival (identity, language, culture); democratic and market reform; and cutting ties with the Soviet past and replacing Soviet and Eurasian values with European ones through "returning to Europe." As one moves from the extreme left to the center-right in Belarus and Ukraine, support for these three parts of a single programmatic package increases.

The strongest support for democratic reform and integrating into Europe is therefore to be found among center-right national democrats. It is no coincidence that support for these three aspects of a single program are also backed by political parties who draw upon those sections of the Belarusian and Ukrainian populations who have higher national consciousness and promote national revival and nation building. National identity, reform, and a pro-European orientation are intimately linked in Belarus and Ukraine.

National democratic parties in Belarus and Ukraine are usually negatively depicted as extreme, anti-Russian "nationalists" by the Western media, scholars, and policy makers. One reason for this is the continued location of Western journalists in Moscow (as in the Soviet era), who write about the non-Russian former Soviet republics from this Russian vantage point or after occasional forays into Belarus or Ukraine. Moscow-based journalists and Western scholars with a Russophile Soviet-studies background have also tended to reinforce the stereotype that nationalism in Belarus and Ukraine is negative, especially when it attempts to provide affirmative action for Belarusian and Ukrainian language and culture subjected to centuries of Russification.

In Belarus and Ukraine the center-right national democrats are akin to center-right parties in earlier periods of the West. (Scholars have still to provide any theoretical evidence to differentiate between civic nationalism and patriotism.) In Belarus and Ukraine, nationalism is of a civic, patriotic variety that seeks to implement the necessary political, economic, and administrative reforms oriented toward radically breaking with the Soviet past and

thereby integrating these countries into Europe.

The tsarist and Soviet historical experience is understood as a negative aberration that placed Belarus and Ukraine outside European and Western developments. Not surprisingly therefore, the extreme left are their arch opponents because they say the exact opposite. For Lukashenka, the Soviet experience was the most important historical event for Belarus in its entire history. As this was undertaken together with Russia as the "elder brother" of the USSR, then it is only natural for Belarus and Russia to be in union. Likewise, the Communist Party of Ukraine led by Petro Symonenko has been the only strong supporter of Lukashenka's regime in Ukraine.

Pan-Slavists agree with the communists and Sovietophiles that "White Russia" (Belarus) and "Little Russia" (Ukraine) should orientate themselves wholeheartedly to Russia. Where pan-Slavists and communists/Sovietophiles disagree is how their prescription for the present is based on their past understanding. Pan-Slavists look to the pre-Soviet era as their "golden age" and therefore see no problem in Belarusians and Ukrainians becoming part of Russia. Communists and Sovietophiles see the Soviet era as their "golden age" and therefore would not accept anything other than a union of sovereign republics. Pan-Slavists can be best depicted as Russian nationalists and communists/Sovietophiles as Soviet nationalists.

In Belarus and Ukraine, centrists and national democrats are allied against the extreme left. In Belarus this was clearly seen in the September 2001 presidential elections when the majority of national democrats and centrists allied together into an election bloc led by Uladzimir Hancharyk, head of the Belarusian Trade Union Federation, to oppose Lukashenka's re-election. In Ukraine, the equivalent head of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, Oleksandr Stoyan, was a high-profile member of Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine bloc. In Ukraine, all centrist parties oppose Ukraine's membership of the Russian-Belarusian union.

Centrist parties in Belarus and Ukraine are at once the easiest to define and the most difficult to categorize. Centrists tend to have their origins in the Soviet higher nomenklatura who abandoned the Communist Party in favor of "sovereign communism" in 1990-91 and then altogether when the party was banned after the August 1991 putsch. Centrists at first created no political parties but used their patronage networks to establish a nonconstituted "party of power." From the mid-1990s the "party of power" transformed itself into regional mini-"parties of power" in Ukraine as economic gains made in the reform process were transformed into political power. This happened to a greater extent in Ukraine than Belarus, because reforms were speeded up after 1994 whereas in Belarus Lukashenka's election in 1994 led to the gradual re-introduction of a neo-Soviet regime. Centrists were able to become oligarchs only in Ukraine.

Because of their link to the Soviet past, centrists and oligarchs straddle the Soviet Eurasian past and the European future. Their past ways of operating in a nontransparent, corrupt fashion using patronage networks have been continued in Ukraine in the post-Soviet era. During the Brezhnev "era of stagnation" they learned to pay lip service to officially espoused rhetoric, then in the march

from "developed socialism" to communism and now for "reform" toward "integrating into Europe." Centrists and oligarchs prefer not to completely break with the Soviet past and hence prefer "third-way" populist alternatives.

In the foreign policy arena they will espouse integration into the EU, and less so into NATO, but still prefer to remain active in the CIS. Hence, "multi-vector" foreign policies are preferable. Decisiveness in domestic or foreign policy is therefore not one of their strong points.

As centrists originated in the largely Russified former Soviet nomenklatura, it is not surprising that their strongest support comes from the Russophone population. Hence, centrists are supporters of state building and independence but lukewarm on nation building, something that divides them from national democrats. In Belarus, most national democrats are willing to overlook the division with centrists on the national question because of their commonly perceived threat from Lukashenka. Russophones are the most passive and least active in civil society as well as being the most amorphous both ideologically and in national consciousness. Ideologically driven parties in Belarus and Ukraine only exist on the left and right.

In conclusion, if Western policy towards Belarus and Ukraine aims to strengthen the reform movement, then it has little choice but to support these very same national democrats whom it has often criticized in the past.

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