

END NOTE

PUBLIC OPINION, UNIONS, AND NATIONALISM IN THE THREE EASTERN SLAVIC STATES

By Taras Kuzio

The public disagreement in recent months over the future of the Belarus-Russia Union gives rise to two questions. First, what value do opinion polls and public sentiment have in the three eastern Slavic states of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus on issues such as unions with neighboring states if those expressions of popular preference have little relationship to the realm of the possible and elites are unwilling to implement them? Second, how can new unions be formed when all three eastern Slavic states understand their relationship to one another differently?

Since the disintegration of the USSR in December 1991, there have been countless opinion polls conducted by Belarusian and Ukrainian organizations as well as Western governments and institutions that deal with foreign-policy preferences. These polls invariably register strong support in all three eastern Slavic countries for some form of union. In Russia and Belarus this support is evenly distributed throughout the population, while in Ukraine it is confined to its eastern regions.

But, can these sentiments be translated into policy? The gap between the common people and the elites that dates back to the USSR has grown, rather than shrunk, in the post-Soviet era. Ruling elites still feel they have the sole right to control issues of "national security" (i.e., foreign policy, the military, control over the security forces). In all three countries the militaries, which are mainly geared toward dealing with external threats, have been downsized, while internal-security forces have grown disproportionately.

These internal security forces are under the control of the executive and their focus is on dealing with internal "threats," such as that emanating from citizens who might wish to increase their level of political influence. Internal "threats" are seen as more threatening than external ones, despite all the rhetoric about a Western and NATO threat to Belarus and Russia or a Russian threat to Ukraine.

The ruling elites in the three eastern Slavic states take little heed of domestic opinion on most matters, especially on foreign policy. The local population understands this perfectly well. Opinion polls indicate low levels of perceived political effectiveness, and declining participation in civil society (e.g., membership in NGOs, parties, demonstrations, etc.,) throughout the 1990s.

What use then do opinion polls have in determining state

policies, particularly in areas of "national security?" It would seem very little. Russian, Ukrainian, or -- as we now see -- even Belarusian elites are not going to implement the policies that logically follow from their citizens' preferences as reflected in opinion polls.

Second, the growing dispute between Belarus and Russia over their union project, launched in 1996, has failed to resolve the dilemma of what kind of union is to be created. Russia's view of its ideal relationships with Belarus and Ukraine differs considerably from its view of its optimum relationships with other former Soviet states. Belarus and Ukraine are not "foreign" in Russian eyes, but temporarily separated regions of one spiritual-cultural space within which Russia is the "elder brother" and the Russian language the language of modernity and culture, in contrast to the Belarusian and Ukrainian languages, which Russians consider remnants of the village and the past. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been willing to go along with this conception, thereby reinforcing the Russian view of Belarusians as essentially the same people. In addition, Belarus and Russia have adopted variations of the Soviet Belarusian and Soviet anthems, respectively.

Eleven years of defending Ukrainian sovereignty vis-a-vis Russia and the outside world have forced Russians to begrudgingly realize that Ukraine is different from Belarus. This is something Putin has understood, and he has adopted different policies toward Ukraine. The only political forces in Ukraine that have supported a union with Russia and Belarus are on the extreme left (the Communists, Progressive Socialists, Slavic Unity, etc.). No member of any centrist political group in Ukraine, which are President Leonid Kuchma's main support base, supports Ukraine's membership of the Russia-Belarus Union.

The reasons for these conflicting views of what kind of "union" is to be built are to be found in Soviet nationalities policies that helped entrench among non-Russians a twin allegiance to their republics and to the USSR. Belarus and Ukraine were unique among the former non-Russian republics in that they even had United Nations representations and small foreign ministries. Russia was different. It had no republican institutions until 1990 and Russians therefore identified with the USSR as their "homeland," not the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

Prior to 1917, Russia did not have a developed sense of national identity nurtured within an independent nation-state, and the blurring of Russian-Soviet identity therefore added to an overall confused identity, particularly toward the eastern Slavs. In contrast, Serbia had a nation-state throughout most of the 19th century and republican institutions within Yugoslavia. Some Western scholars have therefore characterized Russian ethnic nationalism as "weak," as seen in the lack of Russian diaspora mobilization, unlike Serbian nationalism in Yugoslavia.

The Russian understanding of a union with Belarus and Ukraine is closer to the tsarist view of Belarusians and Ukrainians being "Russians" who should simply be absorbed into Russia. But to Belarusian and Ukrainian elites, including those on the extreme left, such a proposal is worse than the policy of sblizhenie (drawing

together) that was the cornerstone of Soviet nationality policy during the final years of the USSR.

Allegiance to their Soviet republican territory and borders is strongly entrenched among the Belarusian and Ukrainian elites and public. Separatist movements have been nonexistent or weak and pure Russian nationalist groups have never been able to obtain public support in Belarus or Ukraine. In Ukraine, Russian nationalist groups did not obtain more than 2 percent of the vote in the 1998 and 2002 elections.

In answer to Putin's referendum proposals on a merger of Belarus and Russia, Lukashenka has ruled out any steps that would "liquidate" Belarus as a country, even though opinion polls in both states support such a step. Lukashenka's views on the ideal union are similar to those of the extreme left in Ukraine; that is, a new confederal USSR where republics would enjoy more sovereignty than in the former Soviet Union. But this is not what Putin has in mind. Lukashenka's defense of his country's sovereignty vis-a-vis Russia and domestic supporters of Putin's proposals is consequently making him sound increasingly like his nationalist opponents.

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