

RIGHT-WING NATIONALISM IN RUSSIA

135

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OR A POLITICAL AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE?

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- Debates on nationalism acquired a great deal of significance in Russia in the summer of 2013, with the activities of right-wing nationalists increasing during this period too.
- Modern Russian nationalism has its roots in anti-immigrant sentiments, mainly as a consequence of failed nation-state building in the post-Soviet period.
- Most right-wing organisations are marginalised, with membership and support relatively low. But the anti-immigrant ideas which these organisations propagate currently enjoy high levels of support in Russian society.
- Over the past eight years, the activities of right-wing nationalists have been largely limited to ‘the streets’, due to the lack of opportunities open to nationalist parties to participate in electoral processes.
- The prospects for Russia’s right-wing nationalist organisations will depend on the regime’s approach to ‘illegal’ immigration, but also on the state’s overall policy towards right-wing nationalism. Three scenarios are seen to be possible at this juncture: ‘marginalised nationalists’, ‘underground nationalists’, and ‘incorporated nationalists’.

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Introduction

During the summer of 2013, the nationalism debate in Russia gained enormous significance. There are a number of reasons for this, but four stand out as being particularly relevant, including: the race riots in Pugachev; Aleksei Navalny's participation in the Moscow mayoral election; the state's efforts to combat 'illegal' immigration; and the so-called 'Russian clean-ups' (*russkie zachistki*) involving extremist nationalists.¹

The first of the above relates to Pugachev, a small Russian town in the Samara region with a population of around 41,000. Race riots flared up on July 7, following the death of a local citizen during a fight with an ethnic Chechen, with protestors subsequently demanding the expulsion of all immigrants from the North Caucasus. During the course of several days, most adults in the town took to the streets, brandishing placards inscribed with both anti-Caucasus and nationalistic slogans.

Right-wing nationalist organisations were quick to try to capitalise on this incident, instantly labelling Pugachev a 'Russian riot'. One prominent leader of the St. Petersburg nationalists, Nikolai Bondarik, attempted to travel to Pugachev in order to lead events, but was duly arrested by police and detained for two weeks. The incident in Pugachev is by no means an isolated one, and is the fourth time since 2005 that the killing of a local by 'strangers' has resulted in race riots, with nationalist slogans conspicuous in each case. On August 9, 2013, police in St. Petersburg dispersed a 'public gathering against ethnic crime' (*narodny skhod protiv etnicheskoi prestupnosti*) organised by nationalists in response to the murder of a local man (the suspects in this case were Uzbeks), with participants claiming that this event was a continuation of what was started in Pugachev.

The Moscow mayoral election that took place on September 8 is a second factor underlying the heightened significance of the nationalism debate in the summer of 2013. The main challenger in this

election, Aleksei Navalny, is not only an opposition leader, an anti-corruption activist and a fierce opponent of the Putin regime, but also a nationalist who, in the past, has participated in the so-called 'Russian March' – an annual procession that takes place in several Russian cities and which typically involves a range of nationalist groups, including extremists. Navalny's electoral campaign for the post of Moscow mayor emphasised, among other things, the fight against illegal immigration and included a proposal to establish a visa regime with the former Soviet Central Asian republics. These demands are now popular among right-wing nationalists.

A third factor behind the increased significance of nationalism in the summer of 2013 relates to the official response to the problem of illegal immigration in Russia. Early August saw targeted police raids in many Russian cities aimed at locating and detaining illegal migrants. The formal pretext for these raids was an incident that occurred in a Moscow market where a police officer was injured attempting to arrest a rape suspect. The latter was from Dagestan and was allegedly assisted by members of the local Dagestani community.

Despite the fact that Dagestan is a part of the Russian Federation (North Caucasus), meaning that Dagestanis living and working in Moscow are in no way 'illegal', the authorities reacted by intensifying their efforts in combatting illegal immigration, notably in market places in Russia's capital. Hundreds of people were arrested in Moscow and the country's first illegal migrant camp was established in the city. These raids were then replicated in other Russian cities.

The fourth and final reason for the increased salience of the debate on nationalism in the summer of 2013 concerns the worrying occurrence of a number of so-called 'Russian clean-ups'. These incidents began at the end of July 2013 when right-wing nationalists in St. Petersburg, sometimes armed with baseball bats and other weapons, descended on market stalls operated by non-ethnic Russians, demanding to see work permits. If met with refusal, they would then proceed to damage goods and disrupt business. These acts of lawlessness were often justified on the grounds that those involved were 'helping the law enforcement agencies do their job' and, as a result, the police would often detain market workers and

1 The word *zachistka* has a military connotation in the Russian language. It is mainly used to describe a set of actions aimed at eliminating terrorists or criminals from a certain geographical area, either by arrest or liquidation.

ignore the nationalists. But, as these acts became more regular, the police took action and arrested around 20 organisers, although these ‘clean-ups’ have since occurred in other Russian cities.

In short, the debate on nationalism and the activities of right-wing nationalists managed to make their way to the top of the political agenda in Russia in the summer of 2013. The central element of this debate is the fight against illegal immigration, which has now become a main programmatic component for some of Russia’s largest right-wing nationalists. Consequently, this topic is extremely sensitive for a majority of Russians, with some public opinion polls suggesting that up to 74% of respondents believe that the arrival of a large number of immigrants is bad for the country and just over half (53%) of respondents showing support for strengthening existing migration laws.²

However, the reaction of both the public and the authorities shows that there is often little distinction made between ‘immigrants’ who are foreign nationals and ‘internal migrants’ from Russia’s ethnic republics, notably the North Caucasus. The race riots in Pugachev and the reaction of the authorities to the aforementioned incident in the Moscow market are evidence of the fact that even Russian citizens are considered ‘aliens’ and ‘illegal’ in many parts of the country.

This paper argues that one cannot say with any certainty that the recent upsurge in anti-immigrant attitudes in Russia is just a temporary ‘by-product’ of the present election cycle that gave this issue extra relevance in the summer of 2013, or whether it is an aspect of a longer-term political agenda on the part of both the regime and right-wing nationalists. As such, the real threat of Russian nationalism remains open to debate.

Why is Russian nationalism anti-immigrant?

In terms of understanding the rise of anti-immigrant attitudes in contemporary Russia, one may identify a group of main contributory factors, including

2 ‘Dobro pozhalovat’ – ili ‘postoronnim vkhod vospreshchen’?, available at: <http://weiom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=%20114341> (accessed 1 September 2013).

failed attempts at nation-state building in the post-Soviet period, the Putin regime’s attitude towards right-wing nationalism, as well as public distrust of the police and law enforcement agencies.

Russia as a failed nation state

Contemporary Russia is an example of a failed nation state, as opposed to a failed state. The main explanation for this development includes the legacy of Soviet federalism as well as the lack of political will on the part of political elites to create a civic nation in post-Soviet Russia. For much of the 1990s, Russia was an asymmetric federation, where ‘national’ or ‘ethnic republics’ (currently 21 out of Russia’s 83 federal units) enjoyed a special legal status and so wielded greater power vis-à-vis other, non-ethnic territorial units. This situation was largely a consequence of the Soviet system of ethno-federalism, in which only those ethno-territorial units had rights to a limited autonomy.³

In addition, the conflicts occurring in the early 1990s between different power centres, including Russian and Soviet presidents (1990–1991) and later between the Russian president and the Russian parliament (1992–1993), also played a crucial role in the emergence of asymmetrical federalism. During these conflicts, each power centre tried to gain the support of the ethnic republics by granting them new rights. Moreover, as the special status of these ethnic republics was justified in terms of the ‘right to self-determination’, the basis for proto-nations in the form of ethnic republics became rooted in Russia.

As a result, the idea of the Russian nation as a united political community was marginalised in the early post-Soviet period. However, several different representations of a “we-community” were nonetheless forming, including not only those communities within the ethnic republics already mentioned, but

3 The Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was divided into autonomous republics, autonomous oblasts and districts (okrugs), krais, oblasts, and republican cities (Moscow and Leningrad). All autonomies (republics, oblasts and okrugs) were formed according to the ethnic principle, while krais and oblasts were administrative territories governed from the centre. Almost all autonomies had references to the ‘main’ ethnic group in their titles.

also the community of others, mainly ethnic Russians in the remaining regions. In addition, many ethnic Russians did not have a clear idea of ‘nation’ similar to that which existed in the ethnic republics. According to public opinion polls at that time, almost half of all respondents felt frustrated at the collapse of the Soviet Union and considered themselves part of the ‘Soviet people’, but not part of the Russian nation.⁴

Nevertheless, some attempts at building a civic nation in Russia were made in the 1990s, in particular by Russia’s first president, Boris Yeltsin, in the period 1994–1998. Yeltsin, in his first address to the Russian Federal Assembly in February 1994, noted that the idea of a civic nation already existed in the Russian Constitution and so representatives of the political elite started to use the term ‘Russian citizens’ (*rossiiyane*)⁵. A special competition was even organised by the state newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta* inviting the general public to suggest the basis for a new Russian ‘national idea’. The second half of the 1990s also saw several attempts by officials and opposition politicians to fill this perceived void.

However, in the 1990s, these attempts at elaborating a national idea for the country were largely unsuccessful and so the stage was set for Yeltsin’s successor, Vladimir Putin, when he assumed the post of president in 2000. In fact, Putin started from the premise that there was no need to look for a new national idea because one already existed, and that the basis for national consolidation, according to Putin, lay in the achievements of the Soviet period.⁶ The return of the old Soviet national anthem, albeit with some changes, and the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the USSR’s victory in WWII aptly illustrate this way of thinking. Yet, in the mid-2000s, it became evident that Russia was moving further away from the idea of civic nation-building

and was instead promoting the Russian nation on the basis of Orthodox culture alone.⁷

The regime’s attitude towards nationalism

The attitudes of the Putin regime towards radical or extreme forms of nationalism are contradictory. From one perspective, many right-wing nationalists now have access to state-owned media outlets and have established platforms for transmitting their ideas. Moreover, some have even been incorporated into the Russian higher education system.⁸ The regime has also promoted some nationalists to senior posts in government institutions. For example, Dmitry Rogozin, a figure active in nationalist organisations and parties, is now a deputy prime minister in the federal government.

But from another perspective, the Putin regime has deliberately limited the opportunity structure for the formation of new nationalist political parties, and by mid-2013 only three were registered by the Ministry of Justice – ‘Motherland’ (*Rodina*), ‘the Russian People’s Union’ (*Rossiiskii Obshchenarodny Soyuz*) and ‘the Great Fatherland Party’ (*Partiya Velikoe Otechestvo*). Other nationalist movements attempting to gain legal status as political parties have so far been denied registration.

The same kind of ambiguity can also be seen in other areas. For example, the regime seems interested in building its ideology on the basis of Russian Orthodoxy, which is also a key programmatic element for many nationalist organisations. The new state holiday established in 2005 (the National Unity Day) falls on 4 November and coincides with the feast day of the Russian Orthodox icon Our Lady of Kazan. Initially, this holiday was intended to mark the liberation of Moscow in 1612 at the end of the ‘Time of Troubles’, but in recent years increasing value has been attached to the religious component of this

4 Gorshkov, K. M., Tikhonova E. N. (eds) (2005) *Rossiiskaya identichnost v usloviakh transformatsii: opyt sotsiologicheskogo analiza*, Moscow, 78–79.

5 *Rossiiane* is a term which refers to the civic identity of people as opposed to *russkie* (“Russians”), which refers to their ethnic identity.

6 See Putin’s first presidential address to the Russian Federal Assembly in 2000.

7 The key element of ‘Orthodox culture’ is Orthodox morality, which includes anti-LGBT and anti-atheistic attitudes, and is based on traditional social norms. The infusion of Orthodoxy into the Russian idea of nation is not new, but was officially supported during nation-building in the late Russian Empire.

8 Umland, A. (2013): New Extreme Right-Wing Intellectual Circles in Russia: The Anti-Orange Committee, the Isborsk Club and the Florian Geyer Club, in: *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 135/, 5 August.

holiday. The 2012 trial of members of the Pussy Riot punk group, together with regular appearances by the president, prime minister and other officials in Orthodox churches are signs not only of a merging of the Russian Orthodox Church and the regime, but also of the attempt at forming a national idea on the basis of Russian Orthodox culture.

However, there are also indications that the regime is keen to keep nationalist initiatives 'from below' under control, and this is particularly evident with the previously mentioned National Unity Day holiday. Since 2005, nationalist Russian Marches have become an integral part of this holiday, and on 4 November 2012 they took place in 46 cities, attracting 12,000 (according to police estimates) to 32,000 (according to the organizers) participants. But in most cases these marches are not granted formal permission by the authorities and the police often arrest those in attendance.

Ultimately, the approach taken by the authorities to the issue of nationalism is ambiguous, but also cautious. Even though the slogan 'Russia for Russians' has a great deal of support among the populace, Putin has publicly condemned this attitude. In 2009, he remarked that "those who say 'Russia for Russians' are either dishonest people who do not understand what they are saying and are just plain idiots, or they are provocateurs".⁹ This is despite the fact that opinion polls at that time indicated that the slogan 'Russia for Russians' had the support of around 54% of citizens.

Distrust in the law enforcement agencies

The majority of Russian citizens view the police and law enforcement agencies in a negative light. According to polls conducted in 2013, 55% of respondents agreed that the police are unable to protect them and their families from criminals, and 56% of respondents said they did not trust the police.¹⁰ At the same time, a 2012 opinion poll found that 71% of respondents were sure that immigrants

contributed to rising crime.¹¹ Thus, a majority of Russian citizens view immigrants as a threat and do not believe that the authorities are able to guarantee their safety. In these circumstances, it is no surprise that Russians consider a cap on immigration (support for this move increased from 45% in 2002 to 70% in 2012) and extraditing illegal immigrants (this was supported by 64% of respondents in 2012) as effective measures to increase their personal safety.¹²

In fact, popular support for the idea of 'Russia for Russians' as well as support for anti-immigrant attitudes among the majority of Russian citizens looks quite logical when viewed against the backdrop of the prevailing socio-political context in contemporary Russia. In a situation where ordinary Russians distrust the police and in the absence of serious alternatives to the ethno-cultural version of 'nation', it is almost impossible to expect that the division between 'we' and 'others' can be sustained through other criteria. This also explains the fact that it is not only immigrants, namely citizens of other states, that are considered 'strangers' and 'illegal' by Russians, but also many Russian citizens or those natives of Russia's ethnic republics, in particular those from the North Caucasus.

Right-wing nationalists and their political activity

In the post-Soviet period, right-wing nationalist organisations have largely failed to attract any kind of mass support. As a result, the bulk of their activity is known only to human rights activists and the police, rather than to the wider public. Nevertheless, some organisations have managed to gain publicity.

In the 1990s, most nationalist organisations failed to gain any electoral success of note. This was despite the relatively large number of nationalist organisations, occasional political visibility, ideological diversity and the relatively non-restrictive attitude on the part of the authorities. One explanation for the electoral failure of right-wing nationalists was their inability to coordinate their efforts during the pre-election period in order to enhance their

9 *Tsitaty iz Vladimira Putina*, available at: <http://www.v-v-putin.ru/citations.html> (accessed 1 September 2013).

10 *Indeks doveriya politsii*, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/04-03-2013/indeks-doveriya-politsii> (accessed 1 September 2013).

11 *Obshchestvennoe mnenie - 2012*, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/books/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-2012> (accessed 1 September 2013).

12 *Ibid.*

prospects of success. In addition, since the end of the 1990s, right-wing extremists have found themselves increasingly under pressure from the authorities and have typically found it impossible to register their organisation as political parties, thus preventing them from competing in elections.

In the 2000s, the number of right-wing organisations in Russia continued to grow. However, their support, as a rule, was insignificant. Of the six largest right-wing organisations which existed in Russia in the mid-2000s, only one was new – the Movement against Illegal Immigration, or DPNI (*Dvizhenie Protiv Nelegalnoi Immigratsii*) – with the other five established in the 1990s. Among those organisations created in the 2000s, some were clearly extremist in nature (for example, the National Socialist Society; Format 18), with some utilising the issue of illegal immigration as the basis for their ideology. The most well-known of these organisations was the above-mentioned DPNI, created in 2002 and banned under anti-extremism legislation in 2011. Initially, DPNI suggested that it was helping the authorities combat illegal immigration, but the radical measures used by DPNI members eventually led to its official ban.

Overall, the relations between the regime and right-wing organisations are fluid, not least because of the lack of consolidation on the right wing of the political spectrum. Some nationalist organisations support Putin, and so tend to avoid pressure from the authorities. Initiatives on the part of nationalist intellectuals, such as the Izborsk Club, are good examples. However, there are also nationalist organisations that are in opposition to the regime, notably the National Bolshevik Party (NBP). NBP members, it should be noted, helped establish the civil movement ‘Strategy 31’ to protect freedom of assembly in Russia.

The activities of those organisations which do not support the regime are, in many cases, suspended by the authorities. This is typically achieved through two main mechanisms. The first is to recognise their activities as ‘extremist’ according to anti-extremism legislation, the second to restrict access to the political system by other legal means. The first mechanism is used to suspend the activities of those extremist nationalist organisations which are not only legitimately criticised by human rights groups, but also have criminal links too. However, this same mechanism is also applied to those organisations which are

obviously opponents of the regime. For example, the aforementioned NBP had its activities suspended in 2005 by a court decision and two years later it was banned altogether as an extremist organisation. The second mechanism is used to prevent the emergence of political parties not under the control of the Kremlin. It typically involves denying nationalist organisations registration as political parties or cancelling existing registration due to a failure to meet some formal criteria outlined in the Law on Parties.

In view of the lack of opportunities to express themselves in the electoral arena, the only way for nationalists to become visible to the wider public is to organise street events. However, any ‘mass action’ orchestrated by organisations or movements which are not in some way connected to the regime are more often prevented by the authorities. In sum, opportunities to express political views in public, including nationalism, are strictly limited in contemporary Russia. Nevertheless, a number of nationalist organisations have managed to organise public events, although most tend to be dispersed by the police. In recent years, the most active participants in these events have been representatives of the former NBP, united within the Other Russia (*Drugaya Rossiya*) organisation.

In recent years, extremist nationalist groups have tried to maximise their limited opportunities to gain public visibility, including participation in the above-mentioned Russian Marches, but also in other mass actions. As such, the peak of right-wing nationalist activity was observed during the protests that followed the December 2011 parliamentary election and the March 2012 presidential election. Not only were representatives of extremist nationalist organisations present in these protests, but they were also included in the so-called opposition Coordination Council which was formed in October 2012 from elements of this protest movement. But, as some experts have noted, the participation of nationalists in the protests that followed the December 2011/March 2012 elections declined towards the end of 2012.¹³

13 *Gosduma ukazala pravoradikalam novye tseli: Ksenofobiya i radikal'niy natsionalizm i protivodeistvie im v Rossii v pervoi polovine 2013 goda*, available at: <http://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/publications/2013/07/d27507/> (accessed 1 September 2013).

The events of the summer of 2013 provided right-wing nationalists with a new opportunity to raise their public visibility, and as a result many extremist nationalist groups have capitalised on the events. In consideration of the conditions currently prevailing in Russia, the population's sympathy will likely go to those able to suggest and implement effective measures to combat illegal immigration and, in some cases, even extreme nationalists may score political points.

Conclusion: three scenarios for the future

In my opinion, there are three scenarios that capture the future possibilities open to right-wing nationalists in Russia. Each of these scenarios depends on the approach of the regime towards the question of immigration, as well as the approach of the nationalists themselves.

'Marginalised nationalists'

If the authorities persist in their attempt to curb illegal immigration, give legal status to immigrant camps and establish them in most of Russia's regions, but at the same time continue to prevent 'Russian clean-ups' from occurring and deny nationalist political parties registration, then Russian nationalists will likely see their position further marginalised. This kind of political agenda could result in the regime 'privatising' the anti-illegal immigrant discourse, with the authorities presenting themselves as the only legitimate defender of the public's interests in this sphere.

As such, those actors who try to emphasise immigration as an issue and as an important part of their political programme may lose potential public support and could be forced to look for new ideas. If this scenario transpires, then any politician or organisation espousing nationalist ideas, either in opposition to the regime or otherwise, will be of little interest to the authorities: they will simply be viewed as competitors trying to increase their own popularity at the Kremlin's expense.

Yet, realising this scenario will demand significant investment and financial resources, which in the present economic climate, are very limited. Ultimately, any huge state expenditure in this area may be counter-productive and decrease the popularity

of the regime. Moreover, this scenario implies increasing policy coordination between different state institutions, such as the police, the Federal Migration Service, social departments, and so forth, which is complicated and fraught with difficulty. In this respect, this scenario is seen as unlikely.

'Underground nationalists'

If the present state-led fight against illegal immigration is part of the regime's plan to disarm its political opponents at a time of an important election campaign (the Moscow mayoral election, but also the other regional elections in September 2013), then we may see a hardening official line towards right-wing nationalist organisations in the future. The important element in this scenario is the persecution of extremist nationalists by the regime within the broader context of widespread anti-immigrant attitudes among ordinary Russians. In other words, the regime will not persevere with its fight against illegal immigration, but at the same time, it will not give any opportunity to other political actors to become 'defenders' of the public on this issue.

However, this scenario could also lead to increasing opposition on the part of right-wing nationalists towards the regime. Extremist nationalist organisations will likely switch to an 'underground mode' and will actively participate in events organised by other elements of the regime opposition, using them as an opportunity to enhance their public visibility. This scenario may offer a short-term advantage to the regime, but it could be dangerous in the long term if anti-immigrant attitudes continue to gain support in Russian society. Despite the dangers, however, this scenario is seen as likely in view of the present political and social context.

'Incorporated nationalists'

A third scenario may see the regime try to minimise its own costs by incorporating a large number of right-wing nationalist organisations into the political system. But for this to happen a further easing of registration requirements for political parties will be needed. The influx of a large number of small, right-wing parties into the party and electoral system will serve to further fragment this end of the political spectrum and generate conflict among these new parties.

The advantage is that this scenario would allow the regime to avoid wasting valuable resources in meeting the anti-immigrant demands of Russian society. In this scenario, the electorate will have a chance to vote for the champions of immigrant-free Russia, but these small parties will only absorb popular dissatisfaction without changing the political and social reality. The authorities could jettison costly state-run programmes aimed at combating illegal immigration simply by allowing the return of this issue to the nationalist political agenda.

In this scenario, the majority of right-wing nationalists would probably make a deal with the regime and would try to adapt to the formal framework of the political system. It is unlikely that any nationalist organisation would repeat the success of the Hungarian Jobbik party or even the Russian party Motherland (*Rodina*) in the parliamentary election of December 2003.¹⁴ However, this approach has its dangers. The registration of nationalist parties may lead to the formation of coalitions rather than the small, controllable parties envisaged. However, although this scenario may prove dangerous for the regime in the mid- to long-term perspective, from my point of view, it does seem likely.

Given the possibility that all three scenarios may come to pass, the prognosis is difficult, and it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty whether the present salience of nationalism is just a by-product of electoral competition or evidence of a larger, political agenda on the part of both the regime and extreme nationalists. Ultimately, the unpredictability of the regime and the ability (or not) of right-wing nationalists to use the opportunities now open to them, make understanding the threat posed by Russian right-wing nationalism a difficult and challenging task.

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¹⁴ Jobbik became the third biggest faction in the Hungarian parliament following the 2010 parliamentary election.