“Back to the USSR?”: New Trends in Russian Regional Policy

EMIL PAIN

Before comparing the policies of Vladimir Putin with those of his predecessors, one must remind oneself that Putin is not a new political actor: He is a part of the Yeltsin legacy. Yet Yeltsin’s politics were different in various periods. His government began in the time of liberalism, and its main task was to reduce the role of the state in Russian society. Later, his approach was said to be based on the necessity of strengthening the role of the state. In the first stages of Yeltsin’s presidency, the foreign policy positions of Russia and the West were noticably similar, right up to the support of Russian leadership for the American action against Saddam Hussein. In the second period Russia took a separate position on the majority of serious international problems: Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Iran. If in the first period bright, famous people surrounded Yeltsin—Gaidar, Chubais, Kozirev, and others—than in the second stage there were darker, less-noted bureaucrats such as Borodin, Korzjakov, Yumashev, and Voloshin.

During this second stage, after 1996, when the former liberal goals were forgotten and the oligarchic, or so-called “family,” form of administration of Russia was strengthened, Vladimir Putin was born as an independent political actor. Putin received his first post in the rank of minister and became the head of the Federal Security Forces. Then Yeltsin publicly named him his successor. In the consciousness of the majority of Russians, however, he wasn’t perceived as a successor who would continue the antiliberal tendencies of the second stage of Yeltsin’s governance. Moreover, some of the Russian intelligentsia—who traditionally place all of their hope for a better future in a new leader, be it tsar or general secretary of the Communist Party, and who wanted to see the new president as a deliverer of Russia from all her woes—contrived several myths about Putin as a liberal and reformer, and those myths in part were shared by the West.

The first myth: Putin wants the reformation of Russia, but the “Yeltsin family” is inhibiting him. This is a typical Russian myth, resembling the traditional Russian fairy tale about the “good tsar” and the “bad boyars.” But I was surprised

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Emil Pain is director of the Center for Ethno-political Studies (NGO/Moscow) and Starovoitova Fellow on Human Rights and Conflict Resolution, at the the Kennan Institute, Washington, D.C.

that some of my American colleagues spoke in terms of this myth when they described the modern political situation in Russia. In fact, the Yeltsin family named Putin the guarantor of the family's preservation, and they are still quite satisfied with him.

I use the term "family" not only in the narrow sense (to mean relatives of Yeltsin), but in the wider meaning to include the groups of people and corporations that received most of the profit from the privatization of Soviet property. The Yeltsin family is striving to retain its advantages in three ways: First, they devote all their power to defeating political and economic competitors, especially the Moscow group, led by Mayor Luzhkov, who openly stated that he plans to re-examine the results of privatization. The casualty of the group became Berezovsky, who not long ago played a more important role in the family. But Berezovsky is not the first man in history to become a victim of something he had himself created.

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Second, the Yeltsin family group is striving to subordinate the government and retain power by using the mass media, most of all television, to manipulate the consciousness of the population, especially before the elections. Third, they are striving to weaken the political influence of regional leaders, who form the only political group potentially capable of restricting the all-powerful Kremlin in Russia, where until recently no new parties or other institutions of civil society were developed. Decreasing the political weight of the regional leaders also allows those closest to the Kremlin oligarchy to place the regional economies under their control.

The main point is that the Putin regime has not in any way diverged from the goals and values of the Yeltsin family. The president's political advisers perpetuate the myth of contradiction between them in order to separate the popular Putin from the unpopular Yeltsin. In my opinion, the influence on Putin of representatives from the former family is a lesser evil than his being influenced by others in his political coalition, namely, his friends from the Leningrad KGB. An example of this is the return of the Soviet anthem, to which Yeltsin publicly and categorically announced his opposition.[1] This, by the way, is the first open break between Yelsin and Putin since the latter was elected president of Russia.

The second myth: Russian society expects economic reform from President Putin. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Russian society is tired of reform; politicians who are connected with reform, such as Gaidar or Chubais, for example, have the most negative ratings. The majority of Russians expect no new reforms from the president beyond the punishment of those guilty for the political failures during the time of President Yeltsin, which today are considered the national shame of Russia. They include the fall of the Soviet Union; the defeat of the Russian army in the first Chechen war (1994–96); privatization; and the excessive authority given to leaders of Russian regions, especially the republics. Who is to blame in all of this, according to public opinion? Again it is the oligarchs, regional barons, and liberal mass media. Putin is acting in full accordance with societal expectations about those negative reforms, and he considers all of the Yeltsin period as "time lost."

The third myth: Under President Yeltsin, anarchy grew between Moscow and the republics, and President Putin brought order and stabilized the situation. In fact the opposite is true. Yeltsin became president of Russia at a critical period in its history, when Russia was feeling the consequences of the disintegration of the USSR. In 1990–91 all of the Russian Federation republics declared sovereignty. The threat of the disintegration of Russia at that time was the worst.

Yeltsin managed to stabilize the situation at the expense of concessions to the republics. If in the beginning the leaders of the republics supported the most radical nationalist movements, by 1993 the situation had dramatically changed. At that time, Yeltsin and the leaders of the republics formed something resembling a secret pact against radical nationalists. And since that time not one serious manifestation of separatism has appeared, with the exception of Chechnya.[2] The situation has changed for the worse since Putin began to exert pressure on the leaders of the republics. The leaders of the republics do not exhibit their negative sentiments toward Putin's policies openly. Instead they secretly allow nationalistic movements to develop in their republics.

Putin's Administrative Reform

The reform of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation—in particular, the removal of regional leaders and the creation of seven administrative areas, with a governor-general at the helm of each—is seen in the regions as a method of pressure, so it is without doubt disliked by all the regional leaders. But most of the leaders of the republics do not openly exhibit their negative sentiments toward Putin's policies. Instead, they secretly allow nationalistic movements to develop in their republics. Until recently, the only regional leader openly negative about the Kremlin reforms was the president of the Chuvash republic, Nikolai Federov. At that time the leaders of Dagestan were examples of the other extreme, wholeheartedly supporting Putin's policies and welcoming his efforts to rebuild the hierarchy of power in Russia.

But it was this way only in the first months after the publication of the Putin directives. With time, leaders of Russian regions began to be braver in voicing their doubts about the correctness of Putin's reforms. Even such careful and influential regional politicians as the president of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, today publicly question the logic of creating seven administrative regions. But federal authorities do not have to be concerned with collective opposition by the leaders of the regions; they are incapable of joint political activity, as was demonstrated by their behavior in the parliamentary and presidential elections of 1999. The real threat to Moscow comes not from the governors of regions or the presidents of republics but from local political movements that are not dependent on Moscow. The leaders of the regions can have real influence on those movements, but so far they have not wanted to avail themselves of that potential influence to resist the Kremlin.

The ostensible main function of the governor-generals is to make the laws of the regions consistent with the constitution of the Russian Federation. But presidential appointees carry out that mission very selectively: they demand the repeal of laws that give greater autonomy to the regions but do not demand that regional leaders correct laws that violate human rights and the rights of national minorities. For example, in the Krasnodar krai there are a number of laws that are in glaring violation of international and national standards on the treatment of refugees, especially national minorities, but the representative of the president in the southern region, General Victor Kazansev, did not once bring up the question of repealing the laws, his main mission being to guarantee public support for the war with Chechnya.[3] The governor of the southern region has been increasingly and openly abusive to many ethnic groups living in the region (Turks, Armenians, Jews). But the representative of the president, the guarantor of Russian laws in the region, did not even reprimand him.

The historic precursors of administrative regions were *general-gubernatorstva* in tsarist Russia and *sovnarhoz* in the Soviet era. Even those forms of governance, more antiquated in Soviet times than superregions are in ours, proved that fear and force alone will not keep together a multiethnic state. And since those times the economic independence of the regions has substantially increased, with most of the economy privatized, so bullying is all that presidential appointees have to use. They cannot influence the state of affairs in the regions, and the bureaucracies that they create only raise the threat of corruption.

In my opinion the idea of administrative superregions will not be long lived. On the ground it is being resisted by forces even more powerful than regional leaders. Federal ministers are suspicious of the regional representatives' attempts to control the flow of finances from the center to the regions, and they refuse to recognize their role in the coordination of the activities of the regional offices of their ministries. That kind of competition in Soviet times, under Khruschev, led to the collapse of his favorite brainchild, sovnarhoz, the prototype of the present-day administrative region. Sovnarhoz included three to four oblasts, republics, or krays, making them very large territories and very poorly governed. But the administrative regions are even bigger (they include twelve to thirteen regions). In addition, the Communist Party discipline that supported the command hierarchy in Soviet times is gone. That alone condemns Putin's administrative system to failure.

The power of regional heads should be limited, not from above, not at the risk of concentrating even more power in the Kremlin, but by the development of municipal self-government. Putin's reform proposes to weaken further the already insignificant role of municipal authorities, because as compensation for their loss of federal power the leaders of the regions are to receive a free hand in their dealings with the municipalities.

The situation of local self-government is worsening even more as a result of changes made by Putin to the proportion of revenue going to federal and regional budgets. Before, they were almost equal: 51 percent went to the center and 49 percent to the region. That 49 percent included 32 percent that went to the municipalities. Today the federal share has increased to 63 percent, and the regions now receive only 37 percent. But it was the municipalities that got hit the hardest, with their share cut in half to only 17 percent. At the same time, their expenses did not decrease, if only because almost all of the housing and municipal infrastructure still belongs to the municipalities. Accordingly, the local budget deficits are growing, and as a result many cities have no money to pay for electricity, gas, and coal. It is mainly because of this that many cities and villages of Russia (especially in the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East) spent months in winter without electrical lighting and heat. Municipalities do not have the means to perform needed repairs on houses, particularly on their heating and ventilation, and so the number of accidents is growing.

Concentration of revenue in the federal budget has reduced the number of donor regions (those that gave more in taxes to the federal budget than they received from it). Before the reforms there were eighteen donor regions; in 2001 there were seven. An overwhelming number of regions—eighty-two—are now exclusively dependent on the federal budget. That destroys the commercial spirit, prevents initiative on the part of regional leaders, and creates a climate hostile to investment, including foreign investment.

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The Russian government is fooling itself into believing that regions thus controlled are easier to rule, that they become more pliant. In reality the opposite is true. The less money there is in the regional and municipal budgets, the less responsibility their leaders feel, and the less can be demanded of them. We can expect that in the near future the residents of the provinces will more and more direct their displeasure directly at the Kremlin. For non-Russian peoples that means a growth of anti-Russian sentiment, because federal rule is seen as Russian rule, as are the ills that come from it.

The Chechen War as a Factor in the Disintegration of Russia

Those in power in Russia say that the purpose of the second Chechen war is to prevent the fall of Russia, but they are not correct. If, in time, the Russian Federation excluded Chechnya, cutting it out like a cancerous tumor, it would not precipitate the departure of other republics from Russia. The example of destitute and criminal Chechnya did not infect or inspire anyone, and its relationship with its neighbors before the war was worse every day. But now, since the beginning of the war, solidarity with Chechnya has grown among all non-Russian nationalities, including Volga Tatars and Siberian Yakuts, Muslims, and all offended nationalities. The last is especially important. Since the beginning of the war, practically all Caucasians, including those who traditionally do not like the Chechens, have experienced some of the same pressures that the Chechens have, in that for the majority of the Russian people all Caucasians have one face—they are all "dark" and all terrorists. Those phobias have grown, especially after several terrorist acts in Russian cities.

The second Chechen war has already dragged on for a year. According to official statistics for October 1999 to 4 October 2000, losses of Russian troops include 2,500 killed and more than 7,000 wounded—more than in the first year of the previous Chechen war, of 1994–96.[4] Engaged in fighting a guerrilla war (now often called a "dynamite" war), the regular army can no longer use its basic military advantage—aviation and artillery. The rebels are attacking dispersed groups of Russian soldiers and inflicting on them the most serious losses. In the last months the average losses to Russian troops have stabilized, but at a rather unpleasant level: every week, fifteen to twenty people are killed and fifty to fifty-five wounded.

There is little probability of a military victory for Moscow, but the utopian idea of an economic victory in Chechnya is even less likely. That would denote turning the Chechens to the Russian side through the economic restoration of Chechnya. But how will new workplaces be created in Chechnya if that was not possible in any of the other republics of the Northern Caucasus where there was no war? How can Russia restore industry in Chechnya if in peacetime more than 80 percent of it was concentrated in Grozny, which now is completely destroyed? Is it possible to restore industry in Grozny if even by official Russian statistics one-third of all rebels are concentrated in that city and it is there that Russian troops constantly suffer the most losses? An example of the character of the present reconstruction in Grozny was given by Interfax News: "In the past two days during the special operation, federal powers have been using heavy machinery, fully clearing the earth of all structures of the central market in Grozniy."[5] That action was taken because during the last several months, guerrillas were prevalent in the area of the bazaar.

A history of colonial war in the twentieth century shows that when a war drags on for a long time, the attacking party will not win for the following reasons: First, the army cannot be located for long (more than five to seven years) in a hostile occupied territory without becoming demoralized. Demoralization of 100,000 Russian troops in Chechnya is already evident: soldiers drink, fear retribution, and so drink more.

Second, the longer the war drags on, the more people in the home country become dissatisfied with it. Some of them have already lost those closest to them to the war; for others, the call to military service for their children lies ahead. Russian people are ready to support the war with Chechnya abstractly but not ready to send their relatives to it. The Russian army is already experiencing difficulty with reinforcements, and those problems will inevitably grow.

Third, the economic burdens of the war are being felt. According to the scholar Nikolai Petrakov, it is costing approximately $160 million a month.[6] For now those costs are covered by the especially large profits from the sale of oil at a high price, but oil market conditions may change.

Most important, when the army goes for a long time without a victory, the rebels stop being afraid, in this case encouraging not only the Chechens but other nationalities such as the Tatars. They begin to think, "If the Russian army has gone for so long without achieving victory over the Chechens, and there are not more than 400,000 Chechens remaining, then how could they overcome the Tatars, who number 6 million?" The loss of the army's function of inspiring fear could be a factor in accelerating the breakup of Russia. Sooner or later, Russia will leave Chechnya, and that will be less dangerous for Russia than the present situation.

The Changing Ethnic Composition of the Population

The multiethnic character of the population is the biggest challenge for Russia. Today in Russia, Russians compose 83 percent of the population. In spite of the growing proportion of non-Russian peoples (especially Muslims and Buddhists), in the coming twenty years Russians will continue to be the majority in the country. But it will be another situation in some of the regions of the federation.

In almost all of the republics of the Northern Caucasus, Russians are already the minority. The process of their exodus from there began long before the Chechen war, which has further encouraged it and made it irreversible. In the Far East and in Siberia, the Russians are the minority only in Tuva, but in the coming years they will become the minority in Buryatiya and maybe in Yakutiya. According to the prognosis of the best Russian specialists, in just ten to fifteen years the number of Chinese in Russian regions of the Far East and Siberia will grow to about 10 million people through illegal immigration, and then they will become the ethnic majority of Russia's largest geographic area.[7]

But the main danger to Russians is in the Povolzh regions. There, Russians are already the minority in Chuvashiya and soon will be the minority in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Tatars, Bashkiris, and Chuvashis are ethnic relatives, belonging to the Turkish group; in addition, Tatars and Bashkiris are both Muslim Sunnites. More than ever, the Tatar and Bashkir nationalists speak of uniting and creating one federation.[8] If such an entity appeared on the world political map, it would be a comparatively large state in population, surpassing all of the Baltic states and Georgia combined.

Thus, Russia is threatened by ethnic disintegration, which can occur in two forms. First, "peripheral secession" occurs when a country or group located on the borders of the federation, like Chechnya in the Caucasus or Tuv in Siberia, leaves the Russian Republic. This is the less dangerous variant of disintegration. What is more dangerous to Russia is the second variant, collapse of the country, when one or two comparatively large, independent governments form in the very middle of Russia. If a Povolzh federation or republic formed, it could bring the collapse of Russia, which would simply split into two poorly connected pieces between its eastern and western parts.

The probability of either type of disintegration will greatly depend on the tendency of economic development. The current economic upturn in Russia—productivity growth, increase in gold and currency reserves and in investment flows—I consider to be unstable and, because of its causes, dangerous for the long-term development of Russia.

The increase in production began after the financial crash of 1998, when the buying power of the population fell so low that people could no longer afford imported goods. Those goods left the Russian market, bringing a temporary revival of local production. But without competition Russian industry, already technologically backward, lost the last incentive for modernization. Because of this, many experts believe that in the next two to three years Russia will experience an acute technological crisis and even an increase in the number of technological catastrophes.

The second cause of the temporary economic upturn is the increase in the world prices of oil and natural gas. This has further concentrated capital in one sector of the Russian economy—energy. But the experience of others, including developed countries like Holland and Norway (not to mention Indonesia and Iran), shows that this kind of concentration can have painful consequences for economic development. An excessive reliance on natural resources usually makes the economy decadent and lazy.

The third factor contributing to Russia's economic growth, to which the Russian government pays special attention, is the increase in the production and sale of arms, a very dangerous phenomenon. Not only is the market for Russian weapons very limited, it is also confined to those states that the West regards as irresponsible, if not downright criminal. Selling weapons to those countries may even lead to the imposition of sanctions on Russia, and then the only real achievement of Putin's government so far, the creation of a more favorable investment climate, will be destroyed. In addition, the growth of the military-industrial complex will inescapably strengthen the Soviet, chauvinistic, and imperialistic elements in Russian society.

In the event of substantial economic growth beyond the present level, a peripheral secession could be expected. Chechnya will certainly go, but the remaining territories should be integrated into the overall economic interests. In the event of the economy's maintaining the present level of development or its worsening, the collapse of Russia would become more probable. Those threats could influence the Russian government in two possible directions.

Possible Political Doctrines

First, Russia could consolidate around the idea of a multicultural society. That would mean that the Russian government, realizing the threat of the disintegration of the country, would radically change its present course in national politics. Instead of supporting Russians as the basic ethnic group, it would strive to unite and value all nationalities as the foundation for a democratic society. Such a course would require more representation of non-Russian nationalities and their inclusion into the political elite. It would cease to create the conditions for the Russian Orthodox Church's domination over other religions in the country. Government television would begin to carry programs in languages other than Russian; instead of the order of Saint George, there would be established new government symbols less connected to purely Russian culture.

Unfortunately, I can say that the idea of a multicultural society is absolutely foreign to the present powers and, more important, to the majority of Russian society. That was clearly demonstrated by the decision of the Russian parliament to make the old Soviet anthem the new anthem of the Russian federation. That music will remind many of the imperial content of the anthem. Thus the government will probably use the second mechanism of consolidating Russian society, one based on the growth of Russian nationalism. Indeed, that is already occurring. The newly elected governor of the Kursk oblast, secretary of the local division of the Communist Party Alexander Mikhaijov, said his victory was a joint effort of the Kremlin and his team and "shows Russia is beginning to cleanse itself from the filth" created by Jewish leaders.[9]

In the Pskov oblast, after being re-elected for a second term, Eugene Mikhailov, one of the leaders of Zhirinovsky's party, expressed his ultranationalist position. At his inauguration he stated that with the seating of a new Russian president all political disagreements between him and the Kremlin have disappeared.[10] In the Kaliningrad oblast, in support of the Kremlin, Admiral Vladimir Egorov openly expressed his pro-Soviet and anti-Western sentiments after winning in the recent elections. In the Ulyanov oblast, General Vladimir Shamanov, well known from the Chechen wars, has a good chance of winning the upcoming gubernatorial elections, again with full support of the Kremlin. A Russian nationalist, he is seen as the most violent general, even by those Chechens who support the Kremlin. The last gubernatorial elections give reason to think that the Kremlin consistently and successfully backed former Soviet officials and generals, exploiting Russia's nostalgia for the Soviet Union and popular nationalistic sentiments.

It is possible that all of these Soviet-era generals, admirals, communist functionaries, and leaders of Russian chauvinist organizations overstate the level of federal support they received in the last elections. But even if this is the case, the very fact that the old Soviet nomenklatura and the new Russian nationalists speak of their friendship with the Kremlin, and with Putin personally, without doubt will be thought of by the Russian people as important. Nothing like that could have taken place under Yeltsin. The communists did not try to play up to him even when he was as popular as Putin is today. Everyone knew of his anticommunist sentiments. The Russian nationalists considered him so foreign that they invented a myth about his having Jewish origins. On the other hand, Putin was referred to as one of their own by practically all the leaders of Russian nationalism—Prohanov, Chikin, Zhirinovsky, and others.

If the Kremlin did not bring those Russian nationalists to power—if they did it on their own—then the situation is even more frightening. It would mean that the federal government does not control the situation in the regions, and the growth of Russian chauvinism has been such that it can develop uncontrollably even against the will of the authorities, exploiting the prevailing mood of the Russians.

Now in Russia xenophobia is growing, suspicion toward the West is growing, and imperialistic sentiments are also growing. For nationalistic consolidation to occur there needs to be an image of an external enemy—"worldwide Islamic terrorism" or "world imperialism," for example. If nationalism and imperialist militarism really firmly establish themselves in Russia, it could for some time stop the disintegration process, but Russian chauvinism will surely stimulate a backlash from the national minorities. Of course, strategically this is a dead-end path for democratic development.

The picture that I have drawn may seem depressing. Therefore, for those who enjoy a happy ending, I will finish my article on an optimistic note: All these negative developments are still, for the time being, potential; Russia still has time to prevent them. Who then is capable of arresting the Sovietization of Russia?

Many Russian intellectuals still pin their hopes on Putin. He is an energetic and intelligent man and can understand the danger to the country posed by the present-day Russian nationalism and anti-Western feelings. And it is still important for him to be accepted by "polite society," especially by the leaders of the seven richest countries in the world. But it is much more likely that Putin, even when he understands the downside of some of his decisions, will not want to change them but will attempt to justify them. That is how he behaved during the incident with the submarine *Kursk*, and he behaved the same way in regard to the Chechen war. I am more hopeful that the policy of Sovietization will give rise to a new democratic opposition. It is possible that the main, unintended historic achievement of Putin will be the solidification of democratic forces in opposition to his "Back to the USSR" policy.

Finally, I hope Russia can successfully develop both the economic and political spheres. However, that cannot come from continuation of the present course of Putin's administration. But if those polices are reversed, new political powers of a liberal democratic character will be formed sooner or later. They will differ from the present-day "Russian democrats," most of all in the realization that liberal reforms in the Russian economy will not be possible without liberal reforms in the political system.

NOTES

1. See NTV. RU., 6 December 2000; *Komsomolskia Pravda*, 12 August 2000.

2. For more information see *Evolution of Interrelations between the Center and Regions of Russia*, ed. Jeromy Azrael and Emil Pain (Moscow: Complex-Progress, 1997), 30–52.

3. Kazantsev's five-year plan "Commissars" to control government property. See *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 3 November 2000.

4. From statements of Colonel General Valeriy Manilov, first deputy commander of the General Headquarters of the Armed Forces, Russian Federation. ITAR-TASS, 10 October 2000.

5. *Interfax*, 27 November 2000.

6. Nikolai Petrakov, "After a Respite One Could Lose the Fight," *Trud*, 11 January 2000, 2.

7. The number of Chinese immigrants has often been stated by well-known Russian demographers, for example, by Zhana Zaionchkovskaia at the conference "The Role of Ehtnocultural Cleavages and the Perspectives of Relations between Russia and Its Frontiers," Turin, 10–12 November 1999.

8. This statement was first used on 8 April 1997 in Kazan by Indus Tagirov, the chairman of the executive committee of the Tatars World Congress, and by Niyaz Mazjidov, the chairman of the Bashkir World Congress ("kurultia"). See "Socio-political Situation in Russian Regions," *Vestnic CEPRI* (Ethno-Political and Regional Studies Center) 58, no. 2 (April 1997). In summer 2000, the leaders of a Tatar national center (Tatarsky Obchestveni Center) made a proposal to create a confederation "Idel-Ural," consisting of three republics, Tatarstan, Bashcortustan, and Chuvashia. Kazan, ITAR-TASS, 26 August 2000.

9. Sharon LaFrantere, "Provincial Vote Suggests Russia Wants Firm Rule," *Washington Post,* 16 December 2000.

10. Inaugural speech of Governor Eugene Mikhailov, *Pskovskaya Pravda* (Pscov), 22 November 2000.