

Russia's Gordian Knot

RADICAL NATIONALISM, THE NORTH CAUCASUS, AND MIGRATION

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With the legislative and presidential campaign of 2011-2012, Russia is entering a phase of uncertainty, and debates that have hitherto been reserved for the establishment have become ever more visible. There are already many cracks in the apparent unanimity of the Putin regime, and they are likely to grow in number. Regardless of who becomes president, the Kremlin is going to have to face up to multiple challenges: geostrategic reshaping; tough decisions in many economic sectors awaiting modernization; and accelerating social transformation. One such challenge that the Russian authorities have unwittingly helped to create has emerged at the nexus of a triad of phenomena:

- 1) radical nationalism, which has not succeeded in becoming an autonomous political force but reflects the xenophobic anxieties of Russian society;
- 2) the deadlock in the North Caucasus; and
- 3) migrants in search of integration and recognition.

In the years to come, Russia will likely be challenged by a range of domestic issues impacting social stability. How can a civic consensus be built that takes into account the deep transformations that have transpired in Russia over the last two decades? Do authorities want to see this issue shape public debate during and after elections? And will this debate be supervised and led by the Kremlin, or will it run counter to it?

The Radical Nationalist Scene after Manezh Square

The events of Manezh Square in December 2010 mark a turning point in the history of Russian nationalism. The image of 3,000 to 5,000 youthful football fans and radical nationalists at the walls of the Kremlin shouting anti-immigrant and anti-police slogans, some raising their arms in Nazi salute, and in front of overwhelmed law-enforcement units, has affected public opinion. The visibility of the event and the ensuing series of

attacks and brawls initiated by both anti-Russian and anti-Caucasian racists in Moscow and the provinces, were much more effective for nationalist propaganda than the annual Russian marches of November 4 (“Day of Russian Unity”), even though the march of 2010 attracted a record turnout of more than 5,000 people in about 30 cities across the country.

Have the measures taken by the Russian state against racist violence produced results? A superficial reading of the phenomenon seems to confirm that they have. Murderous violence has been on the wane since 2008. In 2010, a SOVA Center census reported 38 people killed and 377 wounded as a result of racist violence, much less than in previous years.¹ Criminal prosecution, once virtually non-existent, has improved, and several resounding trials have seen members of neo-Nazi groups accused of racist crimes and sentenced to hefty prison terms. Extremist Aleksei Voevodin, for example, was recently sentenced to life in prison.² The National Socialist Society (NSO) has been officially banned, as has the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI). The radical scene continues to be as fragmented as before, despite several attempts at creating alliances.

However, the legal instruments available to the state only make it possible to stop the activities of the most organized and notorious gangs. Even then, this applies only to those targeted by authorities; some groups enjoy official protection from local authorities.

Moreover, the ultra-radical right is profoundly evolving in a direction that further reduces the utility of the authorities' already poorly calibrated tools. First, small autonomous ultra-right groups with no relation to the already known and more organized nationalist groups are growing in number. Grassroots xenophobic violence is on the rise; radical groups are heading more toward the logic of guerrilla or “urban warfare”; and confrontational behaviors between youth groups have developed in scope. For each of these phenomena there exist few, if any, repressive responses.

Second, organized groups are adopting new programs. They no longer raise only interethnic issues but social ones, and their narrative is more and more clearly an anti-regime one. They present themselves as supporters of democracy and victims of Kremlin abuses of power, and they are moving closer to democratic opposition movements, by participating, for example, in the “Strategy-31” demonstrations in support of the right to peaceful assembly. This is the strategy being followed by the Russian Social Movement (ROD), which presents itself as an ethnic Russian-based human rights organization, as well as by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The support they receive from Garry Kasparov’s Other Russia party, which welcomes them but denounces their use of violence, has strengthened their rationale to strive for “political correctness.” A new movement, the Russian Citizens Union (RGS), has adopted the goal of “broad cooperation of Russian nationalists and democratic

¹ See: Alexander Verkhovsky, and Galina Kozhevnikova, “The Phantom of Manezhnaya Square: Radical Nationalism and Efforts to Counteract It in 2010,” Moscow: SOVA Center, 2011. See also: Natalia Yudina and Vera Alperovich, “[Causes Célèbres and New Ultra-right Formations](#),” Moscow: SOVA Center, Spring 2011

² Tatiana Boltskaia, Valentin Baryshnikov, “[Natsisty osuzhdeny – natsizm ostaetsia](#),” Svobodanews.ru, June 14, 2011

opposition” in a bid to unite, without great success, the Young People's Democratic Union and the Just Cause party. Lastly, the rapprochement between well-known economist Mikhail Deliagin and nationalist publicist Vladimir Kucherenko (Maxim Kalashnikov) in the party Motherland-Common Sense shows that the Rodina experiment, undertaken between 2003 and 2006 to unify moderate nationalists with extremists in order to avoid juridical repression, is still being emulated despite its failure.

The Political and Ideological Background of the Russian State's Responses

Faced with racist violence, the responses of the Russian state and the messages sent by political leaders are clumsy and sometimes ambiguous. A move to ban parties, the first victim of which was the National Bolshevik Party, has been devoid of effect. Not only do movements rapidly reconstitute themselves under different names, their banishment enables them to present themselves as victims of the state and dissident democrats. The fight against publication of “extremist materials” is just as ineffective. The continual extension of the list of banned extremist texts does not in itself provide any solution and instead just makes it possible to re-establish a kind of preventative censorship and to monitor the reading activities of citizens in libraries. Moreover, the Kremlin instrumentalizes the stigmatization of extremism, in order to control the political legitimacy of its rivals and to denounce willy-nilly all those who undermine the ruling system.

More importantly, the Kremlin has itself encouraged a confusion of kinds. Vladislav Surkov, the president's first deputy chief of staff, blamed the Manezh Square events on the democratic opposition, not on youth radicalism. The state agency Rosinfomonitoring, supervising illegal financial activities in Russia, published a list of terrorist organizations in Russia, tossing the Emirate of the Caucasus, extreme right-wing groups, and the National Bolshevik Party into the same category as Al-Qaeda.³ With new amendments to a 2002 law on fighting extremist activity, the definition of extremism has become even vaguer. Verbal attacks against a state employee, of whatever status, can be interpreted as an attempt to undermine constitutional order. Publications critical of Kremlin policies, even if they in no way constitute an incitement to interethnic hatred, can be condemned according to article 282 of the penal code. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin himself has emitted even more ambiguous signals. He paid a visit to the graveside of Yegor Svidirov, the young fan of the Spartak sports club whose killing triggered the riots of December 2010. He also continues to play the card of distinguishing between “good” legal migrants and “bad” illegal ones who must be penalized, thus indirectly fostering xenophobia.

Although President Dmitry Medvedev has delivered some tough speeches on the subject, his remarks are generally imprecise and do not really move away from the old Soviet conception of interethnic relations. He expresses a commitment to the fight

³ “[National-Terrorism](#),” Kasparov.ru, June 7, 2011

against nationalism and xenophobia (very rarely employing the term racism) while continuing to employ tired rhetoric about the need to develop the learning of tolerance among schoolchildren, take measures to spread culture (as nationalists supposedly have none), promote “our true values and traditions,”⁴ and hail “multiculturalism.” The terminological confusion is total: the defense of “tradition” and “culture” is something used by both Russian authorities and their radical nationalist opponents.

The rhetoric about tolerance and multiculturalism also does not go far. It is taught in a folkloric mode borrowed from the Soviet model of the “friendship of peoples,” it is fundamentally essentialist (people are endowed with specific primordial essences that are necessary to respect), and pupils who have received “courses in tolerance” are just as xenophobic as the others, if not more.

In the end, a debate on the relationship between “Russian citizen” (*rossiiskii*) and “ethnic Russian” (*russkii*) is systematically avoided. Both terms are sometimes employed in the same phrase as synonyms and sometimes as two different things, but only insofar as their difference remains implicit.

Russia’s Civic Challenge: Integrating the Internal “Others”

The real stakes surrounding the question of nationalism and xenophobia in Russia are virtually never discussed in the public sphere. However, they form the Gordian knot of key domestic challenges facing Russia in the coming decade: finding a solution for the North Caucasus; integrating migrants; reforming the political system; and creating a civic consensus.

These elements often overlap with one another. Terrorist acts such as that at Domodedovo Airport in January 2011 will not stop in the absence of a solution to the North Caucasus problem. With the approach of the Sochi Olympic Games, which will heighten the international visibility of the region and its actors, there exists the risk of rising tensions. The authorities’ ineffectiveness in combating terrorist attacks not only in the North Caucasus but also in central Russia contributes to a climate of fear and undermines the state’s credibility. The lack of consolidated institutions in the Putin regime and the impossibility of developing rule of law in Russia rests in part on the North Caucasus deadlock. Management of the federal republics is entirely founded on a feudal principle of the personal relationship between suzerain (Vladimir Putin) and vassals endowed with special rights that can be withdrawn at any moment, including levying taxes (impunity in exchange for controlling the shadow economy) and local armed forces (militias, such as the *Kadyrovtsy* in Chechnya, that instill the reign of the arbitrary). The presidential administration continues to maintain this logic for lack of any alternative.

In addition, the Chechen question remains indirectly linked to that of racist violence. This link was bolstered last year, when Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov loudly presented himself as an opponent of Russian nationalism and the defender of Chechens throughout Russia. Grassroots violence between youth groups thus took on a

⁴ “[Medvedev prizval borot’sia s natsionalizmom s pomoshch’iu kul’tury](#),” RF Today, January 17, 2011

new political significance. This could be seen, for example, during the mass brawl in the “Don” summer camp in July 2010 or in the polemics over the anti-Chechen (and anti-Semitic) statements of a Russian history textbook written by two professors of Moscow State University, two events in which Kadyrov did not hesitate to intervene personally. (This did not prevent two of the main Russian ultranationalist leaders, Alexander Belov and Dmitri Dmushkin, from visiting Grozny and returning enchanted after their meeting with Kadyrov.) The idea that has been wielded by the Kremlin over the last decade, to set up a *cordon sanitaire* isolating the unstable North Caucasus from the rest of Russia, is a patent failure. More than ever, this region is at the heart of the country’s security problems.

After the North Caucasus, the migration question constitutes the authorities’ second Achilles’ heel. Official statements about the issue are contradictory, explaining the necessity of migrants for the Russian economy but also the risks they carry for the Russian people – economic risks, as well as demographic, cultural, ethnic, religious, and security ones. Most decisionmakers understand the necessity of an open migration policy for the Russian economy and are supported in this by the country’s large companies. However, they prefer not to display their stance publicly and thus leave the field free to those who see migration as a threat. This latter group is not only made up of nationalist opponents: a large part of United Russia and the youth movements linked to it such as the Young Guard or Nashi maintain discourses on migrants that are more negative than positive.

Russia has the world’s second-largest migrant intake after the United States, but its identity narrative is not one of an immigration country. Its practices of integration are extremely limited and sometimes counter-productive. Russia finds itself in the position of the United States or Canada, but with a narrative inspired by that of West European populist movements, focused on the implicit separation between the “native/indigenous/white population” and “migrants/Muslims.” Popular discontent at the [announcement](#) of further mosque constructions is a telling sign of growing Islamophobia, a phenomenon historically non-existent in Russia. The migration issue is mainly managed in security and technical fashion by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Migration Service, leaving aside the social stakes of integration (schooling of migrants’ children, access to social services, professional integration, and cultural recognition).

Conclusion

The authorities’ refusal to place at the core of public debate the question of the inevitable transformation of Russian society in forthcoming decades, even as they seek to reassure popular anxieties by validating them, only reinforces popular nationalism and everyday xenophobia and blocks all solutions to the North Caucasus question. Nationalism, in its anti-migrant form, will not quickly disappear, and the social, cultural, political, and ideological mechanisms that fuel it may even intensify in the years to come. A new generation of politicians aiming at a “politically correct” anti-migrant xenophobia – one with West European culture, norms of action, and models

such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, Silvio Berlusconi, and Jörg Haider—is likely to develop. The Kremlin's ambiguous use of nationalist references, as well as intra-elite divisions over the North Caucasus and migration, provide the backdrop on which political strategies will have to be constructed during and after the 2011-2012 electoral cycle.

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