

Borderland Identities or Steering a Sinking Ship?

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Only a decade ago, it was hard to imagine that the so-called wall of democracy would run along the Bug River, along the historical borderlands of Europe. It has been argued that NATO (and expected European Union) enlargement to the historic “gateway” represents a tangible commitment of the West to Central Europe, as well as to the borderlands, a region that has been unstable for centuries and that now has a chance to define itself politically and economically. Until 1989, Eastern Europe was a political rather than a historical construct, designating the zone between Germany and Russia—essentially the former Soviet bloc without East Germany or nonaligned but communist Yugoslavia. In the new, reunited Europe after the collapse of the USSR, this historically peripheral region has become central to the security and the economic stability of the West and, I would argue, of paramount importance to the development of the former Soviet region, including Russia.

Historically, the borderlands were a territory of competing civilizations, East and West, a patchwork of ethnicities that bred a hybrid, multicultural personality. It extended between the Baltic and the Black Seas; from the west it was culturally influenced by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and to a lesser degree Austro-Hungarian and Hanseatic groups. Once a swampy, predominately rural region, characterized by ethnic diversity and thought of as backward and unruly, the borderlands were ethnically homogenized by World War II and Soviet experiences, through massacres, “ethnic cleansing,” and mass deportations—or as Kate Brown puts it, “modernized.”¹

Today the region has become a barometer for gauging the development of the former USSR, with significant progress toward European integration in the Baltic States, a nostalgic regressive regime in Belarus, and ambivalence in Ukraine. I argue that the collapse of the Russian monarchy and the reinvention of the former empire as the USSR represented the last gasp of its orientalism. The legacy of the

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Soviet collapse, in contrast, has been an ongoing attempt to reintegrate the entire Soviet continent into the West. That transition, involving deep economic and social readjustments, quite naturally tests the limits of cultural identity in several countries, especially in Russia, where the distinctions between ethnic, imperial, and ideological identities—including *homo sovieticus*—are fluid and ill-defined. It justifies dubbing the entire former Soviet region as Europe's borderland.

I believe that Westernization is the corrective option and that the former bloc has been "playing catch up" since the collapse of communism. Timothy Garton Ash extends the idea of "catch-up revolutions" by suggesting that the revolutions that swept Central Europe in 1989–91 were correctives that produced no new ideas.² Ash qualifies his claim by pointing to the self-conscious, essentially post-modern character of the revolutionary changes, the minimization of violence, and the negotiated settlements. Those who criticize Western ideas on a distinctive Eurasian ethos, or who point to retro-ideologies that have emerged in the region as examples of another way, miss the point of market globalization and the growing international consensus on civic responsibility.

Even more important, communism uprooted agrarian societies and localized identities and led to the relative homogenization (Russification, denationalization) of the region. Although fears of "Weimar Russia" have been commonplace during the NATO enlargement debate, a more apt historical parallel is the disintegrating eighteenth-century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Preoccupied with its own internal conflicts, Russia cannot reconstruct its imperial or Soviet past, and it is not likely to invade its neighbors. From that point of view, Russia can either reinvent itself or implode, but it cannot regress into its Euroasiatic isolation. It is noteworthy that more than half of those polled support slow integration with Europe, and even supporters of the so-called Slavic nucleus, such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, refer to it as "our East European community."

Russian leadership under Putin reflects European continuity. Putin is from Russia's "window on the West," St. Petersburg. A student of Anatoly Sobchak (the mayor who renamed Leningrad, St. Petersburg) at the law school, a former intelligence officer in the German Democratic Republic, and past vice president for international affairs at Leningrad University, he emerged from the circle of "reformers" that included Anatoly Chubais. His appointment of "liberals" Alexei Kudrin and German Gref to leading economic policy posts demonstrates commitment to reform, albeit his decisions are motivated by pragmatic compromise and consolidation of power. Putin has been trying to rein in the power of the oligarchs who amassed huge fortunes with Yeltsin-era, scandal-ridden privatization schemes, including Chubais himself. As enthusiasm for the war in Chechnya wanes, Putin needs an enemy toward whom to rechannel frustrations. In a country that has traditionally hated the rich, the tycoons are a popular target.

Somewhat paradoxically, one could argue that the war in Chechnya demonstrates Russia's path to Europe. Although the war has been fought to check further disintegration of Russia, it also represents the restoration of Russian dominance over a strategic region that could potentially fall out of the European sphere of influence. The rise of Islamophilia and the reawakening of non-Russian con-

federations, such as Idel-Ural, are widely seen as a threat to the integrity of the federation.³ A major impetus for the Slavic nucleus ideology is the need to restore demographic balance to favor Europe. Such tensions test the Eurasian identity of modern Russia and redefine the traditional borderlands more broadly to include Russia and the former Soviet territory.

How have the shifting alliances in the borderlands affected the national identity of emergent states? In contrast to the Baltic States, it is often argued that Ukraine and Belarus are without a firmly rooted national identity. The erosion of such differences as language, religion, historical experience, and ideological heritage in this essentially postcolonial region has been significant. Soviet experience, social engineering, and cultural and ideological homogenization have more or less been grafted onto the native traditions of all the former Soviet republics and will probably take years of detoxification.

It is difficult to predict how the region will evolve over time, but one can detect a tug-of-war between competing constructs of democracy: "egalitarian democracy," or social leveling—skewed by the Marxist past—and "market democracy," interested in strengthening legal institutions. One can also detect the kernels of new identity manifesting themselves inside Russia in the ongoing struggle between the center and the periphery, particularly non-Russian Islamic populations, and in the resurfacing of ethnic distinctions, such as Ruski/Rosiiski. Outside of Russia's borders, this is seen in Moscow's diminishing role in the region. The postimperial sobering process feeds inflated rhetorics and theatrics in leaders from Zhirinovskiy to Lukashenko, and it was the staple of victory for Putin, a technocrat who claims he can put Russia back on track. Not surprisingly, the ascendance of Putin took the wind out of the political sails of the other two. Zhirinovskiy came in fifth out of eleven presidential candidates. Lukashenko's ambitions to become Yeltsin's successor as the vice president of a Russia-Belarus union were clipped earlier; his popularity even in Belarus had plummeted to 38.4 percent in a May poll.

Belarus and Ukraine dramatically illustrate the new post-Soviet identity dilemma. Both were carved out of the borderlands as standardized ethnicities under denationalized Soviet conditions and are today relatively homogeneous. Both have analogues in other parts of the region, which sees itself at the crossroads between tradition and transition, both modernist and postmodern, with its postideological relics and disoriented unknowns. The most denationalized is Belarus; the least, the Baltics. Will Ukraine follow Belarus to some sort of accommodation with Russia? How do we explain the cult of "the last new Soviet man," reflected in the personality type of Alexander Lukashenko? A vehicle for nostalgia for millions of Soviet "dependents" and a useful propaganda tool for some Moscow policymakers, Lukashenko expresses a longing for moral certainty in uncertain times, for a simple voice in a complex world that reflects the defeat of a uniform value system, for unipolarity in a multipolar world. Is the Lukashenko cult of personality a product of people without a sense of ethnic or national identity (so-called *tutejsi*, or locals)? Is Lukashenko just one of the simple folk (*prosti ludi*) on an ideological mission?

Although the “local” phenomenon is widely missed by Western scholars, who mostly rely only on Soviet sources (see, for example, David E. Marples’s historical retrospective on Belarus), lack of ethnic self-consciousness was widespread in the region before World War II and was an important factor in Sovietization.⁴ Polish sources for the underpopulated Polesie province of 1.1 million, representing one-tenth of prewar Poland, indicate that 62.5 percent of residents who expressed no ethnic identity were identified as Polesians, 14.5 percent as Poles, 10 percent as Jews, 6.6 percent as Belarusians, and 4.8 percent as Ukrainians. Some estimates from the war period suggest that Polesians constituted about half of Home Army units operating in the province. Regionalism and the “local” phenomenon at least partly explain the kinship in Belarus, Ukraine, and other parts of the former USSR to *homo sovieticus* as an identity analogous to ethnicity. It can be identified with a sense of continuity with the former Soviet state, not necessarily its ideology, or with nostalgia for the past.

However, it seems to me that claims (for example, by Victor Charnou of the Belarusian Open Society Fund) that a “localized” perspective with strong paternalistic roots in agrarian society—reinforced by loss of life during World War II, repressions under the Soviets, and a communist culture of dependency—feeds militant opposition to reform fall short of explaining the popularity of neocommunist retro-ideologies with populist overtones.⁵ Populist, anti-elite rhetoric has also been used by the “antipolitical” reformers (Walesa, Havel) against the corrupt communist regime. The claim for a vestigial borderlands identity “at the crossroads” seems to me more instructive, especially since it seems to be a widespread phenomenon in the former Soviet region. Lukashenko’s appeal is polyphonic, expressing cultural inertia couched in the rhetoric of independence.

Multipolarity has traditionally defined the ethos of the borderlands, which is epitomized in Piotr Wrobel’s description of General Lucjan Zeligowski: a tsarist officer born in Lithuania and married to a Russian joins the struggle for Polish independence, is vilified by the Lithuanians for his nationalist coup, and becomes an advocate of Pan-Slavism in later years.⁶ One could just as well describe two distant relatives from Vilnius: Felix Dzierzhinsky, who wanted to be a priest and ended as the founder of the communist Cheka, and Josef Pilsudski, a socialist, proud of his Lithuanian roots, who stood at the helm of Poland’s national revival and stopped Soviet expansionism.⁷ Hence, Czeslaw Milosz is a Polish poet from Lithuania, not, as Milosz would have it, a Polish-speaking Lithuanian, because of his culturally rooted myth of history. Lithuanian natinoalist Vytautas Landsbergis, like many modern leaders from the borderlands, often struggles to reconcile a specific historical myth with civil values. This juggling act can become more complicated in regions of cultural hybridity or “denationalized” states with overlapping identities.

Cultural multipolarity breeds ideologically firm personalities, especially under conditions of imported ideologies, as well as linguistic extremism, which has the potential of distorting history or turning into violence. One could point to the Nazi zealotry of the German minority (many the children of Siberian exiles) in the Lublin region of Nazi-occupied Poland, or to General Andrei Vlasov’s army, com-

posed of disaffected Soviet POWs who went over to the Germans and were instrumental in putting down the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. In a more spectacular recent case of an ideological superimposition emerging from a similar multicultural overlap in the Balkans, numerous Serb and Croat locals have fought in nationalist paramilitary units against their own ethnic militaries. Adhering to an ideology is a way of rationalizing behavior and accommodating a fluctuating identity.

Zealotry is connected to an ideological separation of word from deed. A common feature of transition societies has been the “war of words,” or the displacement of violence into rhetorical excesses, such as occurred in the Russian Duma during impeachment proceedings, when Yeltsin’s policies were described as “genocidal.” Ideological antagonism, expressed in various rhetorical prefabrications, sloganeering, or labeling, recalls the propagandism of the communist period and the socialist realist belief in the primacy of words over deeds. Overstatement often acts as overcompensation for absence, as, for example, in claims by nationalists from Belarus or Ukrainian

Galicia that they are the victims of Moscow. Putin’s electoral slogan “Dictatorship of law” is a striking example of a verbal challenge to lawlessness aiming to fill the vacuum.

The Western news media’s euphoria about the triumph of democracy in the former bloc and various attempts to steer or market political change through image-building gimmicks have been partly responsible for overestimating achievements and distorting truth about serious structural problems, such as conflicting clan, state, and public interests in countries such as Russia and Ukraine. In her analysis of the role of “transactors” in U.S.–Russia aid, Janine Wedel ascribes the “selling” of the Chubias clan as pro-Western “reformers” to cultural impenetrability and to publicly unaccountable elites.⁸ Wedel points to the cultural ignorance and overdependence of the Harvard clan, which often circumvented procedures and lacked adequate institutional oversight in their private arrangements with like-minded Russians. One might speculate that such practices were a continuation on a grand scale of the self-interested agreements between elites in negotiated transfers of power that went under the guise of democratic ideals in Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere in “the other Europe.” The divergence has played into the overlapping concerns that, in the case of Ukrainian leaders, have been quite deftly used as an instrument of foreign policy.

Unlike Belarus, neither Lithuania nor Ukraine produced magnetic personality cults, even though national revival was a component in their emergence as independent states. Perhaps that national revival is the explanation, for Lukashenko is the flip side of nationalism. It is worth noting that Belarus had no organized

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national opposition, like Sajudis in Lithuania, or even Rukh in Ukraine, which was a formidable political force when it joined forces with Kravchuk. Zenon Paznyak's Belarusian National Front emerged only after the declaration of Belarusian independence. Lukashenko could reinvent socialism in one republic and call it an independent country, so long as Russia paid its transit bills and supplied Belarus with cheap energy. The Lukashenko phenomenon, playing to post-Soviet ambivalence toward the West, is a distraction from economic difficulties caused by the changes and reflects a longing for ideological certainty and integrity. In contrast with his Balkan counterparts, Franjo Tudjman or Slobodan Milosevic, "the last new Soviet man" is not a nationalist, nor is he an ideological throwback to the old ways, rooted in nostalgia for the Soviet past, as is, for example, Gennady Zyuganov.

In some respects, Lukashenko and those in opposition are mirror reflections, both prone to verbal extravagance. Elena Gapova's descriptions of the displaced struggle for national identity in Belarus sadly reflect the marginalization of opposition intelligentsia.⁹ Banned, exiled, silenced, or simply dismissed as irrelevant, "the enemy within" can only resort to symbolic play. The act of clinging to symbols is not a means of circumventing censorship but an expression of the group's exclusion from the political process. Although it has been growing, the opposition so far has had minimal impact, as it has been unable to circumvent tight media controls or muster enough strength to discredit and oust Lukashenko. Its unnecessary power struggles and divisiveness have been only part of the problem. One cannot, however, dismiss the brashness of Lukashenko as the mainstay of the Belarusian identity. The observation that the "social basis for Lukashenkonism exists in every country of the former Soviet Union" seems only to reinforce belief in the staying power of the past.¹⁰ The rhetoric about the "Slavic nucleus" is less about ethnicization of politics than about disassembling the empire, both a backward and a forward glance.

Belarus cannot be put aside and reserved for future development any more than Ukraine or Russia can. Post-Soviet Belarus has been characterized by political inertia and lack of economic inventiveness. It became independent by default only after Russia declared its sovereignty. By contrast, in Ukraine, the "enlightened" republican nomenklatura seized the opportunity to steer the changes and, in some respects, created its own opposition. Similarly, the postcommunist history of Russia can be seen as a series of efforts by the elites to steer events; those efforts may have finally achieved success with the consolidation of power under Vladimir Putin. This "controlled" transformation may have been achieved with Western aid, which essentially covered the costs of Yeltsin's election victory under the guise of democracy and economic reform, just as pumping up the oil prices eased Russia's economic troubles and assured continuity in Putin's triumph.¹¹

What goes under the name of new economic policy in Minsk is a hodgepodge of well-known methods to stimulate competition, but lack of reform and government attempts to steer changes are expected to perpetuate lack of competitiveness and hobble growth. Attempts to stimulate growth in 1998 led to a financial crisis eased by stopgap administrative measures, severe import restrictions, and

Russian bank credits. Still the Lukashenko government will eventually be forced to liberalize its economy and pay a political prize for its ineptitude.¹² Quite predictably, during his symbolic six-hour stopover in Minsk, the newly elected president Putin insisted on economic changes in Minsk and a pragmatic approach to the proposed union between the two countries. Lukashenko, missing from the inauguration ceremonies, will either pay his bills and adjust, or fall.

In a historical overview of post-independence Belarus, Eugeniusz Mironowicz demonstrates that Lukashenko did the expected.¹³ He emerged out of the relative political immobility and economic stagnation that characterized Viacheslau Kebich's rule, when Western credits only delayed reforms and further entrenched the communist nomenklatura. Lukashenko is a product of the post-Soviet inertia of the Kebich government, an expression of the inability of the Belarusian ruling elites to seize opportunities and get out of the culture of dependence. Pervasive corruption, which Lukashenko campaigned against, did not really describe Belarus; Stanislav Shushkevich's impropriety amounted to less than \$100. Yet the anticorruption campaign had appeal because it filled a vacuum, expressed clarity in the ideological muddle that followed the Soviet collapse, and subsequently rationalized restrictive measures taken by the regime. Accusations of corruption are a means of stifling reform, market economy, and Western values.

The culture of dependence, one could claim, reflected economic dependence. More important, however, perestroika came to countries like Belarus from the top down—and really from Moscow—without decentralization, without civil empowerment, and without a grassroots opposition movement that could provide a check on power and bring down the government. In fact, Belarus never achieved complete autonomy, with its defense forces under the command of Russia, which operates military bases on its territory. The small pockets of opposition intelligentsia were easily marginalized, their demands characterized as unrealistic with little popular backing. In Belarus, perhaps the only brief opportunity to force the ruling elites to the negotiating table occurred immediately after the Russian coup, which the ruling elites in Minsk and the military generally supported.

Assuming that the changes are a "correction," I think that those observers who expressed surprise at the extent to which authoritarianism in Croatia depended on a single individual and evaporated after his death might be similarly surprised by what happens in Belarus after Lukashenko's departure. The prospects of a peaceful transition in Belarus are slim. Change may come from the inside (perhaps in the form of a coup), or it may be forced by growing discontent, particularly among labor unions. Most likely it will be provoked by eroding Russian support after Lukashenko has outlived his political usefulness or if the tab for his upkeep grows too high. If, as planned, the currencies of Russia and Belarus merge by 2005, Moscow will retain complete control over the ruble and try to minimize the costs. Although Moscow is serious about union with Belarus, not only for economic or strategic reasons but also to strike a demographic balance, it may be more costly than expected. Belarus will probably remain Belarus, if only because its preferential treatment could generate conflicts that threaten the territorial integrity of the Russian federation.

It seems to me inconceivable in a global economy for Belarus, or for that matter Ukraine, to develop without a market economy or democratic institutions. Like most post-Soviet states, Ukraine perceives itself as a country at the crossroads, and much depends on how it defines itself in the future. It is not in the interest of the local elites to become dependent on the Russian oligarchs or to be excluded from the lucrative energy market on which Ukrainian metallurgical, chemical, and military industries depend. Inertia is tempting, for example, among the former *kolhoz* managers, and some elements of the Belarusian scenario are in place. Although not very reliable for a fluid, regionalized country like Ukraine, polls indicate that about a third of Ukrainians perceive the collapse of the USSR as a misfortune; about half might be tempted to support a Slavic nucleus. These figures probably better express economic than political unhappiness.

Still, Ukraine need not follow the Lukashenko option after the referendum on strengthening its presidency. Perplexingly, Leonid Kuchma's policies, which seem to run counter to the "crossroads dream," could deliver what Russia wants—a dependency manifested in the March takeover of strategic industries, such as the Nikolayev processing facilities by Oleg Deripaska's SibAl (Siberian Aluminum) partnered with the Chubias-owned electrical energy producer RAO JES Rossii. The highly profitable Russian Aluminum consortium, a compromise between the Deripaska-Chubais and Berezovsky-Abramovich clans, represents 7 percent of world aluminum production and is second only to Alcoa. In late February, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Timoshenko was denying rumors that Ukraine would pay its energy debt to Russia with stock options. One wonders whether Kuchma's "transitional" policies pander to wishful thinking about Ukraine's slow road to Europe or are a calculated rationalization of the ruling elite's self-interest in perpetuating Ukraine as what Michael McFaul has called a "privatized state."¹⁴ Is the vacillation anything more than an appeal for Western aid and investment, using the steady drift toward dependence on Russia as a bargaining chip?

There is good evidence supporting the claim of Mikhail A. Molchanov that Ukrainian nomenklatura quite self-consciously steered nationalist aspirations to secure their positions and insulate themselves from aggressive changes pursued in Russia.¹⁵ Kyiv's protectionism was more far-reaching, with the citizenship law used to neutralize the influence of émigré Ukrainian elites (including Jews, Poles, Russians, and other ethnic minorities) from the West, prompting the director of Foundation for Free Speech—Ukraine, Juri Maniichuk, to dub such insular policies the "shtetelization of Ukraine." I am not suggesting that Ukraine is attempting to leverage its underdevelopment and/or its role as a potential counterbalance to Moscow, but one cannot ignore the informal cross-border arrangements that permit the flow of aid, often subsidizing private enrichment schemes. Ukraine's pressing economic difficulties run the risk of leading to an implosion, a loose confederation of regions, or even fragmentation. And they can be eased by the "crossroads dream": various GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) Group initiatives; development of independent energy sources from Azerbaijan through the Odessa-Brody-Gdansk oil pipeline to Europe (halted by Anatoly Holubchenko in 1998 because of a private Russian oil scam); and trans-

portation links to the Caucasus and Central Asia. With the closing of the western borders, complex procedures and high tariffs to pay off ten years of procrastination and corruption, how can the "crossroads dream" be realized?

Dreams, however, are unlikely to compete with human needs determined by the global market forces in an increasingly technologically intertwined world. The crossroads strategy has worked for Poland and the Baltics, and it may yet work for Ukraine, or for that matter, for Azerbaijan. In the end, it is not a question of *if* the former Soviet region adjusts to the West but when and how. Current borders can be redesigned, as has happened in the NIS. However, market economy is impartial to borders, although it can affect or be affected by them. The changes may be very slow in coming, but they are only a matter of time. It is a question of seizing opportunity, not of treading water. Mindlessness imposed by authoritarian culture, to paraphrase Theodore Adorno, can only last at the expense of development.

NOTES

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1. Kate Brown, "The Making of Ukrainian Nation-space: The Ukrainian Borderlands" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, New York City, 13–15 April 2000).

2. Timothy Garton Ash, "Ten Years After," *New York Review of Books*, 18 November 1999.

3. Paul Goble, "Idel-Ural and the Future of Russia," *RFE/RL Newswire*, 17 May 2000.

4. David R. Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized State* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999).

5. Wiktar Czarnou, "Rezim Autorytarny na Bialorusi: Charakter, Trwalosc, Warjanty Transformacji," in *Inna Bialorus*, trans. Ewa Kornowska-Michalska (Warsaw: Centrum Stosunkow Miedzynarodowych, 1999), 80–101.

6. Piotr Wrobel, "Journey through the Borderlands: General Lucjan Zeligowski and His Quest for Home and Identity" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, New York City, 13–15 April 2000).

7. Vytautas Landsbergis, "Ten Years After Freedom," interview by Michael Szporer, *Polish News* (April 2000): 12–13.

8. Janine Wedel, "Rigging the U.S.-Russian Relationship: Harvard, Chubias, and the Transidentity Game," *Demokratizatsiya* 7, no. 4 (1999): 469–500.

9. Elena Gapova, "Bialorusian Discourse as a Symbolic War" (paper presented at Harvard University).

10. Vlodymyr Zvighyanich, "The Lost World: Belarus as a Model of Political Necromancy," *Prism*, 21 May 1999.

11. Andrew Hamilton, "The Cost of Oil: How the White House Helped Pump up the Price," *Washington Post*, 30 April 2000.

12. Tatiana Kalinouskaja, "Kulisy Wzrostu Gospodarczego Na Bialorusi," in *Inna Bialorus*, 146–54.

13. Eugeniusz Mironowicz, *Bialorus* (Warsaw: Trio, 1999).

14. Michael McFaul, "Russia's Privatized State as Impediment to Democratic Consolidation," *Security Dialogue* 29, no. 2 (1998).

15. Mikhail A. Molchanov, "Post-Communist Nationalism as a Power Resource: A Ukraine-Russia Comparison," *Nationalities Papers* 28, no. 2 (2000).