

When Conservatism and Nationalism Form the Spurs of Kremlin Ideology

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The post-Crimea national consensus in Russia is often interpreted as the manifestation of Russian nationalism. The annexation of Crimea and military campaigns in eastern Ukraine and Syria once led to a rally-round-the-flag effect that helped prompt a new patriotic majority of 86 percent support for the government. This consensus, hinging on a boosted Russian nationalism, was observed on all levels of society, among the elites and common people alike. Furthermore, the “Russia World” idea and the increased role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) can be regarded as concomitant, moral grounding not only for Russian foreign policy but also for domestic politics. And the Kremlin’s new loyalist youth movement, Yunarmia, which replaced Nashi, has been activated and is gaining in numbers. Will nationalism become the essence of Russian politics in the coming years? Will the Kremlin use nationalism to further ban political opposition, pursue an aggressive foreign policy, and cut social expenditures?

While clear responses to these questions are elusive, an analysis of recent trends reveals at least one emergent conclusion: over the long run, touting nationalism may prove to be not a blessing for the leadership but a curse. Segments of the population, particularly minority groups, have been irritated by Moscow’s “pro-Russian” policies, and Tatarstan and Dagestan, for example, have recently experienced ethnicity-related conflicts with Moscow. Russia’s post-Crimean nationalities policy is showing its limitations, with one weak point being its attachment to President Vladimir Putin’s legitimacy. If that decreases, the government’s vision and version of nationalism will find less support.

Putin’s Third Term: Conservatism, Orthodox Revival, and the Russian “Bible Belt”

Putin’s third term (he’s now in his fourth) started with his seminal statement about the lack of spiritual bonds among Russians. Henceforth, since 2012, the Kremlin launched

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campaigns to preserve and promote the traditional values of Russian society, including family values, patriotism, and anti-Westernism. Conservatism was de facto declared a leading ideology of Russian society. The Kremlin interfered not only in the political sphere, but also in areas of education, culture, and demography.²

The political implications of this policy were a successful attempt to impose tighter control over various nationalist movements and organizations. This “managed nationalism” approach prevailed: nationalist groups had to either accept the Kremlin’s patronage or be prosecuted. Any unauthorized political activity was barred and all autonomous Russian nationalist groups were marginalized and their leaders prosecuted. The recent political crisis in Moscow—the regional electoral commission’s refusal to register dozens of independent candidates for the Moscow City city council—shows that only the liberal (or pro-democratic) opposition could mobilize thousands protesters, while nationalists were so marginalized that they failed to bring any supporters to the rallies. Even regarding Crimea, nationalists became divided into supporters and opponents of the annexation.

This conservative, pro-ethnic-Russian shift required not only new discourses and policies but also new powerful actors. Numerous polls [indicate](#) that Russian society is becoming more religious. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has been expanding its influence in many areas of public life. Polls [show](#) that Russians trust most of all the military and the ROC, so it is no wonder that both have been priority projects for the Kremlin in recent years.

ROC spokespeople have been insisting on the inclusion of pro-Church disciplines in school curricula across the country. They oppose any abortion policy and they attack cultural events that in their opinion offend the “feelings of believers,” de facto introducing religious censorship. In the political sphere, the ROC became one of the most Kremlin-loyal organizations, which means it also rejects any political oppositionists. It plays an important role in the ideological justification of Russian authoritarian rule. Top Church leaders have [described](#) the “divine” nature of political power while rejecting Western-style, modern, democratic legitimacy. For them, authentic political power is given by God and cannot be lost in elections. The ROC traditionalist doctrine undermines the concepts of popular accountability and turnover of political rulers.

Recent studies [indicate](#) that the ROC has started bringing votes to the top leadership and some research [shows](#) that a higher level of Orthodox religiosity is associated with more loyal voting behavior. These trends have a spatial dimension: Orthodox loyal voters are concentrated in rural, monoethnic regions of Central and South Russia, the historical

² See: Sergei Medvedev, “[The State and the Human Body in Putin’s Russia: The Biopolitics of Authoritarian Revanche](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 597, May 2019.

core of the Russian state, the Russian “Bible Belt.” This belt includes regions such as Tambov, Lipetsk, Nizhniy Novgorod, Kursk, Penza, Ryazan’, Tula, Bryansk, Kostroma, Astrakhan’, and several others. Some of these areas also have large portions of non-Russian Orthodox faithful. Surprisingly, Russia’s “Bible Belt” regions overlap with ex-“Red Belt” areas, implying that communist regions turned into Orthodox loyalists.

The Kremlin’s De-Ethnification of Politics

Trends reveal that the Kremlin has been assaulting ethnic diversity and ethnic representation in Russian politics over the past decade. Earlier, in the 1990s, regional elites enjoyed a relatively free hand in recruitment policy and the representation of titular minorities increased. Now there is a slight move across the board to [decrease](#) the share of minorities in power in what can be called a de-ethnification of politics. This trend should be not treated as an assimilation campaign but as additional evidence of the Kremlin’s denial of multiculturalism; the overall ideological shift is to an official-led form of Russian nationalism. Notions of political ethnic diversity—respect for minority and minority-designated “republic” rights and acceptance of ethnic diversity and cosmopolitanism—have been replaced with “civic patriotism.” The idea is that national unity is more important than diversity.

An example of identity building is the new, pro-government, pro-patriotic, youth initiative, Yunarmia. The previous such youth movement, Nashi, was disbanded about five years ago. The Yunarmia project differs from Nashi in at least [three ways](#). First, the target audience is teenagers (high school students). Second, Yunarmia was established by the Ministry of Defense and thus stresses the importance of *military*-patriotic education (which is also why its name is a reference to “youth army”). The key event for Yunarmia is World War II Victory Day and it has participated in the associated May 9 parades since 2017. Third, it intends to become the largest social movement in Russia. Officially, Yunarmia has 500,000 members now and its numbers are expected to double in a year. The Yunarmia movement recruits its members primarily through schools, with many cases of non-voluntary membership being [reported](#). Clearly, the government is attempting to (re)restore the Soviet-era “Pioneer” youth organization with a modern touch.

As mentioned, official discourses stress the supremacy of a united Russian state (in which, accordingly, minorities should accept the dominance of Russians in the public sphere). Loyalty to the state is needed by leaders during periods of geopolitical tension and especially warfare, and is quite often associated with pro-majority nationalities policy. This combination has become visible since Moscow became involved in conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. There were, for instance, more frequent federal interventions into minority affairs, as will be discussed further below. If earlier the regions enjoyed some autonomy in many important spheres—culture, language, secondary education, identity, etc.—now the center is interfering in these areas. Minority privileges and rights

have been restrained while officialdom describes its efforts as part of a struggle with the remnants of decades-old republic separatism.

The Regions & Minority Nationalism

While the 1990s have been seen as the peak of regional/republic separatism (movements, some say, that could have been a deadly threat to the Russian state), the Putin era is perceived as a golden age of recentralization: separatists are defeated, violations of the constitution and federal laws are not tolerated, ethnic peace is maintained, and all republics benefit from access to national markets and federal funding. Indeed, the number of conflicts between Moscow and the provinces has radically decreased (or become less visible). However, recent trends do not fit this idealistic picture. One may observe a new wave of tensions between ethnic republics and the Kremlin.

In 2017, **Tatarstan**, for example, experienced major disagreements with Moscow. The Kremlin openly refused to re-sign its [bilateral treaty](#), which was about to expire and which contained text about Tatarstan's privileged status of having both Russian and Tatar as official languages. Although the regional leadership was satisfied with the treaty, the Kremlin claimed that the agreement would no longer be accepted and Putin himself became involved in the issue. His position was that pupils and parents could choose to learn Tatar, which had been a mandatory subject in schools for decades, or not do so. Many Tatar politicians, opinion leaders, and citizens claimed that such a radical decrease in the teaching and study of Tatar would undermine the Tatar nation. The situation was so tense that as the presidential election approached in 2018, the head of Tatarstan had to release a statement asking for calm on all fronts—primarily because many polling stations were located in schools and teachers often served on local election commissions.

Examples continue to surface of **Crimean Tatars** being disenfranchised and [arrested](#) in Crimea by Russian authorities for un-substantiated reasons. The Kremlin continues to fail to integrate the Crimean Tatars into established systems of interethnic relations, a scheme that involves ethnic minorities not manifesting disloyalty. The level of autonomy the Crimean Tatars used to have in Ukraine contrasts with the reality of Moscow's authoritarian politics. While other titular minorities were forced to accept the "new Kremlin consensus," the Crimean Tatars struggle for greater autonomy from Moscow. Similar tensions over native language teaching have been emerging in other ethnic republics. One can say that language and cultural tensions rose after Russia's annexation of Crimea and political and military involvement in eastern Ukraine, which took place under "Russia World" slogans. The expansion of ethnic Russian influences in Ukraine and within the country has made [various regions](#) more protective of their culture and language autonomy.

Another conflict occurred in **Dagestan** in 2017. Putin dismissed the governor, Ramazan Abdulatipov, and appointed Vladimir Vasilyev. Although Abdulatipov was not particularly effective, he is an ethnic Dagestani while Vasilyev is an ethnic Russian. This is the first time in contemporary Russian history when the Kremlin sent an ethnic Russian to be the governor of a North Caucasian republic. The local elites had no choice but to accept Vasilyev, no matter their disappointment, which they still harbor.

Even the distant Sakha Republic experienced tensions. In March of this year, a pogrom in Yakutia was committed against Central Asian minorities, particularly Kyrgyz migrants, by ethnic Yakuts after the arrest of a Kyrgyz migrant for the rape of a young Russian woman. As Richard Arnold [writes](#) in a recent policy memo, “This implies that both ethnic and non-ethnic Russian nationalism smolder and can suddenly flare up, creating a possible short-cut to legitimacy that the authorities may not be able to resist.”

What has probably been the most severe recent conflict to date occurred in the **Republic of Ingushetia**, where the issue of border delimitation with Chechnya, imposed from above and supported by the Head of Republic, Yunus-bek Evkurov, led to mass mobilization against this decision. Nearly the entire adult population of the republic protested against the new agreement, which would grant Chechnya a [remarkable part](#) of Ingushetia’s territory. Moreover, these protests were supported not only by local activists and local public opinion but also by some segments of the republic’s elite and even *siloviki*. The latter were refusing to use force against protesters, forcing the federal authorities to bring in Russian National Guard units from other regions. The protests started in the fall of 2018 and peaked in March-April 2019. Evkurov resigned in June 2019, but this did not stop the repression of protest leaders.

Nowadays, any event may trigger protest activity in Russia’s ethnic republics. Recent wildfires in Siberia hit at least two republics hard, Sakha (Yakutia) and Buryatia. The fire damage is so high, and the regional authorities’ refusal to fight the fires so evident, that it may easily result in protest mobilization, including, perhaps, along ethnic lines. For instance, Barnaul residents as well as 40 self-organized shamans from Buryatia, Trans-Baikal, and Irkutsk, [turned out](#) for a rally to pressure the government on the issue. The first wildfire-related protest rally occurred in Krasnoyarsk city on August 1, where protesters demanded the resignation of the regional governor, Alexander Uss. It is worth remembering that the first protest movements in the perestroika era were about environmental protection issues. Ethnicity and environmental protection might thus complement each other in building an anti-federal identity in Russia’s republics.

Importantly, one should not ignore the electoral potential of Russia’s ethnic republics in supporting the Kremlin’s leadership. Thanks to very high voter turnout rates and incumbent support in the ethnic republics, these regions have been crucial pillars of support for the Kremlin’s authoritarian coalition. Without positive contributions from

them, the establishment of electoral authoritarianism in Russia would not have been possible.

Conclusion: The Pendulum Swings to the Right

Nationalities policy in Russia has swung from decentralization to recentralization, and from nativization to assimilation. It is indeed difficult for any state to find a balance between the interests of the majority and those of minorities, and between the center and the regions. Although ethnic peace is generally maintained and interethnic violence is still low in Russia, trends warn of dangers ahead. Among them, the most important are the rise of Russian nationalism, the adoption of conservatism as a new official ideology, and decreasing respect for human rights and regional rights. Interethnic relations, which have appeared rather stable so far, should not be taken for granted. Recent protests in Ingushetia show that ethnicity may easily restore its mobilizational power.

As during the days of perestroika, ethnicity may become a source of political conflict between the center and the regions, and within the regions. The experience of the 1990s shows that ethnicity may be used as a powerful instrument for political mobilization. If decentralization movements of any kind become part of the political agenda, regional elites will definitely use nationalist slogans in their struggle with Moscow. Meanwhile, it is likely that the impact of the Kremlin's foreign policies on nationalism and nationalities policy in Russia will become even stronger. In fact, very recent sociopolitical [studies](#) have revealed some disillusion among Russians with the Kremlin's foreign policies amid [demands](#) for more focus on domestic problems. At present, Russia's ongoing, latent confrontation with the West provides enough fuel to keep enhanced Russian nationalism burning while slowly extinguishing the interests of Russia's minorities.

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