

REPORT FROM A DISINTEGRATING EMPIRE

by Stein Tønnesson

From the 26th to the 31st of May 1991, I accompanied Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe to Moscow for a series of discussions with Soviet scholars concerning ethnic and nationality conflicts in the Soviet Union. We were invited by the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), and the sessions were organized by Olga Vorkunova and other participants in the Commission on Internal Conflicts and their Resolution (ICON), of which Dr. Rupesinghe is the chairperson. My participation was funded by a grant from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. The following report focuses on what I learned from our discussions about the breakup of the Soviet empire, and about the scholarly institutions we visited.

Let me first tell what a delight it was to be with Dr. Rupesinghe on such a trip. He knew several Soviet specialists on ethnic conflicts from the latest conference of the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) in Groningen and from editing their contributions to an anthology based on the papers presented at that conference.¹ In addition, Rupesinghe has a tremendous ability to capitalize on his combination of relaxed, but energetic charm and third world background when establishing relations with scholars and politicians abroad. His day starts with a number of telephone calls. Since the Soviets were reluctant to meet us for breakfast, we usually ate it alone, but the rest of the day we were shuttled by car from a morning session to a lunch meeting to an afternoon session to a dinner meeting to a nightly walk - and then to bed (I didn't even taste a glass of vodka).

Will the Empire Disintegrate?

We met several people during our stay who objected to the view that the Soviet Union was an empire, and they also refused to accept that the union was bound to break up. The reasons most often cited were: 1) despite Stalinist repression, there were also positive experiences with the Soviet experiment; a secular multi-national culture had developed that could not easily be splintered into national entities; 2) the various republics depended economically on each other; some of them might leave the union temporarily, but economic necessity would make them come back. We also encountered the argument that the tension between Gorbachev and Yeltsin had some positive aspects in that it could lead to the building of some sort of consensus between the republics and the Centre. Many of our interlocutors also pointed to the basic difference between the republics in the west on the one hand, and the Central Asian republics on the other. While Russian economy needed to retain its current integration with

¹ Kumar Rupesinghe and Olga Vorkunova (eds.), Ethnicity and Governance in Regulated Societies, London, Macmillan, forthcoming.

the former, it was the Central Asian republics that needed Russia. Therefore, if the Baltic republics broke away and the Ukraine moved in the same direction, Russia might well prefer to see the Central Asian republics secede as well. It was emphasized that Yeltsin had played a significant role in the process leading to the 9+1 agreement (Russia, the Ukraine, Belorussia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, Kirgizia + the Centre).

I myself was not convinced by these arguments. From my studies of decolonization, I know that national sentiment, once it has been aroused, is not satisfied before full formal national independence has been achieved. During our discussions, I insisted on the importance of formalities and symbols: flags, anthems, constitutions, national days, membership in the United Nations. The Soviet Union may perhaps be renegotiable as a (con)federation or economic community, but a voluntary treaty will only be viable if those of the republics who want it achieve full formal independence (cf. de Gaulle's shortlived *Communauté Française*).

A History Course at IMEMO

At the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), we were welcomed by Dr. Vladimir A. Babak, head of sector, and Dr. Victor A. Radein-Raevsky, research fellow.² During our meetings at the institute, we also met a veteran researcher, Dr. Z.V. Litvin, a senior research fellow, Dr. Vladimir I. Stanchenko, and a specialist on India, Algis Prazauskas.³ Babak was originally trained as a mathematician and later developed a mathematical model for analyzing conflicts in the Middle East. Radein-Raevsky was a historian and specialist on Turkish- and Turkic-speaking peoples.

Our hosts were a little embarrassed by having been unable to assemble more people. Apparently, some changes of personnel related to recent political events had made this difficult. Therefore we did not meet any representatives from the various republics. Instead we were offered a series of discussions with from 2 to 10 scholars from various institutes in Moscow.

During the first long session, Radein-Raevsky, assisted by Babak, gave us a historical introduction to the current Soviet "multi-national community". Here are some keywords from his lecture:

- Starting point: the old state based at Kiev and its relations with various tribes; then: the Mongol invasion and the 200 years "under" the Mongols; Alexander Nevski; Moscow's emergence as the centre; the liberation from the Tatars;

- the expansion of Russia, Ivan III and Ivan IV (the Terrible); an interregnum marked by internal strife; the Romanov dynasty, Peter the Great ("He was not so good for Russia, but it is history, and history is impossible to put away");

² IMEMO, 23, Profsoyuznaya Str., GSP-7, Moscow, 117859, USSR, tel. 128-8107/1880, fax: 310-7027, tlx. 411687 IMEMO SU.

³ Dr. Algis Prazauskas, Institute of Oriental Studies, 12 Rozhdestvenka St, Moscow, USSR.

- the exploration of Siberia; relations with the Ottoman empire; expansion into the Caucasus, rule by Governors of a region where each village had its own language, the Russian alliance with the Ossetians in subduing other Caucasian peoples; the Crimean War (1853-56) and the problem of the Crimean Tatars; after they had been killed or deported, Germans, Czechs, Bulgarians and Armenians were invited to take over their land, thus providing the basis for future conflicts; the expansion into Central Asia;

- Lenin and his policy of national self-determination which was "very democratic", his mistake was to insist on the unity of the Communist Party, but in principle his policy was to acknowledge every people's right to self-determination, not only cultural autonomy;

- Stalin mixed everything up; Lenin thought Stalin was a good expert on the nationality question, but Stalin based his understanding on the concept of class and thought all the nations would fuse some time in the future, that he could create "the Soviet man"; the system of the 15 Soviet republics (with autonomous republics and autonomous regions) was partly the outcome of the wars of the 1920s, partly of Stalin's programmatic ideas based on Engels: each nation should be given an institutional arrangement in accordance with the development stage it had reached;

- Stalin's persecution of the national elites in the 1930s (the majority of the victims were communists and dedicated internationalists), and the deportations (Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Mesketians) and border revisions during WWII complicated the system and created new problems;

- Under Stalin, with the help of centralized economic planning, a system was created where every region and every republic came to depend on the others; the principle was that no region should be self-sustained; the Russian-populated areas were heavily industrialized while the Caucasus and Central Asia remained agricultural; today this is to the disadvantage of the Russians since Soviet industry is outmoded: "we have a poor industrialized north and a rich agricultural south";

- Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, the local cultures were stimulated and the local elites bought up and corrupted; at the same time new young nationally oriented educated elites emerged in the various republics, in the 1970s all the various national elites studied their own histories, except in the Russian republic which as the only one did not have its own Academy of Sciences; the only culture that was not allowed to flourish was Russian culture, but it developed underground, in the Army, in the KGB, and in the Party as well, often with a messianistic and antisemitic strand to it (Pamyat);

- The Soviet Union was never a colonial empire since Russia did not exploit the periphery - it was a totalitarian state, not an empire;

- As of lately, Russian culture has come out in the open; Russian newspapers, a Russian radio, now even a Russian television channel contribute to the establishment of Russian identity; since this goes on in full openness, there is hope of less extremism.

A NATO tie at the USA-Canada Institute

At the USA-Canada Institute we were twice welcomed by a lightbearded gentleman who, on both occasions, wore a NATO tie, spoke with a soft American accent and had a huge map of the United States on the wall: the famous Viktor A. Kremenyuk.⁴ He presented us to two of his younger collaborators, Dr. Alexei D. Bogaturov, senior research fellow and a specialist on Japanese foreign policy, and Dr. Maksim Braterski, a specialist on US policy towards India.⁵ We also met the director of the Soviet Center for conflict resolution, the historian Andrei U. Shoumikhin, who was somewhat frustrated that his Centre had not really got off the ground. He was also a little sceptical of foreign "experts" who thought they could teach the Soviets conflict resolution during three day courses. What was needed, was sustained long term programmes with training sessions of at least two weeks each.

Kremenyuk gave us an appreciation of the current political situation. Yeltsin seems to have reached an agreement with the KGB and Rysjkov, but not, apparently, with Pugo. Pugo's MVD has served as "agent provocateur" in the Baltics, and in the Kaukasus as well. In the process towards a new Union treaty, Yeltsin, Nasarbaev and the Ukrainian government have formed an alliance in promoting an activist policy. The process towards a renewed union (federation) can follow one of two models, the locomotive model, or the caravan model. The locomotive model means that the union is moving at the pace of the most energetic republic; those who cannot follow, are decoupled ($15 - 6 = 9$). The caravan model means that everyone moves together at the pace of the slowest. Gorbachev and the Central Asian republics favour the caravan model, insisting that everyone should agree before anything is done. Yeltsin, Nasarbaev and the Ukraine want movement. They therefore played a leading role in obtaining Gorbachev's support for the 9+1 formula; one could not wait for the rest. If Yeltsin succeeds, the Central Asian republics will loose influence.

Concerning the general problems of dual power in Moscow (Yeltsin/Gorbachev), Kremenyuk could not see how it can be solved. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin are eager to go to the end, and no arbiter exists. There is much to say in favour of Yeltsin's actions, but on the other hand the Centre also has to retain some influence: the nuclear arsenal cannot be divided between the republics. Gorbachev prefers to postpone the problems, but the economic crisis calls for action now.

⁴ Institute of the USA and Canada, Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 121814, Moscow, Khlebny per., 2/3, tel. 202-83-49. V.A. Kremenyuk recently edited a book on negotiation where Arild Underdal of the University of oslo contributed one of the chapters. The book was published in San Francisco and Oxford, 1991, by Jossey-Bass Limited, Headington Hill Hall, Oxford OX3 0BW.

⁵ They are among the young and talented scholars who are fluent in English and have already published in the West: Bogaturov has published "Soviet economic, political, and military interests in Eastern Asia, in Arnett, Eric H. (ed.), Science and International Security, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1991. Braterskii has published an article in Asian Survey on Indian foreign strategy.

A Powder-Keg: the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology

Valery Tishkov, Director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (formerly the Institute of Ethnography), is an impressive scholar in a super-modern awe-inspiring building.⁶ It was built for the administration of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, but Tishkov wrote an article in the press, asking why the administration should have such a majestic building when the scholars themselves had to linger in small and worn out offices. The result was that his own institute was let in; it now has the best offices in the Soviet Union. The face-lift is certainly appropriate, for while the old Institute of Ethnography was a half-forgotten castle, assembling heaps of evidence concerning the customs, beliefs and origins of hundreds of different peoples, the institute is now a powder-keg. Not only does the director regularly receive delegations from all parts of the Soviet Union, asking for proof of their legitimate right to nationhood; he also has the most burning nationality conflicts going on among his own staff. The various ethnic groups are well represented among the researchers, many of whom are actively engaged in politics. If the nationality conflicts in the Soviet Union escalate much further, the anthropological research community may well break up as well (I say this, not Tishkov).

During the conference at IMEMO, Valery Tishkov gave us a briefing on the deliberations of the Supreme Soviet concerning a new Union treaty, the process that led to the 9+1 agreement. It was the representatives of the Baltic republics who first started to speak of the need for a new treaty, and representatives from the Trans-Kaukasian area also showed their interest. The question was raised if the treaty of 1922 represented a violation of the treaty with Georgia of 1921. This was 2-3 years ago. The response from the Centre was that anyone was free to suggest changes in the treaty of 1922. This was in itself an important concession since the central government was in general very conservative in matters pertaining to the union. Unlike glasnost and perestroika, the process towards decentralization was pushed from the periphery.

The real process for a revision of the union treaty started in the summer of 1990. Delegations from the Centre were sent out for a series of consultations. One delegation went to each of the republics. A handful of consultants (including Tishkov) were also engaged by the commission set up by the Supreme Soviet, under the direction of Nischanov. The idea was that the Centre should play the leading role in the process, edit the text of the treaty and get it accepted by the republics (1+15). This idea did not receive much support in the republics, so when the real consultations started in Moscow in August-September 1990, it was instead suggested that the Centre should provide the infrastructure for a negotiation process between the 15 republics (15+1). However, the representatives of the Baltic republics, as well as Yeltsin (the new Russian president), argued that the Centre should have no place at all in the process. This was difficult: if the Centre should have no role, it would be hard to decide where and

⁶ USSR Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, 117334, Leninski Prospekt 32A, Moscow, USSR, tel. 938-17-47, fax: (095)-938-06-00.

how the proceedings should go on. During the process, the three Baltic republics, Georgia, Armenia and Moldavia all declared themselves independent and therefore did not participate in the negotiation process. Despite his initial stand, Yeltsin played an important role in enlisting the support of the nine remaining republics. This made it possible to reach the 9+1 agreement, but Yeltsin continues to insist that the final text shall carry only the signatures of the republics: Gorbachev should not be allowed to sign. Gorbachev for his part wants to sign on top of the list. Before there can be a new treaty, it will be necessary to reach an agreement on the role of the Centre. This is the first of several unsolved problems.

The second problem is the number of participating republics. What about the six republics that did not contribute to the 9+1 agreement. Can a new union treaty be signed without them? Would this mean to sanction their secession? Maybe 9 republics is quite enough. The others could then join in later on. The Centre seems prepared to sign an agreement with the 9 while leaving the 6 in limbo.

The third problem concerns the upper limit of 15. This problem was unexpectedly raised in the spring of 1990 by a number of participants. What about the autonomous republics within some of the 15 republics, and what about the autonomous regions? Should they also participate in the negotiations and be allowed to sign the final text? The leaders of the 9 republics are generally against this, and under Yeltsin's leadership a separate treaty has been elaborated between the Russian republic and the autonomous republics within Russia.

The fourth problem is the content of the text itself. The first draft edited by the Centre is quite absurd since it aims at a combination of a strong Centre and strong republics: a sovereign USSR consisting of 15 sovereign states. The draft is self-contradictory and therefore useless.

When we discussed Tishkov's briefing, Litvin reminded us of the economic considerations. The economic needs of the republics would force them to join in the union. I objected to this by pointing to the importance of symbols and arguing that several European colonies had preferred national independence despite economic dependence on the metropolis.

Besides Tishkov, we met one of his staff members: Mara Ustinova, scientific researcher. She is from Latvia and has done research on inter-ethnic marriages and divorces in 9 Baltic cities from 1982 to mid-89. To her great pleasure there had been no decrease in inter-ethnic marriages and no increase in inter-ethnic divorces, but she had no figures for the second half of 1989 or from 1990. She hoped that the various ethnic groups should continue to mix with each other and insisted on important differences **within** each ethnic group. For instance, many Russians in Latvia had a Latvian way of living, with separate villages and no village clusters. Among the Russians in Latvia one should distinguish between 1) peasants and merchants who had lived there over many generations, many since the 17th century, 2) those who arrived during WWII and stayed on, 3) more recent immigrants who generally worked in industry or state farms.

Mara Ustinova was also concerned by another problem: who needs anthropological research? who is going to use it? Reports were being sent to the authorities, but no results were to be seen: Do they need our recommendations at all?

The Sudden Importance of Identity

We payed a visit to Tair Tairov, formerly well-known in Scandinavia for his peace work, now more concerned by his Uzbek origin. He told us a lot about the atrocities in the region of Osh in June 1990, described by Jurij Rost in the Literaturnaja Gazeeta in August/September 1990. The Uzbek national front Birlik has assembled a lot of evidence on the killings, and Tairov is chairman of a foundation in Moscow formed to help Uzbekistan: "I did not use to be very concerned about my identity, but now..."

During our stay, we also met an older, prominent scholar who had lived in Moscow since the age of five and had never lived in Uzbekistan. Now he had asked the Uzbek authorities how he could help his homeland.

Minority rights are not human rights:

The Institute of State and Law

At the Institute of State and Law we were received by Professor Rais A. Touzmohammad, who was on his way to a conference in Leningrad on minority rights.⁷ He talked about Gorbachev's tragedy. The Soviet president was a prisoner of his entourage and should instead have sought the advice of young independent-minded scholars. The 9+1 agreement came just in time to save Gorbachev's position, but then no more had happened. It was not a legal document and so far only expressed some wishful thinking, but it might be an important step on the way to a treaty. Something ought to happen before July 1991, but Touzmohammad feared it would not since the whole process had become part of a struggle over political positions.

Touzmohammad had a different appreciation of the role of the Central Asian republics in the process towards a treaty from that of Kremenyuk. Touzmohammad saw Russia and Kazakhstan as the two locomotives, and was also full of praise for the president of Kirgizia. Touzmohammad had formed an "Association for Soviet Lawyers of Asia and the Pacific" which he had registered in Kirgizia, and he was much in favour of developing a great number of bilateral agreements concerning minority rights, e.g. between Russia and Estonia, between Russia and Kazakhstan, and also between the various republics and representatives of the minorities.

However, Touzmohammad agreed with me that minority rights should not be called "human rights". As group rights, minority rights had to be deduced from the principle of national self-determination, not induced from individual rights.

⁷ Prof. Rais A. Touzmohammad, Chairman Advisory council, Soviet citizens supporting non-alignment's human concerns (SCSN), 119889, Moscow, Kropotkinskaya, 10, Fond Mira, tel. off. 202-42-36, 291-85-74, telex 411489 KAFAS SU.

A journalist with the proper ideas

Another participant at the IMEMO conference was Emile Pain, a sociologist who edits a column on nationality conflicts in the journal *Neesevaya Gazeeta*.⁸ He is involved in setting up a new Centre for Ethnic and Political Studies and Initiative, which may receive funding from a businessman and the participation of Eduard Szhevardnadze's new institute. One of the aims would be to describe all the national movements in the Soviet Union and interview their leaders.

At IMEMO, Pain presented a dual interpretation of national and ethnic movements. On the one hand they provided a means of including people in political life, and this was necessary in order to create the "civil society" which had always been lacking in the repressive Soviet system. On the other hand, the national and ethnic movements might also become bases for micro-totalitarian groups that might even start armed struggles between themselves (as in the Lebanon). What mattered most, was to avoid situations which were most likely to produce this second outcome. The development of each national movement would depend on a range of factors, such as social and economic conditions, external reactions to their demands, etc. In 1990 and 1991, several such movements were radicalized because of very strong resistance against their demands from the existing structures. There was a clear symmetry here.

In addition, the character of each national movement was determined by its main sources. A first category resulted from simple social-economic tensions (jealousy between groups) and often led to spontaneous fights or pogromes (his examples were from the Fergana valley). Such conflicts could later be elevated to propaganda wars by more conscious elites. A second category of movements had their source in more elaborate national ideas (like the demand of the Volga Germans to return from Kazakhstan to their "homeland"). A third category was linked to the interests of established institutions in command of a territory (like the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan).

In order to prevent the evolution of violent or totalitarian national movements, it was necessary to address the exact problems giving rise to each movement, to suggest ways of solving them, and provide means of non-violent conflict resolution. Often, the existing state structures were unable to do so because they lacked legitimacy. What was needed, was education, improvement of negotiation skills and improved laws. To obtain this, it was desirable to fully engage the new independent media, and also to include international NGOs in the process.

Kumar Rupesinghe and I were of course very much pleased to hear our own ideas expressed so enthusiastically by Emile Pain. In the evening, he did us the honour of interviewing us for his journal, asking us if we could point to experiences of conflict resolution outside the Soviet Union that would be directly applicable to the situation somewhere in the Soviet Union today. I think we could.

⁸ *Neesevaya Gazeeta*, Karamichevska Nab. 8-45, 123423 Moscow, USSR, tel. 191-13-95.

Professional American Conflict Resolvers

Three Americans also participated during one of the sessions at IMEMO, the two conflict resolution specialists Bill Uuri and Scott Brown and a permanent research resident in Moscow, Bruce Allen (who corresponded daily with the two others through E-mail). With their suits, ties and accent, the three of them stood distinctly out against the rest of us. They brought with them a flavour of airport, business and smiling effectiveness that made IMEMO's furniture look even more worn than before. Bill Uuri, the author of Getting to Yes, talked about the constructive role of international research networks and about how the prohibition against interference in other countries' internal affairs was on its way out. The principle is simply obsolete, and "everywhere is now becoming everyone's interest". Boundaries have become porous and ties are becoming more important, although sensitivities remain strong. Unilateral interventions should be avoided, but a framework should be generated for partnership and inclusion. There is a tendency in the Soviet Union to think that everything there is unique, but a lot of knowledge exists elsewhere from which it is possible to benefit. Mediation is an extreme, facilitation is less radical. It is simply a question of helping the communication process. Bill Uuri was sceptical of the United Nations because it is so "skiddish" of anything involving a state. Other international organizations, however, could well play a constructive role (some even a destructive one). The field of conflict resolution so far only exists in a nascent form in the Soviet Union, while in the West it has reached its infancy.

After meeting with the nascents, the three infants dined magnificently (with Dr. Rupesinghe and myself) before leaving for the Baltic where they would arrange training sessions for republican ministers in the technique of resolving their differences with Moscow.

Human rights activists looking for an apartment

In an empty apartment in the centre of Moscow we met representatives of two unofficial human rights organizations: the Memorial and the Moscow Helsinki Group. Present were Mikhail Alexeyev (secretary of Memorial), Vitale Cheverev (Memorial), Alexey Tokarev (co-chairman Memorial), Jan Raczynski (Memorial), Alexandre Daniel (Memorial) and Alexey Smirnov (Moscow Helsinki Group).⁹

The larger of the two organizations, Memorial, is much concerned with preserving the memory of all those who disappeared under Stalin, and also in later periods. The organization is also interested in contemporary issues, such as the current ethnic and national conflicts. Its representatives argued that many political leaders in the republics today had been together in prisons and camps and had formed lasting inter-ethnic ties of solidarity during that

⁹ Letters can be addressed to: Aleksei Olegovich Smirnov, 117418 Moscow Zuzinskaya St., 4-5-249, USSR, tel. 331-18-52, fax: 116-76-82.

experience. This gave ground for networks that could be used to prevent conflicts between nationalities.

It was clear that the group of activists listed above were highly dedicated in their work to defend human rights, but they had few resources, not even a permanent office. They were actively looking for an apartment from where they could direct their activities and had ambitious plans to send out fact-finding missions to areas where human rights violations were going on. But they needed funding. How can they be helped?

Anomie

The Durkheimian term "anomie" is used to characterize a society in institutional, legal and normative flux. Moscow gave me an impression of extreme "anomie". The freedom of expression was quite extreme (everyone mocked Gorbachev everywhere), but fear of police prevailed. The economy was in a process of liberalization, but many sorts of prohibitions were still enforced in various domains. No one really knew for sure what was permitted and what was not. There was a lot of talk about mafias controlling various black markets. The whole atmosphere in the research community was marked by the general crisis, economic, political, legal, normative. Government funding seemed to be dwindling everywhere. Department directors lost their protectors higher up and therefore also the means to sustain their clients further down in the hierarchy. Researchers were desperately looking for alternative ways of financing their institutes, their research activities and indeed their livelihood. Some highly skilled, young or middle-aged scholars sought publication opportunities in the West, possibly with a view to future emigration, or research opportunities in the Soviet Union financed by Western capital. Others were trying to raise capital for buying up government property in order to establish private companies: the book market is enormous and may rapidly become lucrative. Then of course many were engaging in various forms of petty trade alongside their research. Some had in fact bought little plots of land in the countryside. They were scholars from Monday to Friday and peasants in the weekends. This was presented as a hobby, but it sounded more like insurance.

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Stein Tønnesson