

Russia's Spreading Nationalist Infection

by Andreas Umland

Abstract: *The recent electoral upheaval in Moscow and the Kremlin's response to it have led to a wave of xenophobic jingoism, and started another cycle of penetration of Russian public discourse with ethnocentrist and conspirological ideas. Russian officials have been using more ardently than hitherto anti-Western ideas, and some high posts are now occupied by outspoken propagandists of an alleged US-inspired conspiracy against Russia. While these developments are worrying, a success of the current Russian attempt to re-democratize will eventually imply a new rapprochement between Moscow and the West.*

Reports on recent developments in domestic Russian politics have, after years of depressing news on the growth of Putin's authoritarianism, become more encouraging again. Reminiscent of the perestroika period, the Russian state appears currently to be in a phase of gradual liberalization which may, like in the late 1980s, eventually lead to a re-democratization. In the 1990s, the emerging Russian proto-democracy was under the threat of being overthrown by the Soviet Union's old elites. Ultimately, this danger materialized with Putin's neo-Soviet restoration since 1999.

The currently liberalizing tendencies are also in danger of being reversed by anti-democratic forces. The most worrying anti-liberal force today is the growing post-Soviet ultra-nationalist movement with deep links into both Moscow's governmental institutions and Russian civil society. The various radically nationalist groupings and circles have so far been fractured and often more engaged in quarrels among themselves than in challenging their (also fractured) anti-nationalist opponents within and outside the regime. Yet, the currently evolving democratic movement could provide an incentive for the various Russian extremely right-wing forces to consolidate. Should this happen, Russia could again become a major matter of concern for international security.

In distinction to the 1990s, Russian nationalist ideas are now prominent in the political mainstream, and nationalists are well-represented in Moscow's establishment. Putin himself belongs to this creed and recently admitted: "I am a Russian nationalist, too."¹ Moreover, ethnocentric, xeno- as well as homophobic, and neo-imperial arguments have become part and parcel of everyday political discourse, on both the elite and mass level. Many, if not most political discussions in Russia today end up with speculations about the nature, fate, role and future of the Russian nation. Where did the fixation on the Russian question come from?

Being neither fully European nor Asian, Russia is in a geopolitically difficult position, has a long, insecure border with China, and is still experiencing syndromes of a post-imperial trauma. 25 million Russians are living outside the borders of the Russian Federation. With over 12 million immigrants, Russia is the second biggest recipient of inward migration in the world after the US, and a large portion of it is unregulated or/and illegal. For instance, 700,000 Tajik citizens are legally registered to work in Russia, yet there are estimates that up to 2 million Tajiks may be living in Russia in total.²

While factors such as these have played their role in the post-Soviet rise of Russian nationalism, its recent upsurge appears a result of purposeful manipulation rather than objective problems of the Russian population. In reaction to the well-known electoral uprisings or Colour Revolutions in some post-communist countries (Serbia 1999, Georgia 2003, Kyrgyzstan 2005), and especially responding to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in late 2004, the Russian government has since 2005 increased its propagandistic use of state-directed mass media and civil society. In particular, the Kremlin

¹ As quoted in: Leokadia Drobizheva, "Most Russians won't support nationalists," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 21 February 2012.

² Tom Balmforth, "Putin's unlikeliest supporters: Tajik migrant workers," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 25 February 2012.

strengthened the already present anti-American and conspiriologial bias of television reporting as well as debates, and created an array of novel pseudo-civic structures designed to spread nationalist ideas and an isolationist world view. These initiatives, implemented in 2005, included not only new TV stations like the Orthodox religious "Spas," pro-military "Zvezda," and English-language "Russian Today" channels, or print outlets like the misnamed "Evropa" Press - a publisher of pro-Putin pseudo-academic texts. Within months after the Orange Revolution, the Kremlin created several pro-governmental, state-financed new youth organizations like "Nashi" (Ours), "Molodaya gvardiya" (Young Guard), Evraziiskii soyuz molodezhy (Eurasian Youth Movement), "Mestnye" (The Locals) or "Rossiya Molodaya" (Young Russia) that have been conducting numerous defamation and intimidation campaigns against supposed enemies of Russia, including liberal politicians, modern artists, Western diplomats, non-submissive journalists, and pro-democratic civic activists. 2005 saw also the establishment of the so-called Public Chamber as the Presidential Administration's transmission belt to pro-governmental civic groups and intellectual circles, and the introduction of the Day of National Unity on November 4th that has since been hijacked by the neo-fascist fringe's notorious Russian Marches. Later on, the government created further propaganda institutions including the infamous presidential commission "against the falsification of history to the detriment of the Russian Federation," and a so-called Institute for Democracy and Cooperation with offices in Paris and New York and the task to criticize Western democratic practices.

A particular escalation of Russian anti-Westernism happened during and after the August 2008 Russian-Georgian War which also saw, for the first time, a rapid decline in the Russian public's usually positive opinion of the European Union. In fact, the West had already been shocked the year before by Putin's anti-American speech at the February 2007 Munich Security Conference. Yet another scandalous public appearance of the old and new President of the RF in the same year may have been even more consequential: In his parliamentary election address of November 2007, Putin previewed his later strategy of identifying Russian democratic oppositionists as national traitors by calling Russia's extra-systemic liberals those "who like jackals are skulking around foreign embassies."³ In his 2012 presidential election speech at the Luzhniki Stadium, Putin continued this line warning that: "We won't allow anybody to interfere with our internal affairs and we won't allow anybody to impose his will on us because we have a will of our own!" He has repeatedly portrayed the confrontation between his regime and the protest movement as one between patriots and foreign agents. And Putin has apparently had some success with this:⁴ A recent survey showed that 23 percent of those Russians polled believed that the 2011 December protesters were paid by the United States, while 43 percent had difficulty answering the question.⁵

Several high positions have been filled, during the last weeks, by known anti-Western political spokesmen. Alexey Pushkov, host of the rabidly anti-American television show "Postscriptum," has been selected to head the International Affairs Committee of the State Duma. The prolific nationalist politician and hawkish former Russian Ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin was promoted to Deputy Prime Minister in charge of defense in late December 2011. Having assumed the post, Rogozin in January 2012 speculated that the United States could launch a simultaneous, "lightening-speed, massive and paralyzing" missile attack against all of Russia's land-based nuclear weapons.⁶ In apparent response to this and similar supposed foreign threats, Putin has announced to spend during the next years \$772 billion on 400 new intercontinental ballistic missiles, 2,300 late-generation tanks, 600 modern combat aircraft (including 100 military-purpose space planes), eight nuclear ballistic missile

³ As quoted in: Andreas Umland, "Russia at the Abyss," *Russia Profile*, 30 November 2007.

⁴ As quoted in: Sergei L. Loiko, "Vladimir Putin evokes enemies of Russia in campaign speech," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 2012.

⁵ "Rossiiane ob aktsiyakh protesta i proshedshikh vyborakh," *Levada-tsentr*, 28 December 2012, <http://www.levada.ru/28-12-2011/rossiyane-ob-aktsiyakh-protesta-i-proshedshikh-vyborakh>.

⁶ Michael Bohm, "Putin chasing imaginary American ghosts," *The Moscow Times*, 10 February 2012.

submarines, 50 surface warships as well as an inventory of artillery, air defense systems, and about 17,000 military vehicles.⁷

In February 2012, Rogozin was allowed to create a new quasi-party, the so-called Volunteer Movement of the All-Russia People's Front in support of the army, the navy and the defense-industrial complex. Rogozin, at the Movement's founding congress, set the tone by complaining "how very mean and disgusting this liberal anti-Russian propaganda really is." Putin sent a message of greeting to the congress participants, saying the creation of a new organization was an "exceptionally important and useful business." The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, also addressed the congress, and warned that, even with a functioning economy and army, the country may lose "freedom, sovereignty and independence" as there are "well-organized and coordinated information flows" working against the masses. Kirill lamented that "historical Russia, which we had called the Soviet Union, fell apart without a single shot fired, and the once great country is no more." Today, according to Patriarch Kirill, sinister forces are still exerting "an information impact is inside the country and outside it." Mass media and the Internet are propagating an ideology of "consumption and richness." Kirill concluded "that these forces may come to power in Russia some day. I am praying to God for protection from deceitful, ugly, disgusting and slanderous propaganda."⁸

As Putin and his entourage have been engaging in election campaigning and whipping up fears of foreign subversion, the public presence of Russia's prominent ultra-nationalist theorists and publicists is increasing further. Anti-Western conspirologists are getting more and more exposure via widely watched TV shows. Some of the most radical and illustrious among them have been joining forces during the last two months within a so-called Anti-Orange Committee. The new grouping treats Ukraine's Orange Revolution as an anti-Russian Western plot, and has set as its goal the prevention of a similar scenario in Russia. It is led by the prolific political publicist and flamboyant TV host Sergey Kurginyan who has brought together, in the Committee, a "Who is Who" of Russian anti-Westernism. The Anti-Orange Committee includes, among others, two of Russia's most well-known and ardently anti-American TV journalists, Mikhail Leont'ev and Maksim Shevchenko, the notorious apologist of fascism and Moscow State University Professor Aleksandr Dugin, as well as the founding father of the post-Soviet Russian extreme right and editor of the most important ultra-nationalist weekly newspaper *Zavtra* (Tomorrow) Aleksandr Prokhanov. The self-assigned task of the Committee is to promote an ideological innovation of Putin's regime in ultra-nationalist terms, and its reconstitution as a Eurasian empire. While the Committee is skeptical towards the ability of Putin to carry out such a transformation, it still supports the current authorities in their confrontation with the pro-democratic protesters who are seen to be, consciously or unconsciously, serving nefarious foreign powers, and be engaged in undermining Russian national identity, interests and sovereignty.

While the recent upsurge of democratic sentiments in Russia gives reasons for hope, it may also intensify the already apparent rapprochement between Russia's systemic and anti-systemic radically nationalist forces. In spite of such risks, the partial political opening that the recent protests have brought about creates opportunities for a more rational and balanced as well as less conspirological and Manichean public discourse. Ultimately, a Russian re-democratization would cause a marginalization rather than escalation of anti-Western sentiments in the post-Soviet world.

This article was originally published in: [German Marshall Fund of the United States: Foreign Policy and Civil Society Program "On Wider Europe" Series, 16 April 2012.](#)

⁷ Fred Weir, "Fearing West, Putin pledges biggest military buildup since cold war," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 20 February 2012.

⁸ As quoted in: Lyudmila Alexandrova, "Popular Russian Nationalist in Government Creates New Movement," *Itar-Tass World Service*, 27 February 2012.

Dr. Andreas Umland is [DAAD Associate Professor of Political Science at the National University of “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.”](#) a [member of the Valdai Discussion Club](#), the administrator of the [Russian Nationalism web archive](#), and general editor of the book series [“Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society.”](#) He publishes on post-Soviet [Russian and Ukrainian politics](#).