

Is Russian Nationalism on the Rise?

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Recent developments in Russian politics have been widely interpreted as signaling a groundswell of public support for aggressive Russian nationalism. The story goes like this: Prime Minister (and now acting President) Vladimir Putin rode the brutal war in Chechnya to the top of the presidential polls. Candidates for Duma seats competed to whip up ferocious bloodlust. The parties that most closely associated themselves with Putin's cruel operation won. Having tasted the electoral fruits of mass murder, Putin will find other victims after dispatching with the Chechens.

This is a serious--and potentially dangerous--distortion of Russian public opinion. It is true that recent Russian polls show that over 70% of the population favors continuing the military operation in Chechnya, while only 20% think it is time for negotiations. Russians also clearly want to be respected as a "great power" again. But such sentiments do not mean that public opinion is driving a resurgence of Russian imperialism and aggression. Five factors make this clear.

1. While polls do show Russians no longer trust the West, they also show Russians very much want to cooperate with it. Although a July 1999 poll commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League found that 96% of Russians said that NATO's bombing of Serbia was a "crime against humanity," 84% said that despite their objections to NATO's actions, Russia should cooperate with Western countries to establish peace and stability in Serbia and the Balkans.
2. Chechnya is a localized issue focused around the specific perceived threat of terrorism, not a symptom of naked Russian aggression.

One must recall the events underlying public support for the war. Late last summer, Chechen warlords invaded the loyal but highly combustible Russian region of Dagestan, declaring their aim to establish an Islamic government there.

Then, in September, terrorist bombs decimated two crowded apartment buildings in the middle of the night in Moscow--buildings that looked just like those to which most Russian city-dwellers return home every evening.

Rightly or wrongly, Russians believe that the terrorism originated in Chechnya. Stories also flood Russia about kidnapping rings and a Slavic slave trade based in Chechnya.

The public, therefore, supports the war because it wants to counter what it sees as a serious and very immediate threat to its security, not because a majority harbors a desire to reestablish imperial rule over a wayward province.

In fact, a late December poll from the VTsIOM agency showed that even *among war supporters*, a whopping 59% would accept an independent Chechnya, and 21% would actually be "happy" for this to occur.

All this certainly does not excuse the reckless, vengeful killing that Russian troops have perpetrated on the hapless civilians of Chechnya. But it also means Russians are unlikely to support similar aggression in other foreign policy spheres in the absence of horrific episodes like apartment bombings to strike terror in their hearts.

3. Putin's support is broader than the Chechen War. Russians clearly want a strong leader, capable of bringing order to their tragically unpredictable lives.

Putin and his handlers have skillfully used the Chechen war to demonstrate his qualities as an effective leader. These qualities (decisiveness, youthful vigor, and effectiveness) have a value that transcends the war itself and leads the public to support Putin even were he to pursue a very different policy on Chechnya.

When VTsIOM asked Russians whether they would support ending the hostilities and solving the Chechen problem by negotiations if Putin proposed it, 48% said they would, while just 42% said they would not.

4. The pro-Putin parties in December's parliamentary race did not win mainly on the basis of blood lust. While both Unity and the Union of Right-Wing Forces (URWF) sought to perch firmly on Putin's coattails, they both also enjoyed the advantages of favorable media coverage on two of Russia's "Big Three" TV networks.

In effective campaigns, they stressed not Putin's brutality but the ideal of youth and effectiveness he represented--an important contrast to the geriatric "stagnation" image of Boris Yeltsin, the Communists, and their leading rival, former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov.

5. Finally, the pro-market Yabloko Party performed dismally not because it took a stand against the war, but because it failed to do so. When people were looking for strong leadership, Yabloko's leaders waffled on Chechnya, at first supporting the military operation, then expressing doubts as events progressed, ultimately failing to communicate a firm stand that could have won over many of the 20% who thought it was time to negotiate. Exacerbating this problem, Yabloko also dropped its longtime opposition to the Russian-Belorussian Union, supporting it in a highly visible Duma vote shortly before the election (the Union of Right-Wing Forces, to the contrary, maintained its strong stand in opposition to this union).

Russians want cooperation, not confrontation. They are unlikely to support belligerence in other foreign policy areas in the absence of provocation commensurate with the apartment bombings.

Since Russia is both powerful and notoriously unpredictable, the US must always be prepared for unexpected Russian aggression, since aggression usually comes from leaders rather than populations. Indeed, current events are certainly cause for concern, especially if rumors prove true that the Russian secret services intentionally set off the apartment bombs in order to get Putin reelected and settle the score with Chechnya. But it would be a sad mistake to assume that further aggression is *inevitable* due to a serious misinterpretation of Russian public opinion. The main danger lies in Russia's leadership, not its population

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