

Tuesday, December 19, 2006. Issue 3564. Page 10.

Political Elites and a Broken Melting Pot

By Konstantin Sonin

Political analysts usually start looking to political elites for action when a decision must be made that would not garner majority support if put to a democratic vote. It is entirely possible that the majority of Russians would not like to see their country turn into a melting pot. Or, to be more accurate, into a vacuum cleaner gathering up talented individuals from neighboring countries, and at the same time a blast furnace in which the talents of those same people become part of a uniform culture or science. Economists tell us that most people are afraid of the increased competition that talented immigrants represent -- competition for jobs, housing and social benefits. Sociologists explain that what is at issue is an unwillingness on the part of the majority to exchange local or national values for more universal ones. Political scientists point out how useful it is for politicians to exploit the "us vs. them" dichotomy.

All of these points are accurate. For this reason the question of a "political melting pot" is a policy question for elites, who are unlikely to find support for an effective policy from a majority of the population. This issue was much easier to address for American elites because, as a country of immigrants, it was much less difficult to generate broad public support.

Russia's political elite has been struggling with this question for a long time. Prior to the 20th century, Russia was more of a vacuum cleaner. St. Petersburg, for example, attracted some of Europe's brightest scientific minds. But the 20th century was more like a melting pot, with secular education becoming accessible to a wide spectrum of the population, thereby underpinning the development of a universal culture.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia retained its potential to act as a center of gravity -- not in the geopolitical sense, but in the real sense, on the level of real individuals. Moreover, the new nationalism of elites in former Soviet republics worked in Russia's favor, compelling more capable individuals to come to this country. And Moscow coped with the fusion of cultures to a certain degree. It was this diversity, rather than mineral resources, that constituted Russia's competitive advantage.

Whatever was maintained during the period of decentralization under President Boris Yeltsin's leadership, however, has been threatened by President Vladimir Putin's focus on centralization. In 2006, an event occurred that, at best, accentuated the role of Russia's political elites and provided an opportunity for contemplating what it was. At worst, it represented a step toward the disintegration of the country. I don't mean the events at Kondopoga. What happened in Karelia and the national reaction that followed were simply characteristic episodes in the life of a cultural melting pot.

It is the events within Russia connected with Georgia that represent a much more serious matter. In hindsight, what happened is clear: Georgia's aggressive policy angered the Russian leadership, which decided to bring economic pressure to bear on its neighbor. Afterward, it seems to have finally occurred to someone that support for sanctions could be gained by playing on ethnic divisions within Russia. It's of much the same character as the fool in the Russian folk tale who kills a fly on his forehead with an ax. And thanks to the efforts of propagandists, who are clearly too lazy to pull out a map and recognize that the country doesn't end at Voronezh and the Urals, the country's progress was stunted by at least a decade in the span of just a few days.

There are signs, however, that some people in high places are beginning to realize that major errors have been made during the Georgian episode. This is important because if the political elite don't think about how to maintain the melting pot, then we don't really have any political elites at all.

Konstantin Sonin is a professor at the New Economic School/CEFIR.