

SEPARATISM AND UNIFICATION IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Evgeny Primakov Interviewed by Nina Khrushcheva

October 9, 2000: Interview with Evgeny Maksimovich Primakov, Member of the Russian State Duma, Leader of the Fatherland-All Russia Party, special presidential envoy to the conflict areas of Russia, former Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. Interview conducted by Nina Khrushcheva.

NK: Today there is a lot of talk about separatism versus unification. How, in your opinion, would it be possible to bridge these two extremes?

EMP: Let me start with an overview of separatism, so it will be clear exactly what we are talking about.

From the end of the last century the prevailing theory held that providing all nations with the right to self-determination would solve the national problem. This notion was fixed when it appeared in the UN Charter. Marxists were the "fathers" of this theory, and it was right until that time, when the national problem became associated with colonialism. Then, with the national problem existing in a separate state, with oppressive and oppressed nationalities within one country, it was possible to raise the question of separation solving the national problem, distinguishing between radical forms of separation and forms of separation that were too radical. The situation has changed. Two and a half thousand ethnicities, nations and nationalities live in approximately 150 nation-states.

Can you imagine the chaos the world would find itself should separatism develop? That means that separatism now is not a problem of separate states, it is a problem of the whole world community, and in that regard we have to come forward decisively against separatism. Surely that does not mean that in those cases when all parties are for separation, for the creation of a new national

state, we should resist and keep them together against their will. But when one of the parties does not agree: either a separate ethos, or a nation which is willing to separate, or the states or nations from which they are willing to separate, in these cases, I suppose, fighting for separation is not the best solution.

Another point I would like to make concerns the dangers of separatism today, which has begun to merge with extremism. In the first instance, I have in mind Islamic extremism, and second, its association with international terrorism, which makes this whole mixture extremely dangerous. Or take, for example, religious extremism. Religious extremism, in fact, has little in common with religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism, for example, for many years had been a natural phenomenon among Muslims who lived on the territory of the Soviet Union. They were pressured, because they could not build mosques, they could not perform their rituals, etc. In any case, even if it was not prohibited, it was not approved, so the rise of fundamentalism there had its grounds. It was objectively reasoned.

It is important to understand how Muslim fundamentalism differs from Islamic extremism. Islamic extremism preaches the necessity of spreading the Islamic model of power and the Islamic model of society across nations. I would like to stress, *spreading* their power across nations. Today this particular effort creates serious dangers and threats. It used to be a widespread notion that only Iran was engaged in promoting terrorism,

extremism and separatism. I do not want to argue now that Iran did not do this. However, Iran is a Shiite state, and Shiites differ tremendously from other Muslims. Besides, Iran, for example, has little to do with the Sunnite extremism that is emerging today. Sunnism includes the Wahabi movement and other tendencies, which primarily come from Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been shaken for decades by violence and power struggles, and it shakes those countries around it. It is the state where Talibs and Taliban rule without hiding their beliefs. These beliefs are to spread Islamism to the neighbouring states by means of power. That is what separatism means.

NK.: Take the Russian case, would you agree that one should not unite or divide parties that are desperate to be separated, unless there is a way to solve the problem via democracy? Is there a way to solve Russia's problems, to help the nationalities within Russia in their desire to become independent, via democracy?

EMP: Of course there is. Moreover, I don't think we really have any other striking examples besides Chechnya, where a part has a choice to either stay or leave. although, of course, ethnic conflicts do exist in other places too. And they will exist. The situation in the United States is different, where each state has a mixed population and nobody save Native Americans have historical origins in this or that area. But Russia is a different story. Let's look at the North Caucasus, for example. From the very beginning, much earlier than the Russians, many other nationalities and ethnic groups lived there. Or let's take Povolzhie (areas by the Volga River). There, too, ethnic groups and nations are very mixed. That is why, in my opinion, we *have* to solve all these problems democratically, providing necessary elements of cultural autonomy and assistance for the national self-expression of the nationalities which are subjects of the Russian Federation today. On the other hand, they should not get special economic treatment because of their ethnicity or nationality. Why, for example, should Russian territories neighboring with Tatarstan

or Bashkortostan be worse off than those of the Tatar and Bashkir nationalities? So, the national support of one nation should not come at the expense of others.

NK: And what about the nationalities that would now like to return to areas which were theirs historically, "by origin"? For example, the case of Crimean Tatars who want to take possession of lands they once owned?

EMP: In cases like that they have the option of returning individually. Even if we admit (and we admit fully) that historical injustices and historical crimes took place when many nationalities were moved away from their lands involuntarily, we have to be realistic. During the time that has passed since those crimes (about half a century now), these lands have been peopled by others. It would be unfair to evict those who live there now, because it would be a repetition of the same mistakes fifty years later. We may encourage them, when they are able, to buy out pieces of land or to settle in other places, but again to evict one group and return others in its place would be unfair. Or take the Chechen auls—originally many were the Cossacks settlements. During the Revolution many of those Cossack settlements were occupied by highlanders, because many Cossacks fought against Bolsheviks. But after the revolution, as a rule, many pro-Bolshevik ethnicities were encouraged to take the lands of those ethnicities that were against the revolution. So in reality, many auls now stand on Cossack land. However, it would be wrong to evict the Chechens now to restore the Cossack settlements.

NK: This problem, obviously, should be solved by today's measures, finding options and possibilities to enable them to live their lives according to the present reality. But how can we do that practically and to the satisfaction of all?

EMP: Undoubtedly, it's a difficult problem. It must be done by democratic means, which eventually should lead to the situation, where

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

people have to find peaceful ways of living together and adjusting to one other; restoring some relations that they used to have, and not making those relationships antagonistic. There is no other option.

Today we can't really decide to evict someone in favor of some else and then destroy their monuments. We will get the same results we had after 1917 and 1991. We will do the same unfair things that we did before. Everyone who is calling for the "restoration of justice" by destructive means is creating a new injustice. And one should not do that.

NK: You mentioned the Islamic religion. I would like to ask you about the Christian and Muslim religions. As always, the Orthodox Church argues with the Vatican, insisting on its own uniqueness, while Muslims unite and become stronger and stronger.

EMP: On the whole, Christians are not killing each other, they are not really fighting. And the Orthodox have their reasons to be concerned—they disapprove of Catholic attempts to implant their religion in places where the Orthodox Church already has some roots. So most disagreements come from this. But this is not life-threatening for either party.

NK: Don't you think that Islamic countries uniting presents a danger and that this is taking place too close to the southern borders of the former Soviet Union? In Tajikistan, for example, and other southern areas close to Afghanistan. Not far from Russia. Is there a danger for Russia?

EMP: I do not think that the confrontation is between Islam and Christianity here. Let us take the former Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union, currently Central Asian states. When a wave of extremism comes from Afghanistan, the fights are not between the Christians and the Muslims; the fights are between the Islamic extremists and regular Muslims for the sacred or secular type of the state.

NK: Many in Russia say that there is a possible threat for the Orthodox Church if it is unable to resist either the Muslim dangers or the Vatican pressures.

EMP: No, Orthodoxy is not in danger.

NK: Now a question concerning the Arab-Palestinian conflict, which does not seem to be ending any time soon. How do you estimate the conflict escalation in the Middle East? What should we expect? Will it be solved one day?

EMP: There is a very dangerous development now in that part of the world. Mainly, I think it is Israel's fault. Israel has been holding a pretty tough position, trying to impose all its conditions on the Palestinians. Because of this, signing the peace agreement has been delayed and delayed. Americans, in their turn, have monopolized the process, trying to base everything on the upcoming elections in the United States in November [2000]. Russia has been practically isolated, despite the fact that we could exert a positive influence on both sides. We could have done a lot. A lot of frustration has arisen because of these conditions, again on all sides! This frustration, in fact, can be threatening, as the situation has gotten even more complicated with some religious issues. You see, it is painful for both sides, for example, when Sharon appears on land that Palestinians believe belongs to them, land on which they have mosques and sacred objects. No doubt, he did so to make a point, but he shouldn't have. Why should he demonstrate his power, insisting that he can solve all problems by means of that power? It creates bad energy and provokes a negative reaction, which often leads to irreversible results. And then we complain that the Arabs are violent. Both Palestinians and Arabs certainly have extremists among them, so we would be wise not give them a reason to be violent.

NK: What role could Russia play in helping to solve this problem?

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

EMP: Russia is already playing a more active role. While we are having this interview, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivanov, is in the Middle East. He is trying to smooth the situation, to influence both sides. Much work has been done to persuade Palestinians to delay the unilateral declaration of their state. We have a very constructive position, which is designed to help them to come to a compromise. The United States, however, thinks that because Russia is trying to smooth the edges it is actually up to something. Funny, isn't it?

It was the same situation, by the way, with Russia's position towards Iran and Saddam Hussein. Russia, then the Soviet Union, had a certain position towards those countries, and because of the Cold War this position was, understandably, in opposition to the position of the United States. When the Cold War was over, Russia could have worked together with America to smooth the situation. There were even very positive signs of cooperation during the Gulf War. However, Russia was not given a real chance, always lagging behind in the American view, always doubted, asked to prove, explain and justify itself. After 10 years it is obvious that such a shortsighted approach on the part of the United States has damaged the world situation in respect to those states.

NK: A question concerning Israel or rather the example of Israel. Is it possible to solve the Kurd problem the same way that, in 1948, the question of Israel was decided, by giving them the land and the state?

EMP: I am afraid, not. First, Kurds live in several states. They live in Iran, Iraq, Syria, some Kurds live in Russia, and they do not in any way represent a united power. For example, during the Iran-Iraq war the Iranian Kurds could not unite with the Iraqi Kurds, and in the end the Iranians fought against their government for Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi Kurds fought against Saddam Hussein but for Iran's government, i.e., Kurds were fighting on two different sides. That is, it is

impossible to solve this problem *à la* the "Palestinian war."

NK: Another question, this time about Yugoslavia. You recently said in a private conversation, "What can Milosevic do? He has to leave." And the next day he agreed and acknowledged the election results. Had you already known that he would have to leave power? What is his fate? Will the Balkans calm down one day or not?

EMP: Common sense, really. It was very important for Milosevic to accept his defeat as quickly as possible. Milosevic, however, is not the core of the problem. In fact, some Western politicians contributed to the Yugoslav problem without a clear understanding of where it might lead. What has happened in Yugoslavia now is not the end. Why? Because Montenegro, for example, would be tough to crack.

NK: Will it separate?

EMP: The President of Montenegro [Milo Djukanovic] just announced that it would be a different federation, as they might try to separate. If they do, the fate of President Kostunitsa is not clear. He is supposed to be the President of Yugoslavia, but there will be no Yugoslavia. Besides, they already have a President in Serbia [Milan Milutinovic]. Another problem is that the newly-elected president will have to deal with the situation in Kosovo, which NATO and its politics have lead down a blind alley. It is absolutely unclear what will come out of this situation. The Army of the so-called Albanian Liberation is a terrorist organization right now, and the Americans, by the way, have said so themselves. Then they changed their mind by 180 degrees as they understood that they are real terrorists. Albanians want to separate. I don't quite believe that President Kostunitsa—a Serb—will want to assist Kosovo's secession from Yugoslavia. In fact, it actually could have been easier to solve many problems with Miloshevic. He comes from the right, and therefore has no fear of

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

the strikes from the right. We [the Soviet Union] always had much better relations with the Americans, for example, when Republicans were in power.

NK: The Yugoslav problem, then, is not a Milosevic problem, and you think Kostunitsa knows it.

EMP: The Yugoslavia shake-up is still far from over.

NK: Now Belarus and Russia.

EMP: I am a very strong supporter of bringing them together, uniting and creating one state in the end. I think it would be beneficial for us, for Belorussians and for other nationalities who lived in the former Soviet Union.

NK: Why?

EMP: I do not agree with those who consider that union with Belarus will hinder Russia. During the Soviet era, Belarus was “assembly shop” for the Soviet republics. That is, a republic with good intellectual resources and hardworking manpower. This republic does not possess as many natural resources as Russia, but it is self-sufficient. And moreover, the same historical origins bind us together. Why should we live in two different states, especially, if the people, and not just small groups from both sides, want it?

NK: You mean, union with Russia is not simply Lukashenka’s idea.

EMP: Absolutely not. If a referendum were held right now, most people would vote for unification. Besides, Lukashenko does not think that it has to happen immediately, without serious deliberation. His objectives are to secure Belorussian independence, while at the same time developing closer ties with Russia. And we agree with him. By the way, it took Western Europe a long time to reach an agreement on the common currency, and it’s still not completely finalized. Denmark

had a referendum, and although the state is an EU member, the common currency was not approved. These processes are very complicated, and the main point is that we must move forward toward unification. Then, perhaps, Ukraine too will want closer ties.

NK: Is Russia satisfied with Lukashenka as President of Belarus, since he supports unification?

EMP: What does it mean—satisfied or not satisfied? If the Belorussians are satisfied with him, he should satisfy us as well. The majority of Belorussians support him. There are going to be elections there soon [October 15, 2000] and I am sure they will be democratic. He promised that, and that is true—absolutely all parties participate in the election process. They can also have their observers at the voting districts. They have the right to count or recount votes and provide their own report of the results. Two of Lukashenka’s rivals are under investigation right now, but they are official candidates and they will participate in the elections. When I met with him recently, he told me that he would like them to run for election, so no one can claim that it was not a democratic election.

NK: It would not be the same sort of elections as those that just took place in Yugoslavia, that is, with unclear results?

EMP: No. In Yugoslavia, believe me, it was not that bad either. In every country, I assure you, there are always a few instances of election fraud. I think the Yugoslav opposition made a major mistake. It was necessary to have a second round of voting there. Then no one could have said the elections were not legitimate, and they would have certainly won the second round. A 10 percent difference would be more than sufficient in the second round to prove their victory. If the re-elections had taken place within one week or so, the situation would not have changed a bit, and the results would have been more than just legal.

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

NK: And, if I may, I would like to ask you one last question about the fate of Russians living in other states. They have been Russians all their lives, they represented a big powerful state, and now they are citizens of states that are not always favorable to the Russians. How does the government plan to help them, if it does at all?

EMP: We ought to help them. First, of course, we should not push them to leave those "other states." Why should we lose our influence in this manner, I mean cultural and so on? And then, it is necessary to assure that their legal situation is stable, that they are not treated as second-class citizens. We are doing a lot through our governmental channels and, in my assessment, we do a good job in this regard. If we continue working in this direction, both the countries where they live, and the Russian people in those countries, will

be loyal to each other. At the same time we face a very important problem: 25 million Russians stayed in the republics of the former Soviet Union after its collapse. Surely, if some of them want to return we would like them to go to places other than Moscow in order to populate those parts of Russia that are not sufficiently populated, such as, for example, the Ural area, where the total population is only 18 million. I think if we provide emigrants with good enough living conditions and reasonable comfort they will go to these areas. The United States became great after they populated their virgin lands.

NK: Thank you.

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