Imagining Russia:
The Prevalence of Power, The Potential of Nation

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This article seeks to understand Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty between 1990 and 1993. I argue that such perceptions were mainly influenced by what I call the paradigm of Power, centred on the idea of Belarus and Ukraine being included within Russia. However, I furthermore claim that another paradigm, the paradigm of Nation, was also influential with its emphasis on Belarus and Ukraine being separate from, and opposed to, Russia.

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This article seeks to understand Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty between 1990 and 1993. That is, the analysis is focused on a period when the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkSSR) disappeared along with the rest of the Soviet Union, and new, or perhaps not so new, independent states materialised in their place.

In this article, I argue that Russian foreign policy perceptions towards the BSSR/Belarus and the UkSSR/Ukraine during this period were mainly influenced by what I deem the paradigm of Power. However, I also contend that a paradigm of Nation retained a consistently powerful appeal, while a third paradigm, that of Law, never gained strength. Indeed, the Russian foreign policy elite during this period failed to accept Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty.

I shall seek to show my argument with the help of the following structure: After the present, short introduction outlining the theme, argument and structure of this article, the first section will present the framework within which my analysis will take place. Then follow the three main parts of the article. Each of these is concerned with a separate political issue that is relevant to the discussion at hand; issues dealing with territory, governance, and ideology. Finally, the conclusion of this article will sum up my main points and outline how my findings can help us understand not only Russian perceptions during the period highlighted here, but subsequent developments until this day.

Framework

The issues discussed in this article have been addressed by a significant body of academic literature, and it would thus be impossible to address more than a slight part of this. Overall, however, three characteristics of this literature may be highlighted. First, it is notable that the development of research concerning this period of Russian foreign policy towards Belarus and Ukraine slowed considerably down after the mid-1990s. Although early Russian perceptions of Belarus and Ukraine continue to be addressed today, findings from literature in the 1990s still dominate. Prominent examples of this include Bohdan Nahaylo's thorough and well-researched analysis of developments surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union (Nahaylo, 1999). Another example can be found in the numerous writings of Taras Kuzio, in his analyses of political and military relations between newly independent states seeking to understand their place in the world (e.g. Kuzio, 1997; see also Kuzio, 1995). Second, and indicated by the above-mentioned examples, it is notable that most literature concerning such topics focuses on Russia and Ukraine, not on Belarus. Prominent exceptions do exist, of course, such as David Marples's seminal work on the early post-Soviet years of Belarus (Marples, 1999), but overall a tendency to focus on the two larger, Slavic states is clear. This is not in itself a problem; indeed, this article shall focus mainly on Russian perceptions of Ukraine, too, in accordance with prevalent Russian perceptions of the early 1990s. Nevertheless, it would be misguided to assume that no perceptions of interest concerned Belarus. Finally, it is remarkable that much existing literature is upbeat regarding the development of Russian perceptions between 1990 and 1993, and beyond. This is especially the case as the early years of post-Soviet insecurity recede without open strife between Russia and its neighbours materialising. Indeed, in 2002, Mikhail Molchanov's study of Russo-Ukrainian relations, among the most novel of all accounts of Russian foreign policy so far, concluded along those lines (Molchanov, 2002). Even accounts that stressed an increasingly belligerent Russia have perceived this belligerence to be turned mostly against the West, not Belarus and Ukraine (Bugajski, 2004). As I shall seek to indicate in the following, however, these analyses have obscured a dangerous tendency apparent in Russian foreign policy perceptions even before the collapse of the Soviet Union to seek enemies close to home, and to oppose Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty.

This article is concerned with the interaction between international state-actors, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, and as such it belongs within the broad disciplinary framework of International Relations (Baylis et al, 2008a: 3). This is the case even though these three actors all resided within the Soviet Union during the first part of the period here analysed, for it is their movement towards and into sovereign statehood I examine. Furthermore, since this article is concerned with perceptions, the theory, which frames my argument is post-

Positivist and Constructivist in nature. Post-Positivism relates to epistemology; that is, to underlying assumptions about what knowledge may be obtained about the world. Is it possible to find 'truth,' or are subjective standpoints all any analysis, at least within the Social and Political Sciences, may hope for (Marsh and Furlong, 2002)? Post-positivists argue for the latter, and thus seek to understand, not explain its subject-matter (Bevir and Rhodes, 2002). Furthermore, I draw on the ontological assumptions of constructivism. Ontology is concerned with underlying assumptions about what really makes events take place in the world. Is it material factors, such as relative military or economic capabilities, or is it ideas and perceptions about the world, about friends and enemies, that matters (Wendt, 1999: 92-138)? Since this article is focused on perceptions, it naturally follows the latter course. In doing so, this article seeks to employ a theoretical framework not often used in analyses concerning developments within the former Soviet region. As shall be returned to again, below, such a framework enables this analysis to show that Russian animosity towards Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty between 1990 and 1993 was due not only an imbalance of power between Russia and its neighbours, but to a constantly reinforced dialogue between the political elites of these republics and states.

Who these elites were shall be addressed shortly. First, though, a few definitions central to the topic at hand in this article have to be presented. What do I mean by 'sovereignty' in this article and what do I mean by 'political'? This article defines ‘sovereignty’ as “...the rightful entitlement to exclusive, unqualified, and supreme rule within a delimited territory” (Baylis et al, 2008b: 587). ‘Political,’ in its turn, is defined as any issue concerning “the organizational stability of states, systems of government and the ideologies that give them legitimacy” (Buzan, 1991: 19, 20). Beyond this, my argument discusses paradigms, of Power, Nation and Law. I use ‘paradigm’ not in the widely sweeping sense of Thomas Kuhn, but in the sense of worldview, or *weltanschauung*. This simply refers to a coherent set of assumptions regarding the past, present and future of a given actor. In the context of this article, the paradigms espoused by Russians regarding Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty are ultimately interconnected with perceptions of what ‘Russia’ is. Therefore, the perceptions held by a given Russian actor regarding Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty depend on the perceptions he or she has of Russia itself, and vice versa. Based on study of academic literature, and especially of a significant body of primary, Russian-language sources, I have discerned three major paradigms relevant for this article. The paradigm of Law is the least significant here. According to this paradigm, ‘Russia’ is the same as the RSFSR/the Russian Federation. It originated as self-conscious construction, and the strategy of Russia for the present should be to stabilise its position internationally, with an aim to eventual ‘normalisation,’ in accordance with established, predominantly Western, international rules and norms. In this paradigm, the political sovereignty of Belarus and Ukraine is respected as separate from that of Russia. In contrast, the paradigm of Power has often been seen as suffusing all Russian foreign policy perceptions, by Russian and Western observers, alike. According to this paradigm, 'Russia' is the same as the Russian empire. It originated from specific, historical developments, and its strategy for the present should be to widen its sphere of influence internationally, with an aim to eventual 'great power' status. In this paradigm, the political sovereignty of Belarus and Ukraine is seen as subsumed under that of Russia. This paradigm was the most visible during the early 1990s. Nevertheless, a third paradigm, the paradigm of Nation, significantly influenced Russian perceptions, too. According to this paradigm, 'Russia' is the same as the Russian nation, understood primarily, but not exclusively in an ethnic sense. This Russia originated from a primordial, ahistorical state, and its strategy for the present should be to re-gather the Russian peoples, with an aim to recreate a 'pure' Russia in the future. In this paradigm the political sovereignty of Belarus and Ukraine is not accepted in its current form, with parts of it incorporated in Russia, and parts belonging to entities opposed to Russia.

Finally, actors significant for the argument at hand must be identified. This article discusses Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty. But who are these 'Russians' I am talking about? Broadly, I define as a 'Russian' any individual describing him- or herself as 'Russian,' without considering status of citizenship, cultural or ethnic background, etc. However, the perceptions of some Russians are more significant for the purposes of my argument than other Russians' perceptions. In order to discern whether a given individual belonged to such a 'foreign policy elite' between 1990 and 1993, I argue that you have to see how closely connected this person was to one of two contemporary power centres: Boris El'tsin or the Russian Supreme Soviet. Until the violent removal of the latter actor by President El'tsin in October, 1993, these two actors jostled for influence in all foreign policy matters (Malcolm et al, 1996: 101-68). However, by stating this I am not arguing that only such actors' perceptions should be considered. Indeed, since an important part of my argument concerns the way in which perceptions of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians constantly influenced and reinforced each other, this article will from time to time consider Belarusians' and Ukrainians' perceptions of Russia, too.

Patterns and Reasons

Within the framework outlined above, the three sections below will analyse Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty within the political issue-areas of territory, governance, and ideology, in accordance with the definition of 'political' presented earlier. Within each of these issue-areas, I contend, first, that a specific pattern of development in Russians' perceptions could be discerned between 1990 and 1993; and, second, that this development can be traced to two main reasons, originating among Russians and in the interaction between Russians on the one hand and Belarusians and Ukrainians on the other.

I claim that the pattern of development within each of the three political issues was as follows: at first, the paradigm of Power was dominant in Russians' perceptions. However, soon the paradigm of Nation gained significance and became the main alternative perceptions. Subsequently, the paradigm of Law appeared as a counterweight, but it never really caught on among Russians. Thus, the dominance of the paradigm of Power was reinforced, with the paradigm of Nation remaining the significant alternative.

The reason guiding this pattern of development can, I believe, be found partly among Russians themselves. Any actor needs an identity, needs to be something, which again has to be different from, if not necessarily opposed to, other identities (Hopf, 2002: 7). The three paradigms outlined above are examples of this. The paradigm of Power was co-opted by the Russian political elite from the outset. However, this made it impossible for any other Russian actors to define themselves in opposition to the regime without defining Russia differently. At the same time, the Russian leadership failed to sufficiently outline and consolidate the paradigm of Law as such an acceptable alternative. The paradigm of Nation thus filled this vacuum. At the same time, however, this development was also reinforced by actions of Belarusians and Ukrainians. As shall be shown in the following, Belarusians and Ukrainians repeatedly contributed to strengthening the paradigm of Nation in Russia by reacting to perceived Russian aggression. Thus, the fact that Russian perceptions developed as they did depended on the interaction of the Russian political elite with Russian, as well as non-Russian actors.

Territory

A Russian Union

Before 1990, the ethnic composition of the BSSR and UkSSR supported a close territorial connection between these republics and the RSFSR. According to a census taken in 1989, for instance, Russians accounted for 22% of the population in the UkSSR (Goskomstat RSFSR, 1990: 78-80). Therefore, Russians accounted for 80% of all non-titulars in the republic (Kolstoe, 1995: 170). Under such circumstances it was not surprising that leading Russians understood the borders of the Soviet Union to the West with those of Russia itself. Even the ethnically Russian General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, had already in 1986 equated the Union with Russia during a speech in the UkSSR. And by April, 1990, after the Baltic States had begun their drive towards independence, Gorbachev argued that the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda had been a city towards which Russia had advanced for centuries (Pravda, 1990: 2). Such signals were reinforced by prominent Russian opponents of the Soviet regime, too. In September, 1990, the famous author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn thus suggested the formation of a Russian Union uniting the territories of the RSFSR, the BSSR and the UkSSR on the basis of popular referendums (Solzhenitsyn, 1990: 5, 6). Solzhenitsyn was thus reflecting the opinion of leading members of republican elites, too. In

November, 1990, Boris El'tsin, leader of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet and Leonid Kravchuk, his counterpart in the UkSSR, signed a treaty recognising existing borders between them, but only within their overarching Soviet framework (Berdennikov and Chalyi, 2001: 20). This understanding of territorial sovereignty was supported, too, by statements coming from prominent officials of the RSFSR, too, such as the Foreign Minister of the republic, and later of the Russian Federation, Andrei Kozyrev (Nezavisimaia gazeta, 1997: 23). While Ukrainians soon sought increased control of their borders, Belarusians at first followed the Russian position much more closely. An outspoken interest in remaining part of the Soviet Union was clear when Belarusians in the March, 1991, referendum on preservation of the USSR overwhelmingly supported this. Although all republics which voted supported the suggestion, the 83% in favour in the BSSR was the highest proportion in favour (Clem, 1996: 219).

Recent transfer

But with such support for retaining the RSFSR, BSSR and UkSSR within a single territory, how did the paradigm of Nation ever appear? Why did some Russians seek to take parts of the territories of the BSSR and UkSSR for Russia and spurn the remainder as anathema? Some seeds for this had been planted in the Soviet past. Notably, among the territories of the non-Russian Soviet republics, Russians felt particularly attached to one: Crimea. Especially with its place in the Crimean War of the 19th century, this peninsula was connected to a central part of Russian history until Soviet General Secretary

Nikita Khrushchev suddenly transferred it to the UkSSR in 1954 to symbolise the anniversary of Russo-Ukrainian union (Solchanyk, 1995: 4). Predictably, therefore, this area would be focus for any Russian perceptions adhering to the paradigm of Nation. On the other hand, however, this paradigm was also visible in Belarusian and Ukrainian protest movements. Even in the generally subdued BSSR, the local Popular Front claimed the cities of Briansk, Pskov and Smolensk back from the RSFSR (Trenin, 1999: 164). Thus, it was possibly with the best of intentions that Gorbachev in February, 1989, gave a speech in the city of Donetsk in eastern UkSSR where he explicitly warned that Russia and Ukraine, should they become independent states, might fight over disputed territory as was presently the case elsewhere in the Soviet Union, specifically in the Caucasus (Gorbachev, 1989: 1-3). Gorbachev perceived himself primarily as a Soviet citizen, not as an ethnic Russian. Following statements such as this, however, Ukrainians focused on his ethnic heritage. Soon, bilateral relations between the republics worsened. After the adoption in late 1990 of the treaty on mutual recognition of existing borders by Moscow and Kyiv, parliamentary deputies in the RSFSR at first refused to ratify it given the ongoing dispute regarding Crimea. Ominously, Russian forces in the military took a similarly confrontational stance. Colonel Dmitrii Volkogonov might have simply followed the agreed treaty by insisting that Russia only accepted existing borders within the Soviet framework, but he unmistakably threatened territorial revanchism if Ukrainians sought increased sovereignty (Nahaylo, 1999: 331). Obviously, this standpoint had support from inside the UkSSR, too. Particularly in Crimea the vast majority of inhabitants were ethnically Russian, and they now sought increased distance from the UkSSR, if not necessarily immediate inclusion in the RSFSR. This was clearly demonstrated in a local referendum of January, 1991, when 93% of Crimeans supported “reinstating” the status of union republic, equal to the RSFSR and UkSSR, for the peninsula (Sasse, 2001: 87, 88, 97). The fact that there was actually no historical precedent for such a status, Crimea had never been a Union Republic, but only an Autonomous one as part of the RSFSR and then the UkSSR, only increased the potential for strife over its future status.

Treaty on inviolable borders

At the same time, however, the leadership of the RSFSR surrounding El’tsin had to distance itself clearly from the Soviet leadership in the eyes of the international community. After Gorbachev had shown an increasing willingness to embed the Soviet Union within international rules and the paradigm of Law, El’tsin therefore had little choice but to seek to take this mantle for himself. This was especially the case since the other viable alternative to Soviet perceptions, the paradigm of Nation, was championed by El’tsin’s declared rivals for control over the RSFSR. Thus, another reason behind signing the November, 1990, treaty on sovereignty and inviolable, if not immutable, borders between the RSFSR and UkSSR was symbolic, to show El’tsin’s Russia as a responsible entity (Bugajski, 2004: 80). In a similar vein, El’tsin and his supporters did not respond to provocations by Belarusian nationalists by forwarding any territorial claims against the BSSR, a unique situation along the borders of the RSFSR by early 1991, (Glezer et al, 1991: 8) even though the BSSR had demonstrably received territory from the RSFSR by Soviet fiat as recently as during the 1920s. This course was mainly chosen by El'tsin and his followers to show the Soviet leadership and the West that they could support increased sovereignty for the RSFSR without fearing the outbreak of territorial strife as had been witnessed elsewhere in the Union. That this was not just a facade presented for as long as necessary, was obvious after the Soviet Union effectively collapsed in the aborted Socialist coup of August 1991. Now, the Russian leadership could feel ensured in its sovereign status. Nevertheless, attempts to reintegrate the territories of Belarus and Ukraine with Russia were half-hearted at best. True, a supranational Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was agreed on between the three states in December, 1991, but it was not clear that Moscow really wanted to recreate any sort of union. It was telling, for instance, that members of the Russian government such as Gennadii Burbulis were inviting all and sundry, including Bulgaria and Poland, to become members of the CIS (Malcolm, 1994: 170). Unless he had completely misunderstood political developments of the previous two years in Central and Eastern Europe, it seems fair to say that the CIS was meant as little more than an informal club of politically sovereign states. The Russian populace, too, seemed to request a peaceful Russia with no territorial pretensions. In mid-1992, surveys indicated that 65% of respondents opposed Russian-sponsored violence even in the most controversial territorial issue of Crime, while only 19% felt otherwise

(Dawisha and Parrott, 1994: 65). This support for the paradigm of Law helped defuse contemporary attempts by some Russian politicians to incorporate Crimea and especially its naval city of Sevastopol' in Russia. And even though such attempt continued to appear, the leaderships of the sovereign Belarus and Ukrainian states slowly seemed to learn not respond to such provocations by anything other than seeking recourse in international law. This was most forcefully demonstrated in July, 1993, after the Russian parliament, the Supreme Soviet, had declared Sevastopol' to be a part of Russian territory. Kyiv could easily have returned with demands and threats of its own; although the capabilities of Ukraine were significantly weaker than those of Russia, even Moscow could not afford any real international trouble at this point. But instead, the Ukrainian leadership appealed to the Security Council of the United Nations, the body that was legally empowered to uphold international peace and stability. Russia, of course, retained the right to veto any decision made by the Council and could thus have scuppered any statements supporting Ukraine. However, El'tsin sympathised with the complaint, he had little love for the Supreme Soviet, and he thus helped creating a resolution that reaffirmed the commitment of the United Nations and the leading states of the world to the territorial integrity of Ukraine (Nahaylo, 1999: 460, 461).

Joint stabilisation of borders

At the same time, though, most Russians were not satisfied with the borders that had been consolidated in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union

(Solchanyk, 1992: 32). Before 1991, republican borders had contained little practical meaning as all affairs in the Soviet Union were governed from Moscow. Thus, the concepts of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ borders of the Soviet Union appeared. Neither of these had constituted borders in the generally understood sense in the West. Inner borders, as seen above, were merely administrative, whereas outer borders, between the Soviet Union and other international recognised states, became even more strongly fortified than was the norm, since they guarded the Soviet Union against corrupting outside influences. It was therefore to be expected that surveys in December, 1991, showed that half of all Russian respondents were concerned or even angered over the result of the Ukrainian popular referendum that had clearly endorsed independence (Kuzio, 1997: 160). The creation of the CIS actually showed similar concerns within the Russian leadership to preserve territorial unity, notwithstanding the fact that the purpose of the organisation was soon diluted, as mentioned earlier. The leader of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, subsequently complained that, as long as El’tsin and Belarusian leader Stanislav Shushkevich thought Ukraine might be lured into a new, supranational union, they used significant pressure to achieve their aim, only relenting when Ukrainian participation in the CIS was jeopardised (Dunlop, 1993: 274). And even though the Russian elite gave way to Ukraine here, there was little indication that it had abandoned hopes of territorial unification in the long run. Indeed, in June, 1992, Kozyrev confidently predicted that the post-Soviet states would ‘come back’ to Russia sooner or later, even if the process of renewed unification was dragging out slightly

(Kuzio, 1997: 165). His confidence was buoyed by the harsh price that sovereign statehood was exerting on Belarus and Ukraine. Minsk, in particular, seemed eager to come under the wing of Russia once more. It was telling that in October, 1992, Russia and Belarus were among only six member-states of the CIS that signed up to the agreement of cooperation on stability along common borders, (Trenin, 1999: 170) an agreement that effectively allowed for Russian control with these borders. For now, as was seen above, the Ukrainian leadership was not inclined to give such control to Russia. The question was how much longer Kyiv could retain this attitude. In December, 1991, 90% had voted for Ukrainian independence. But in March, 1992, 35% were already condemning the liquidation of the Soviet Union, a figure that rose to 60% by the end of the year (Kliamkin, 1994: 113). It was becoming abundantly clear that many Ukrainian had become deeply disappointed with the consequences of sovereign statehood, and that renewed inclusion of Ukraine in Russia might be a relatively easy task for the Kremlin. Due to domestic strife, El’tsin could not pursue this matter actively for quite some time. Nevertheless, when the Russian Supreme Soviet had been violently dispersed in October, 1993, the President immediately turned to issues of post-Soviet unification, calling directly for the “gathering of all Russian lands” (Glebov, 1999: 186).

Renegotiating borders?

Under such circumstances, it might sound peculiar that Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian territories as something alien still persisted. However, continued influence of the paradigm of Nation could not be denied, including among members of the Russian leadership. It was, for instance, noticeable that El'tsin in his comments from October, 1993, did not explicitly highlight all of Belarus and Ukraine as 'Russian lands.' Failure to do so was put in an ominous light by developments over the previous years. Already in the immediate aftermath of the aborted coup in August, 1991, El'tsin's spokesman, Pavel Voshchanov, had exploited current turmoil to stress the right of a sovereign Russia to renegotiate any of its existing borders, with a threat of implementing potentially violent measures if necessary, leading even quiescent Belarus to outspokenly defend its borders (Shimanskii, 1991: 2). Indeed, Voshchanov's comments did not appear to be mere rhetoric. Later, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister of the time, Borys Tarasiuk, was to recall how the Russian administration advanced claims to Ukrainian territory during the last months of 1991; a policy that was only ended after Kyiv started presenting counterclaims on Kuban and other Russian areas in turn (Molchanov, 2002: 220). For the remainder of that year, tensions were defused. However, already in January, 1992, a month after having congratulated Ukraine with its newfound independence, the new Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Kozyrev condemned the transfer of Crimea to the UkSSR. Justifiably, the Ukrainian government protested that such statements violated previous territorial agreements (Kuzio, 1997: 171). Now, however, members of the Russian Supreme Soviet saw an opportunity to increase their legitimacy relative to that of the Kremlin by defending a Russia different from that attempted by El'tsin through the CIS. Already in January, 1992, the Committee for International Affairs under Vladimir Lukin passed a resolution declaring the transfer of Crimea in 1954 null and void. Four months later, the entire parliament ratified this resolution (Ambrosio, 2005: 56). Subsequently, the parliament was also to pass resolutions regarding Sevastopol’ in particular, as highlighted above. But already the tendency was clear. Exploiting internal disagreements in the Russian leadership, members of the Supreme Soviet saw a chance to promote their independent political vision for Russia; a vision in which parts of Belarus and particularly Ukraine had a place, while others were to be pushed even further away. As shall be shown in the following, territorial issues were not the only signs that Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty was being undermined.

Governance

Absorbed by the USSR

While the Soviet Union still existed, the RSFSR had been its central, irreplaceable republic. This was not least due to the fact that the institutions governing how the RSFSR and the Union functioned were in many cases the same. For example, after 1925 the RSFSR had no Communist party of its own until the very last period of Soviet rule, it had no separate security services such as the KGB, it had no separate Academy of Sciences, and so on (Mendras, 1997: 99). In this regard, the RSFSR was different from other republics, which all had these institutions on their soil in addition to branches of their Union counterparts. This had been done quite deliberately by early Soviet leaders such as Joseph Stalin in order to tie the fate of this central republic closely to the fate of the Union as a whole. As mentioned above, though, the BSSR and the UkSSR had all these institutions as indigenous to their republics, but the republics were still closely tied to the Soviet Union. Notably, from the time of the 1917 revolution that brought the Communist party to power, Belarusians and Ukrainians were over-represented in party structures in relation to their percentage of the overall population (Birgerson, 2002: 109). Given that membership of the Communist party was the overwhelming factor providing governing power in the Union, Belarusians and Ukrainians thus had a clear interest in preserving the multilateral governance. Therefore, the fact that protests against Soviet rule were subdued in the BSSR and UkSSR until the late 1980s cannot only be attributed to the ability of Moscow to forcibly suppress protests. Whereas Kazakhstan already in 1986 witnessed protests against the imposition of ethnic Russians in leading republican positions, and the Caucasus witnessed protests relation to local, interethnic strife and heavy-handed, inept Soviet responses, Belarusians and Ukrainians had less reason to feel discriminated against. Tellingly, it was not before 1989 that the nationalist Ukrainian Popular Front 'Rukh' was founded. And even though long-reigning Ukrainian Communist Party General Secretary Volodymyr Shcherbytskyi was soon after ousted from power, this had little to do with Ukrainian nationalists and much more to do with Shcherbytskyi's unwillingness to join Gorbachev's reform policies. Indeed, the replacement, Leonid Kravchuk, who was later to become the first President of sovereign Ukraine, initially showed little interest in promoting a Ukrainian nationalist course (Kolstoe, 1995: 174).

Russian nomenklatura

Nevertheless, to the extent that Belarusian and Ukrainian dissidents existed during Soviet times, they could easily combine protests against Soviet and Communist rule with protests against Russia and Russians. On the one hand, Belarusians and Ukrainians were of course overrepresented in the Soviet governing structures, or nomenklatura, compared to most other Soviet peoples. However, Russians were even more so. Furthermore, for nationalists in the BSSR, UkSSR and elsewhere the problem was not only that ethnic Russians controlled their republics, but that a large number of russified and Russian-speaking titulars did so, too (Lakiza-Sachuk and Melnyczuk, 1996: 112). In this context, it became opportune for Belarusian and Ukrainian nationalists to denounce Russophile ethnic titulars as traitors, abetting the continued imposition of foreign, Muscovite rule over Minsk and Kyiv. On the other hand, the Belarusian Popular Front and Rukh, in particular, actively used the wider framework for expression introduced as a result of Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, or openness, in the late 1980s, to increasingly distance structures of governance in their republics from those of the Union overall. In this context should be seen, for instance, the declaration of sovereignty by the UkSSR in July, 1990, and the decisions by republican parliaments not to allow their military forces to be deployed outside the home republic. Such developments did not please local ethnic Russians or Russophiles, however, and as local, nationalist movements gained power tensions within the two republics increased. Following an example set by local Russians in the Baltic republics, Russians in the eastern and southern parts of the UkSSR began to mobilise in so-called Interfront movements during 1990 and 1991, demanding that a union of twelve regions located in their parts of the republic could be created as a counterweight to the allegedly secessionist tendencies promoted by nationalists from Western parts of the republic and increasingly dominant in Kyiv (Sasse, 2001: 84).

Democratic sovereignty

For the time being, however, members of the political elites in the RSFSR and other Soviet republics were more concerned with the struggle between the Union centre, on the one hand, and the various republics, on the other. It was in this context that the November, 1990, treaty on mutual recognition of the sovereign status of the RSFSR and the UkSSR was accompanied by a joint statement by El'tsin and Kravchuk. In this statement, the two republican leaders called for recognition of the sovereign status of their republics by Soviet authorities, while at the same time suggesting the liquidation of "outdated, totalitarian structures" (Nahaylo, 1999: 329). The idea was to show their domestic audience and the international community at large that the leaderships of these two republics were offering a clear alternative to Gorbachev's Communist regime, even if this was less centralised than in the past. In the wake of the aborted coup in August, 1991, signs appeared that the Russian political elite meant what it said about the construction of democratically sovereign states. When the sovereign statehood of Ukraine was announced in late August, a Russian delegation containing prominent figures such as Deputy President Aleksandr Rutskoi and the mayor of Leningrad, Anatolii Sobchak, flew to Kyiv for consultations. Although the immediate reaction in Moscow to the Ukrainian statement had been one of shock, Sobchak soon reported back to the USSR Supreme Soviet that independence was genuinely being sought by the Ukrainians, and that its population had a right to choose this for itself, (Nahaylo, 1999: 397) as it was planning to do in a subsequent popular referendum. When the result of this, as already mentioned, was an overwhelming endorsement of Ukrainian independence in December, 1991, El'tsin swiftly congratulated Ukraine by recognising the result and echoing Sobchak's words that this was a result of voters' right to democratic self-determination (Nahaylo, 1999: 421). The Russian President could hardly do otherwise, since his own ascent to power, after being dismissed by Gorbachev as leader of Moscow in 1987, had been based around the idea of being a 'democratic alternative' to the authoritarian ideas still propagated by Gorbachev and, not least, by the nationalist forces vying with El'tsin for the prime spot as defender of Russia against the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet collapse, El'tsin also had to come to terms with the fact that sovereign Belarus and Ukraine had used his struggle against Gorbachev to gain self-rule, and had no intention of giving up their recently acquired gains. On several occasions did the two states emphasise their right to stay separate from Russian authority, be this directly imposed or through the medium of the CIS. This defence of sovereign governance sometimes gained a rather sharp tone. In January, 1993, when the Russian leadership for some time had fought to introduce a new CIS Charter that would help strengthening supranational governance among the member-states of the organisation, Ukrainian officials strongly refused being party to such plans, claiming that Ukraine had no need for a suprastate (read: Russian) “drill sergeant” giving orders to the member-states of the CIS (Kubicek, 1999: 17).

Centralised damage control

For the time being, therefore, it seemed difficult for Moscow to gain Ukrainian participation in attempts to reinstate centralised governance in Eurasia. With Belarus the situation was somewhat different. Back in August, 1991, Minsk had swiftly supported the Moscow coup, leaving little doubt that the preference was for continued centralised rule by the Union-centre. True, the Ukrainian leadership under Kravchuk had not endorsed El’tsin, either, but here, at least, equivocation was pursued. In contrast, it was not until the demise of the coup and the reinstatement of Gorbachev in Moscow that the authorities of the BSSR realised centralised governance was not going to remain, and that the independence of the republic had to be declared (Chinn and Kaiser, 1996: 139). El’tsin and the rest of the Russian political elite accepted this, as mentioned above, but this did not mean that they endorsed Belarusian and Ukrainian selfgovernance. The Russian lack of reaction was partly due to an intention to appear acceptable in the eyes of the West, from where substantial material aid was expected, but also to the fact that a substantially weakened Russia really could do little to prevent Belarusians and Ukrainians from running their home regions in any way they wished to. As long as no clear violations of human rights were being instigated by actors in Minsk and Kyiv, Moscow was resigned to letting go. In August, 1991, Rutskoi's and Sobchak's trip to Kyiv had aimed to retain the supremacy of a government located in Moscow (Nahaylo, 1999: 396). Only when this was flatly rejected by Ukrainians did the Russian elite accept that sovereign governance was a fact to accept, until Belarusians and Ukrainians by themselves sought back under Russian government. That such a development was seen as inevitable by leading Russian politicians, even those of a Westernised, moderate hue such as Kozyrev, underlines how widespread the assumption of centralisation as the 'natural' state of Eurasian governance appeared. In such a situation, the role of the Russian leadership appeared simply to exercise damage control, keeping Belarusians and Ukrainians as close as possible until times changed for the better. With socio-economic conditions in Belarus and Ukraine soon worsening to levels even below those of Russia, and local governments being blamed for this development through perceived incompetence, Russian hopes arguably seemed well-founded. By June, 1993, governance in Ukraine, for instance, had deteriorated to the point where striking miners in the Donbas region in the east demanded regional autonomy and overall increased cooperation with and governance by Moscow (Duncan, 1996: 203).

Independence as a Communist plot

Such demands and accompanying protests still reflected perceptions of the paradigm of Power, as the miners and their sympathisers believed that Ukrainian leaders were possibly honourable, but simply out of their depth. They were provincial leaders who had no ability to rule a state and needed help from the much more experience Russian elite. Such sentiments were often expressed in Russia, as well. Other arguments, however, directly challenged the integrity of Belarusian and Ukrainian political elites. Some of these challenges even came from very high echelons of the Russian leadership. In May, 1992, Rutskoi himself dismissed Ukrainian independence as little more than an attempt by national Communists to stay in power; a claim that drew heated responses from Ukrainian commentators (Pravdenko, 1992: 7). Admittedly, Rutskoi's comment was not completely without merit, but it highlighted a perception by which the governance of Ukraine, and of Russians living there, had somehow been 'hijacked' by elites betraying the true interests of their people and of their democratic wishes to be ruled from Russia. Thus, the debate started by Rutskoi was a clear example of the paradigm of Nation. More ominously, the Deputy President appeared to have substantial support for his sentiments among the Russian population, at large. Shortly after his article had appeared, the prominent Russian Institute of Europe drew up a confidential document advising the Russian leadership to aim for policies that would isolate Kyiv internationally by creating an image of an authoritarian-nationalist and neo-Communist regime, thereby restricting the abilities of the new state to gain much-needed Western assistance, rendering it unable to tend to the needs of its population, providing Russians with the opportunity to claim that their compatriots in Ukraine were being mistreated and should be governed from Moscow (Kuzio, 1997: 161). It therefore appears reasonable to conclude that significant parts of the Russian elite remained prepared to use pre-independence tactics; accusing their opponents of being non-democratic and discriminating against Russians, while at the same time assisting this perceived negligence as much as possible. At the same time, however, it must not be forgotten that the leaderships in Belarus and particularly in Ukraine sometimes brought criticism on themselves by dealing heavy-handedly with the grievances of local Russians. Crimeans, in particular, were repeatedly promised a large degree of autonomy, but never really received it. Instead, their frequent protests were met with increased inflexibility by Kyiv. Eventually, in January, 1993, this resulted in the imposition by decree of direct presidential rule over the entire peninsula, following earlier measures that had ensured similar governance over the city of Sevastopol' (Kravchuk, 1993: 8). While it cannot be denied that the Ukrainian government had the duty to control governance throughout its territory, such wilful alienation of the most heavily russified part of the state seemed little more than an attempt to cast Russian and Russophiles as scapegoats, out to undermine hard-gained Ukrainian independence. Thus, perceptions belonging to the paradigm of Nation were visible in Kyiv, as well as in Moscow.

Ideology

Imperial law

Even before the appearance of the Soviet Union, the Russian empire was based around the idea of one core nation of Russians, consisting of Great Russians, White Russians, and Little Russians. This was reflected, too, in the legal code of the empire, which treated members of these three ethnicities, which were otherwise known as Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, in a similar fashion (Molchanov, 2002: 174). With the appearance of the Soviet Union, this principle of equality was spread to all inhabitants of the Union, and multinationality thus became a core part of Soviet state ideology. However, since the Soviet Union had formed around a Russian core, a tendency to equate the Union with Russia remained strong, even among the political elite. In 1985, the new General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Gorbachev, who was ethnically Russian, even went so far as to openly equate the Union with Russia (Solchanyk, 1992: 35). In this way, Russian state ideology would inevitably be intertwined with the paradigm of Power, and have Belarus and Ukraine as crucial components. Consequently, in the following years, when El'tsin and others persistently sought to distinguish Russian state ideology from that of the Soviet Union, some Russian observers began to fear that the leadership of the RSFSR was tearing Russia apart, and that the crucial

Belarusian and Ukrainian elements of the Russian state would be lost in the process. Most prominently, such fears were shown in the quite influential scholar Aleksandr Tsipko's article from May, 1990, which inaugurated a protracted debate on whether the El'tsin leadership was going too far in its demands for sovereignty from the Union (Tsipko, 1990: 1). For the time being, however, it neither appeared that El'tsin sought to construct a new, Russian state ideology, nor that the average Russian was ready to acquiesce in this. The same, for that matter, was the case with most Belarusians and Ukrainians. Somewhat paradoxically, one of the strongest examples of this came when El'tsin in November, 1990, flew to Kyiv to sign the treaty on mutual recognition of sovereignty with Kravchuk. Ukrainian demonstrators did not meet him with nationalist protests, but instead shouted "Glory be to El'tsin" in a direct imitation of the greetings presented to the emperor in centuries past. It indicated that the average individual looked to praise a person symbolising a multinational ideal, as opposed to any specific nation (Kuzio, 1997: 169).

Invented nationalism

However, most opponents of the Soviet Union opposed its Russian incarnation, too. Soon, it became obvious that this was the case even in the two republics that had historically been closest to Russia, the BSSR and the UkSSR. Especially Belarusians had traditionally been loyal to Russia, and it had been quite difficult most of the time to find any proponents of a specific Belarusian state ideology, as such. Nevertheless, when Gorbachev's glasnost slowly began to allow for the appearance of resistance to his regime, the Belarusian Popular Front was created. Aiming to oppose the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and of the BSSR, this Popular Front had to attach itself to a different ideology. Eventually, this organisation thus began to construct a Belarusian nationalism around which it could gather. It is a moot point whether Belarusian nationalism was an invention suited to the moment, (Hagendoorn et al, 2001: 65) but there were some aspects it could seek support from; unfortunately, several of these included direct opposition to the Russian state, and possibly to ordinary Russians, too. One of these had to do with traditional connections between some Belarusians and Poland, a traditional arch-enemy of Russia. The other was of much more recent vintage and concerned Soviet behaviour in the BSSR before and during the Second World War. Instead of highlighting the liberation by a heroic Red Army, Belarusian nationalism slowly began to emphasise persecutions of Belarusians by the Soviet military and secret police. In the UkSSR, nationalist organisations did not even have to search long for such episodes, for here Ukrainian nationalists had twice been violently opposed by Russian-dominated Soviet forces during the 20th century. First, during the civil war a short-lived Ukrainian republic had been overrun by the new Bolshevik Red Army; later, after the Second World War, partisans in the western UkSSR, which had hitherto not been part of the Soviet Union, fought Moscow for several years until they were eventually suppressed. Given such recent historical events, it was perhaps not surprising that Russians living in the west-Ukrainian province of Galicia, towards the end of Soviet rule reported of increased tensions between them and ethnic Ukrainians. By 1991, surveys showed that 59% of ethnic Russians noted attitudes towards them had worsened while as many as 82% claimed that they daily witnessed ethnic enmity. Even more ominously, perhaps, 38% argued that such enmity was not the result of the hostility harboured by individual Ukrainians, but instead was founded on a policy directed by the central leadership of the UkSSR (Molchanov, 2002: 214).

Ukrainian statehood congratulated

It was thus, perhaps, to be feared that the paradigm of Nation would push the RSFSR and UkSSR further apart after these two Soviet republics had declared their sovereignty in the summer of 1990. Remarkably, however, already in August such fears were somewhat dispelled. Parliamentary deputies from the two republics, including members of nationalist parties, met and agreed to inaugurate a bilateral relationship based on individual, not communal rights. To this effect, these deputies issued a joint declaration that highlighted the chance to open a new chapter in the history of Russians and Ukrainians by stressing mutual harmony as an integral element of the sovereignty of their republics (Afanas'ev et al, 1990: 1). It must be stressed that this declaration was not simply the work of a few, isolated idealists. Instead, this attempt to construct the basis for new statehoods within the paradigm of Law was heard by the leaders of the two republics, and directly reflected in subsequent bilateral treaties between the two republics. The following year, when El'tsin in December, 1991, sent his representative to congratulate the newly elected Ukrainian President Kravchuk at his inauguration, it was also made clear from the Russian side that a historically new beginning in bilateral relations was to be inaugurated, one based on mutually agreed principles (Nahaylo, 1999: 422). Arguably, such principles were visible in the much diluted CIS. However, this organisation was also weakened to the point of becoming little more than a mechanism for the ordered separation of post-Soviet states, by the wish of Belarusian and Ukrainian elites. These were increasingly forced to hail the calls among republican nationalist parties that sought to turn these two new states away from their previous role as ‘appendages to Russia,’ and into ‘European’ states, (Chinn and Kaiser, 1996: 140) or from barbarism to civilisation. For the time being, the Russian elite accepted this on the principle that ideologies promoting independent Belarusian and Ukrainian states were better than no ideologies at all with the corresponding lack of stability along the western borders of the Russian Federation. In July, 1992, the Kremlin even sought to directly benefit from the independence of Ukraine when Kyiv was promoted as a valuable assistant to negotiate peace in other post-Soviet states, specifically between Moldova and Transnistria, where a joint initiative by El’tsin and Kravchuk ended local hostilities (Gow, 1992: 259). During the same month, Russian First deputy Foreign Minister, Fedor Shelov-Kovediaev, further argued in an interview that it had been Russian understanding and foreign policy moderation that had helped Ukrainians to believe in the viability of its independence and stop seeking the “image of Russia as an enemy” (Gagua, 1992: 5). If independent Ukraine was unavoidable, the Russian leadership could just as well use it to legitimise itself worldwide. And from Ukraine, indeed, appeared signs that the search for inclusive, law-governed ideologies supporting the new state was genuine. By late 1992, Ukrainian Minister of Culture Ivan Dziuba gave a good example of this as he stated in an article that the new Ukrainian nation, which he saw being formed, was centred on the concept of citizenship rather than that of ethnicity; (Dziuba, 1992: 59) a welcome message to Russians living in Ukraine.

Civic Union

Ukrainians and Belarusians could not be ensured, though, that the future Russian state would be equally willing and able to exist separately from them. Indeed, for every time El'tsin and selected officials around him declared their support for the construction of independent Belarusian and Ukrainian state ideologies, other leading Russians sent quite different signals. Again, Rutskoi was central to such developments. Already by early, 1992, the Russian Deputy President had been integral to the formation of the Civic Union, a Russian party that brought together leading political and economic figures all intending to re-establish Russian imperial supremacy of the past in Eurasia, and thus in having Belarusian and Ukrainian entities that sought to defend Russia against foreign threats (Stowe, 2001: 54). It was thus clear that parts of the Russian elite were quite unwilling or unable to abandon the ideologies of the past and the vision of Russia as something powerful on the international scene, equal not to Belarus and Ukraine, but to China and especially the USA. At the same time, it was telling that the striving for a sovereign state ideology in Belarus and Ukraine had abated substantially shortly after these states had become completely sovereign. The problem with an ideology that stressed the independence and Westernised nature of these states was, in later President Leonid Kuchma's words that no one was expecting or waiting for Ukraine, or Belarus for that matter, in the West. At the same time, however, Russians official policy made much emphasis on trying to convince these two states that they really belonged in a Russia-dominated CIS (Buszynski, 1996: 129). In Belarus, observers were also coming to the conclusion that a status as sovereign away from Russia might not be the best thing for the state. In April, 1993, a Belarusian journalist noted with remarkable candour that after the so-called 'shock therapy' of the preceding years, during which Belarusians had been forced into unprecedented economic hardship, Belarusians no longer seemed to appreciate their national identity or, for that matter, the sovereignty of their state. Instead, they were by now willing to approach and support any foreign alliance as long as material conditions were improved (Chinn and Kaiser, 1996: 132). Based on this, it might seem straightforward to use this as an example of material conditions trumping developments in identity. However, the matter can easily be seen the other way round. Of course, Belarusians wanted to live better. However, their seeming abandonment of state sovereignty had more to do with a feeling of having been misled. Sovereignty had been sold as something that would bring renewed material benefits to them, a sort of new 'social contract,' if you like, mirroring the Soviet idea that the average person should experience an increased living standard but not concentrate on political matters. Therefore, when living conditions deteriorated after 1991, Belarusians, and Russians and Ukrainians, too, felt that the new state ideologies had lost their legitimacy in the same way as their Soviet predecessor, and that a Russian-dominated imperial framework therefore was the ideology these states should return to.

Defending ethnic Russians

Some Russian actors felt differently, though. They believed that it was not so much the idea of a sovereign Russian ideology that had failed, but the attempt to mould this according to the wishes of the West. Western advice had brought hardship and not much else to Russia in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse. At the same time, and despite a few attempts to seek allies elsewhere in the international community, Russians understood that no other foreign allies or ideologies could realistically be approached. Thus, with a feeling that Russia had been abandoned or even betrayed, a number of Russians began looking inwards to a Russian nationalism that was marked by anti-Westernism and, often, ethnical in nature. This ideology had increasingly little place for anything non-Russians. Although Russian was mostly seen as something individuals could choose, as opposed to being born with or without, this still alienated a number of Belarusians and particularly Ukrainians from Russia, where fears appeared that western Ukrainians, in particular, were siding with the West (Tuminez, 1996: 59). These accusations were responded to in kind by Ukrainian nationalists, notably surrounding Rukh. In April, 1992, the nationalist party went so far as to advocate that Ukraine terminated its membership in the CIS with immediate effect, since this organisation was allegedly little more than an attempt to resurrect the Russian empire to the detriment of Ukraine. At the same time, Rukh suggested that Ukrainian citizenship should be re-established around the Ukrainian nation (Molchanov, 202: 263). Perhaps not without reason, the Russian elite began to fear that ethnic Russians would have little place in such a state and even Kozyrev stressed by December, 1992, that Russia had to defend the rights and lives of ethnic Russians in neighbouring post-Soviet states (Kozyrev, 1992: 2). True, this remark was mostly aimed at Estonia and Latvia, where discrimination against Russians was much more widespread than in Belarus or Ukraine, but nonetheless, the Russian leadership had sent a signal that it was willing to see Belarusian and Ukrainian nationalism as anathema, if necessary. And signs remained to the end of this period that this might well become necessary in the near future. Ukraine was one thing, but even in Belarus did tensions arise. Gradually, a national identity was being created by local opinion-makers and other observers that saw local Russians as potential fifth columnists and cultural occupiers, set on preventing the resurrection of the Belarusian state. In turn, local Russian organisations openly denied the existence of a separate Belarusian nation, drawing the ire of locals (Kolstoe, 1995: 169) and continuing a strife that had the potential to be lasting for a long time.

Conclusion

This article has sought to argue that Russian perceptions of Belarusian and Ukrainian political sovereignty between 1990 and 1993 was mainly influenced by the paradigm of Power, but that the paradigm of Nation continued to have a highly significant influence throughout. In other words, it seems clear that Russians never truly accepted Belarusian and Ukrainian sovereignty as something wholly separate from Russia. Thus, it was to be expected that the Russian elite would not be ready in the long run to retain the post-Soviet status quo of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine being three formally equal, sovereign states. In arguing thus, this article appears to be following the conclusions of a large body of academic literature dealing with this topic. However, I have furthermore argued in this article that there were two ways in which Russians could fail to accept the political sovereignty of Belarus and Ukraine, and these ways had quite different implications for future inter-state relations. On the one hand, Russian perceptions could belong within what I have named the paradigm of Power. That is, Russians could seek to reincorporate Belarus and Ukraine within Russia in an attempt to recreate a state that would once more be an international force to reckon with and a worthy competitor, if not adversary to the USA. In this paradigm, Belarusians and Ukrainians were seen as wayward allies that might have felt like trying out freedom from Russia for a time, but who could be counted on to ‘come home’ before long. On the other hand, Russian perceptions could belong within what I have named the paradigm of Nation. That is, Russians could seek to reincorporate parts of Belarus and Ukraine within Russia in an attempt to recreate a ‘pure’ Russian state that would no longer be contaminated by alien influences, and which would ensure that Russia returned to its true roots. In this paradigm, Belarusians and Ukrainians, that is, those individuals who explicitly presented themselves as non-Russian, were seen as traitors and enemies seeking to draw Russians living in the false, post-Soviet states away from the Russian homeland. Thus, these Belarusians and Ukrainians had to be resisted as much as possible. Thus, whereas a superficial analysis might stress the revisionist nature of both of these paradigms, the difference between them was quite significant, not least for the future of Belarus and Ukraine. During this period, the paradigm of Power remained dominant, not least given the recent Soviet, multinational past, and the inability of nationalists on either side to really do anything about their mutual enmities. But it was worth keeping in mind that as the Soviet Union receded, and capabilities in Russia in particular increased, mutual animosities could return. This article does not have the space to dwell on how developments during this formative period in post-Soviet Russian statehood influenced relations until today. It simply notes that when post-Soviet Russia, Belarus and Ukraine were originally imagined, the paradigm of Nation was never far away.

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