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Distinguished Visitor

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Russia in the Midst of Change

Russian Academy of Science Professor George Mirsky addressed four issues during a roundtable discussion at the Institute for National Strategic Studies. They were: the current situation in Russia, nationalism and relations between Russia and its "near abroad", great power status for Russia, and suggestions for U.S. policy vis-a-vis Zhirinovskiy.

Situation in Russia

THE ECONOMY: Joking that things are not so bad that they cannot get worse, Mirsky said that industrial output had shrunk 40% since last year and oil production in the first two months of 1994 was down 14%. Energy prices are rising but are still only 45% of world prices. Inflation was 10% in February. Unemployment is listed at only 1.5%, but there is much underemployment, and many people are not working but are on enterprise rolls in an unpaid leave status. Some 8,000 enterprises should be declared bankrupt. About 80% of small enterprises have already been auctioned off; 800

enterprises (1% of the total) are being privatized each month. While there is some industrial investment taking place in smaller cities, most money is sent out of Russia. Economic reform will require closing giant military industrial enterprises; this will be politically explosive as it will lead to 15% unemployment.

CRIME: About 75% of private organizations pay 10-20% of their earnings as protection money to gangs. Some 150 gangs control most banks and other institutions; most of the 1,800 banks pay protection money to these Russian mafias. Some 120 bank managers were killed last year. There were 6,500 cases of theft of weapons from military depots in 1993, and the gangs are now dealing in explosives.

SOCIETY: There is a near total criminalization of society, with many in the large middle class believing that if they are not stealing they are cheating their family. The Academy of Sciences is dying as young people leave for other ventures.



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People pursue business ventures that are built on paper rather than actual production.

POLITICS IN A WORSENING ENVIRONMENT - RUTSKOY AND ZHIRINOVSKIY: If the situation in Russia worsens, Rutskoy or Zhirinovskiy might emerge as leader. Rutskoy is decent and honest but not bright. He might win the support of many who voted for Zhirinovskiy. Zhirinovskiy as leader would be the worst case. He is not mad but calculating; he is as mean as a junk yard dog. Zhirinovskiy has captured the crime issue, saying he would have criminals shot on sight. He has also won support by playing to the sentiment against Russia being humiliated.

Nationalism and Relations between Russia and the Near Abroad

RUSSIAN NATIONALISM: While Russian nationalism has existed for centuries and there has always been a clear sense of nationalism in Russia, Russian nationalism is the weakest of all nationalisms in the republics of the former Soviet Union. Russian domination in the area of the former Soviet Union had never before been challenged by another nation. Contributing factors in the past have been the Russian language, the Orthodox Church, and the Czar. Since the White Army used Russian chauvinism as a weapon, the Bolsheviks steered away from this. Later, because Russians dominated the former Soviet Union, there was no need for Russian chauvinism. There was no particular "Soviet" nationalism or patriotism. But many in the USSR felt they belonged to a country surrounded by an enemy.

THE "NEAR ABROAD": Russians have been shocked by developments in the "near abroad" and by rumors about treatment of the some 25 million Russians there. As a result, Russian nationalism has risen. Rumors of genocide of Russians in the "near abroad" are ridiculous—no one has been killed—but perceptions are strong. Russians have been squeezed out of jobs. Zhirinovskiy plays on these perceptions.

Some Russians felt it would have been better to have lost the non-Russian republics. Some view Ukraine as having "seceded." Russians felt betrayed when Chechnia in the North Caucasus of Russia claimed independence. There is now an anti-Caucasus campaign in Moscow. First the Georgians and now the Azeris have captured the

fruit and vegetable markets in Moscow.

Russians have left Uzbekistan as they see no future there and have left Tajikistan because of the war. Kazakhstan is different, since there are almost as many Russians there as Kazakhs, although numbers of ethnic Kazakhs are increasing faster than Russians. Russians feel that if they were to leave Kazakhstan, they should take part of the territory of Kazakhstan with them.

Psychologically speaking, Russians in the Baltics feel inferior to the Balts. In Central Asia, the Russians regard the indigenous Central Asians as inferior. There is psychological compatibility between the Russians and the Kazakhs, and between Russians and Tatars.

The Tatars, however, are starting to take charge of the police and other organizations in Tatarstan, a republic in the Russian Federation, and Kazakhs may take charge in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev is trying to walk a tightrope between the Kazakhs and Russians in Kazakhstan.

CIS: Russia is working to reassert its influence and to reintegrate the former republics under a restored Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which is viewed as a viable entity. A year ago the CIS was an organization for orderly disintegration, but no more. Pan-Slavism is dead, and the Slavic states are not going their own way. The Central Asians would vote for integration if it meant an increase in the standard of living. The economic situation is ugly except in Turkmenistan and Estonia.

RUSSIAN FORCES IN THE "NEAR ABROAD": Russian troops are deployed in South Ossetia and Moldova, and people there are grateful to Moscow but still fear they will be double-crossed by these forces. People do not see an imminent danger while Yeltsin is in charge, but they would if Rutskoy or Zhirinovskiy were in charge. Russians do not want Russian boys killed there.

ISLAMIC THREAT: The concept of "Islam is the solution" could become a rallying cry in Central Asia. Moscow has deployed forces to Tajikistan and attempted to draw a line there. If the Russians pull out of Tajikistan, the Muslims would take over. There is a domino theory—if Tajikistan falls, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan would fall, and eventually Muslim fundamentalism would have to be fought in Russia itself.

GEORGIA: Some of Yeltsin's generals probably pressed to have Russia help the Abkhazians against the Georgians. There may have been concern that, if the Abkhazians lost, Georgian Parliamentary leader Shevardnadze would drive the Russians out of Georgia, and seaports and bases would be lost. On the other hand, if the Georgians were allowed to run over the Abkhazians, the people in the North Caucasus area of Russia would see this as a betrayal by Russia and this might trigger a conflict in the North Caucasus and the Russians might lose bases there. The Russians then helped Shevardnadze against the Gamsakhurdia opposition in Georgia, and Shevardnadze agreed to having Russian bases in Georgia.

UKRAINE: Disputes between Ukraine and Russia over the Black Sea Fleet could poison relations. Ukraine will be independent but aligned; it will be politically independent but economically tied to Russia. The Ukrainians have an inferiority complex. Ukraine lacks qualified people, and many have left Ukraine for Moscow. Russia will attempt economic integration with Ukraine but not total integration, as with Belarus. Russian experience in Belarus has shown total integration to be too costly. It will cost a billion dollars to incorporate Belarus into Russia. Some in Moscow encourage close contacts between Russia and Ukraine's Kharkov and Donbas areas.

Great Power Status for Russia

Russian national pride has been hurt with the loss of great power status. This helps explain the Russian stance on Serbia, as well as on the Kuril Islands and Sevastopol. Russians say they want Russia to be restored to the position of a great

power, not a superpower. This restoration would begin with increasing Russian influence in the "near abroad." Some believe that Russia's throwing its weight around in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia will show the world that Russia is still a great power. Any perception that efforts will be made to restore the Soviet Union is an exaggeration.

The West should make a distinction between the area west of Russia, where any attempts to interfere in the Baltics or Poland should be opposed, and south of Russia. Russians see Europe as lost. But the West must be careful regarding Russian relations with the zone of influence in Ukraine, the Transcaucasus, and Central Asia. If the West tries to interfere, this will be counterproductive and play into Zhirinovskiy's hands.

Suggestion for Policy vis-a-vis Zhirinovskiy

In response to a question, Mirsky said developing policy vis-a-vis Zhirinovskiy required real skill. It would be a mistake to over-emphasize his importance and include him in receptions and the like, but he should be criticized. A subtle strategy of criticism is needed. Some positions Zhirinovskiy emphasizes are shared by many Russians, e.g., opposition to Russian humiliation. Mirsky agreed with sending a message to Russians that Russia would be isolated if Zhirinovskiy acceded to power; he further suggested indicating that Zhirinovskiy might lead Russia into a war.

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