



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES REFUGE

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HUMAN RIGHTS AND REFUGEE MOVEMENTS IN THE NEWLY INDEPENDENT STATES OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Russia: Only Two Alternatives?

Alexander Benifand

On June 22, 1998, the anniversary of the beginning of World War II, Russian President Boris Yeltsin made a radio announcement dedicating a day to the memory of the War. This special attention of the President to this anniversary was precipitated by the growing popularity of neo-Nazi ideas among the population, especially the youth. Teenagers, impressed by military symbols, try on the black uniforms. Appeals to impose strong discipline upon society are gaining popularity. Imposition of a dictatorial regime, for many, seems to be the best way out of the present situation. This rhetoric is often accompanied by fantasies about the revival of the old Russia, its national spirit along with the search for an "enemy" to be blamed for the recent crisis and punished accordingly.

The situation gives rise to a number of questions. Why are neo-Nazi ideas so popular in a country where millions of people were killed during World War II? Why are neo-Nazi ideas so popular in a country where the memory of relatives

who died during the war is so fresh? Why are neo-Nazi ideas so popular in a country where for many years the ruling Communist party tried to demonstrate a huge difference between Soviet Communism and Nazi Fascism and to discredit the latter?

In the past, communist leaders told their populations that they must build socialism or else suffer from fascism, or foreign occupation and a slow decay, at the very least. Now, many new leaders—not to mention their supporters and opponents abroad—insist that all

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citizens must rapidly build democracies and a free market economy or face the return of the old regime or an equally horrible alternative.¹ Unfortunately, today, people in Russia, and in many newly independent states (newly independent former Soviet republics), are raising concerns that the second alternative is much more likely as the economies of their countries are in disarray.

"The economic reforms in Russia have suffered a crash,"—says one of Russia's important newspapers—*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.² A pauperization of the population and the emergence of a class of multimillion dollar proprietors seem to be their only tangible results. Firstly, in opinion of the newspaper, such a situation creates an objective base for the return of the communists to power; secondly, it is a precondition for the rebirth of authoritarianism and even fascism. This new economic crisis in Russia and in some of the Newly Independent States has also created the atmosphere of apathy, anxiety, and mistrust among the ordinary people.

The autocratic ideas are extremely popular there, since too many citizens are not receiving their salary for even few months; crime is not only on the rise, but remains mostly undetected; and the gap between the richest and the poorest is immense. The most egregious violation of human rights are often overlooked by the people, who rather focus on similar violations elsewhere, which is a convincing evidence of retrograde social behaviour. And that pattern, in turn, leads to the situation many countries whose regimes are anything but democratic and free market oriented to seek certification and to avoid such criticism. For example, the victory of General A. Lebed in Krasnoyarsk showed that people could vote for anybody, even if his ideas and activities seem to be dictatorial.

Also, there is a revival of nationalism and racism. In 1998, a record number of crimes committed on racial grounds were registered in Moscow, writes a magazine *Kommersant*. On April 22 and 23, the employees of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow received a strong warning.

Non-white employees of the embassy were recommended to be careful while being outside the Embassy. Moscow racists have announced war against Blacks and the Asians. Anonymous research showed, that practically all of those who are not Europeans frequently face random displays of hostility, because of their ethnicity or race. One third of them has declared, that during last year, was subjected to rough insults or physical violence coming even from the ordinary citizens. Quite recently, Skinheads were involved in a series of attacks on foreigners of African and Asian origin, and beat a young Russian rabbi in a subway station in Moscow.³

Polish historian, Adam Michnik, editor in chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and a leading former Solidarity activist, who spent six years in prison for opposing communist regime, spoke about the recent developments in Russia at the opening of the Central European Arts Festival in London this year. According to him, chaos in Russia is the biggest threat to the security in Central Europe. Thus, it is essential for the outside world to encourage democracy in Russia. Michnik also suggested keeping a vigilant eye on Russian intentions—or as he put it, to "look closely at her hands."⁴

As it was implied before, the situation in many Newly Independent States is not better, and in some of them, even worse.

For example, President of Belarus, Mr. Lukashenko, is a former Soviet collective farm boss, who thinks in Stalin's era stereotypes and who was once the subject of criminal charges for beating a tractor driver with a stick. After a referendum that was criticized by foreign observers, he dismissed the elected parliament and set up his own puppet chamber of hand-picked deputies who routinely approve every measure he proposes. Almost every opposition leader has been arrested, jailed, and subjected to fines. Some have been savagely beaten. In Belarus the number of journalists that are being arrested, expelled, beaten or threatened is constantly growing. The independent press is subjected to systematic persecution by the authorities. Accord-

ing to the reports of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the local authorities are constructing a system of totalitarian government. In order to justify its policy, the dictatorial regime in Belarus is desperately looking for enemies, both external and internal. Of course, Western countries and Western culture are viewed as the external enemies, while opposition groups and minorities are regarded as the internal enemies.

Belarus is also the only European country whose citizens need permission to travel abroad. Here the state controls the economy; almost 1.5 percent of the population work for security services, which uses the same old name, KGB.

When *perestroika* began, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, unlike their neighbouring countries (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), were looked upon as places of real democracy in Central Asia. But after few years of independence the picture has changed dramatically. And again, opposition leaders, journalists, and media are victims of growing authoritarian regimes, which does not tolerate any criticism.

If we add to this situation massive displacement of many peoples as well as growing number of refugees, the whole picture is very bleak.

Before 1917, some historians thought that Russia had only two alternatives: communism or fascism. The victory of communists, in their opinion, was the better solution in this situation. Are there really only two alternative for Russia and many of the former Soviet republics today as well?

It is hard not to agree with Adam Michnik who says that a democratic Russia does not threaten the world, and the democratic world does not threaten a democratic Russia. Thus, the free world should do its best to make Russia a member of the European democratic system as soon as possible. It means opening onto Russia and not causing anxiety among its population or closing Russia off. Russia is a country that can be like any other European state. Nonetheless, for the time being, we have to be very vigilant about events that take

place on its territory and in the Newly Independent States, and act accordingly, since the stakes are very high.

This issue of *Refuge* attempts to address some of these problems. The articles presented here were written by insiders, i.e. scholars and human rights activists living and working in the former Soviet republics. The reader has to keep in mind that doing research in that part of the world often involves a considerable personal risk. Also the access to reliable information is limited if not denied, while the official sources are hardly ever objective and usually represent the views of the local propaganda. Thus, the researchers frequently have to relay on "leaks" from the circles close to the decision-makers or on "what ordinary people think," and cannot reveal the identity of the informers. Therefore, some of the ideas and conclusions presented in this issue may seem to be founded on hearsay, anecdote and personal bias. But such information is often the only harbinger of important events, especially in the areas of socio-political turmoil.

Also the tone of the papers is very personal and emotional in character. But the reader has to keep in mind that the authors do not enjoy comfort of Western scholars and are writing about problems that are seriously affecting everyday lives and near future of their homelands and peoples. This emotional tone is also a valuable piece of information as it stresses the gravity of these problems. ■

Notes

1. Paul Goble, "East: Analysis from Washington—Avoiding the Apocalypse," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 22, 1998.
2. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, May 22, 1998.
3. Lev Krichevsky, "In Quest for Financial Bailout, Russia Addresses Extremism," *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, June 3, 1998, Moscow.
4. Benjamin Partridge, "The Biggest Threat," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 22, 1998. □

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Legitimate and Illegitimate Discrimination: New Issues in Migration

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Freedom of movement: If the members of a state are forced to flee, the legitimacy of that government is questionable. On the other hand, if members cannot or must leave, again the government is not democratically legitimate.

Immigration control: While limiting access and determining who may or may not become members of a sovereign state remains a legitimate prerogative of the state, the criteria, rules and processes for doing so must be compatible with its character as a democratic state.

Legitimate and Illegitimate Discrimination: New Issues in Migration, edited by Professor Howard Adelman, deals with the question of legitimacy with cases studies from the Developing World, Europe, Australia, the United States, and Canada.

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