

New Extreme Right-Wing Intellectual Circles in Russia: The Anti-Orange Committee, the Isborsk Club and the Florian Geyer Club

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Abstract

Some recent publications on Russian nationalism focus on various extra-systemic right-wing radicals and their links to the new urban protest movement in the RF. However, developments in the intra-systemic ultra-nationalism of Putin's regime are at least as important. This article examines some of the new, extremely anti-Western intellectual circles that have emerged during the past two years in Russia. In the face of the new polarization between pro- and anti-Putin forces, the authoritarian regime and its propagandists are closing ranks with certain extremely right-wing literati. Also, there is stronger cooperation between formerly competing anti-Western intellectuals, such as Sergei Kurginyan, Aleksandr Dugin, and Aleksandr Prokhanov. The three new, rabidly anti-American discussion clubs briefly introduced in this article, include a broad spectrum of publicists, journalists, politicians, and academics.

The Anti-Western Discourse

Since the revival of the Russian democracy movement in December 2011, some Western observers of Russian ethnocentrism have focused on the partial cooperation between democrats and ultra-nationalists during the protests (e.g., Popescu 2012; Satter 2012). During the past few months, however, a trend of radically anti-Western nationalism consolidating itself as a relevant political force has become a challenge not so much in terms of the emergence of the Russian opposition, but in connection with Putin's authoritarian regime. The recent further promotion of an already rabid anti-Americanism in the public rhetoric and politics of Putin and his cronies can be easily classified as a PR maneuver by the Kremlin to distract the population from other domestic challenges, such as wide-spread corruption, elections manipulation, or bloated government. At the same time, the societal impact of the bizarre TV campaigns, and the deeper effects of the escalating demonization of the USA on Russian public discourse cannot be neglected as merely temporal phenomena. This has become clear from the long-term repercussions of similar, earlier instances of Russian media hysteria, for instance, in connection with the bombardment of Serbia by NATO in 1999, the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City in 2002, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Russian–Georgian Five-Day War in 2008. Following these campaigns, public opinion in the Russian Federation has become increasingly critical of the US and, to some extent, also of the EU.

An Increasingly “Uncivil” Society

The renewed stimulation of anti-Western discourses through application of “political technologies” is promoting a dangerous undercurrent and accelerating the development of what may be called “uncivil society” in

Russia (Umland 2007). The anti-democratic faction of the Russian third sector represents a network of, partly cooperative, partly competing, extremely anti-liberal groups, organizations, and publications. Many of them, to be sure, are currently distinguished by the support they receive from government agencies and through active advertising on Kremlin-controlled TV channels. They thus present GONGOs (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations), rather than genuine civil society initiatives. However, there is a danger that the increased campaign of incitement against the US may both permanently establish a conspiracy-minded, paranoid worldview as a legitimate pattern for the interpretation of international events, and help entrench the clubs that promote this worldview as legitimate participants of Russian public discourse.

As a result, an aggressively anti-Western right-wing extremism seems to be forming, within Russian political life, as a stable third pole between the authoritarian regime and the democratic opposition (while the Communists have a hybrid function being part of both, the regime and opposition, as well as also closely linked to Russian right-wing extremism through their radical anti-Americanism). The Kremlin appears to be implementing a risky political scheme aimed at a restructuring of public life. In that scenario, the increased incorporation of ultra-nationalists into mainstream political discourse is designed to cause a comprehensive right-wing shift within Russia's ideological spectrum, to the extent that the nationalism of Putin and his immediate associates, which is also quite virulent, comes across as relatively centrist against the background of the far more radical demands “from the grassroots”, i.e., from the more and more prominent right-wing extremists (Umland 2009).

Several ultra-nationalist groups and leaders have connections—sometimes through one and the same

person—to both the government and the opposition. One example is the blogger and activist, Vladlen Kralin, known in right-wing extremist circles by the pseudonym of “Vladimir Thor”. He has been a member of both, the Coordinating Council of the opposition and of two nationalist organizations led by Dmitri Rogozin, a current Deputy Prime Minister of the RF, namely, “Rodina” and “Velikaya Rossiya”—“Motherland” and “Great Russia”. Due to the way Putin’s system of government and Russia’s mass media operate, however, right-wing contacts in the government have a higher political significance than the ultra-nationalist participation in protests, which is controversial among Russian democrats anyway. Within the democracy movement there is an eloquent minority that is explicitly opposed to any cooperation between the liberal opposition and radical nationalists. These voices are organized, for example, in the Facebook group “Russia without Hitler! No to meetings with fascists, Nazis, and nationalists”.¹

Amid the spectrum of ultra-nationalist associations, which, though often promoted via Kremlin “political technologies”, are nevertheless not necessarily irrelevant, right-wing extremist intellectuals and their clubs, publications, and media appearances deserve particular attention. These are publicists, TV commentators, and (self-styled) academics, who have an impact on the formation of public opinion through their influence on university students, junior academics, political bloggers, and civic activists in particular, but also on the general public.

Consolidation Tendencies in the Extreme Right-Wing Spectrum

The extremely right-wing Russian political spectrum is currently divided by whether the respective groups fall into either the pro- and anti-Putin camp. Since the announcement of Putin’s return to the presidential office in September 2011, two further tendencies within the radically anti-Western intellectual milieu, which had already been present before, have intensified. First, the extremely anti-Western literati milieu is experiencing a partial consolidation. This means that formerly manifest differentiations between similarly oriented, but separate intellectual clubs and their respective interpretations of Russian history and world politics are gradually losing significance. The rivalry among the various “Slavophiles”—for example, between those of the ethno-nationalist and the “Eurasian” orientations—which was still manifest in the 1990s, is decreasing against the background of the new polarization between the increasingly anti-Western regime, on the one hand, and the largely pro-Western opposition, on the other. This is

illustrated by the recent cooperation between two of the most influential theoreticians and TV commentators in this spectrum, Sergey Kurginyan and Aleksandr Dugin. In the 1990s, acting as the propagandist for a reinstatement of the Soviet system under new auspices, Kurginyan had harshly criticized Dugin in his then capacity as an openly neo-fascist publicist. In the meantime, however, Kurginyan, who had already been closely linked to the conservative establishment in the final phase of the Soviet era, has come to publicly cooperate more and more closely with Dugin, who had once been marginalized politically as an SS admirer.

Second, there is increasing cooperation between extra-systemic ultra-nationalists, on the one side, and intra-systemic sympathizers of their conspiracy theories, on the other—a tendency that has been observable since the end of the 1990s, but is now intensifying. This includes a partial cooptation of marginal publicists, who used to be located on the outermost political fringes, into structures close to the Kremlin or sometimes even into governmental institutions. One example is the quick academic rise of the above mentioned neo-fascist Dugin, who is now teaching as a professor and acting Chair of the Sociology of International Relations at Moscow State University (MGU) named after Lomonosov, Russia’s leading higher education institution.²

These tendencies of consolidation among the extreme right-wing can be illustrated by considering three new intellectual clubs, which were not yet in existence in 2009, when Marlene Laruelle published her seminal review of post-Soviet Russian nationalist think-tanks.

Kurginyan’s Anti-Orange Committee

Created by Kurginyan on the basis of his “Sut’ vremeni” (Essence of Time) movement, the Anti-Orange Committee³ has so far been the most visible new structure, although it may turn out to be only an ephemeral phenomenon. It includes, amongst others, the above-mentioned Dugin, prominent TV journalists Mikhail Leontiev and Maksim Shevchenko, neo-Stalinist publisher Nikolai Starikov, and Aleksandr Prokhanov, the editor of the most important extreme right-wing weekly journal “Zavtra” (Tomorrow). The committee was a result of the pro-Putin counter-demonstration organized by Kurginyan on 4 February 2012 on Submission Hill (Poklonnaya gora) in Moscow, against the simultaneous opposition event on Bolotnaya Square. The name of the club refers to the 2004 Ukrainian so-called Orange Revolution, which is interpreted by extra-systemic right-wing extremists, as well as by many rep-

1 See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/knbor/permalink/458823157522279/>

2 See <http://www.socir.ru/>

3 See <http://anti-orange.ru>

representatives and apologists of the Putin regime, as a conspiracy that was steered by the CIA or even as a fascist-inspired event. Such a link from the Orange Revolution to “fascism”—a glaring example being Leontiev’s TV propaganda film “The Orange Children of the Third Reich” (2010)⁴—is drawn in Russian anti-Western conspiracist circles by highlighting the role that some Ukrainian émigrés played at the electoral uprising in 2004. This includes, for instance, Kateryna Chumachenko, the second wife of the Orange Revolution leader and 2005–2010 Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko. Chumachenko grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in the USA, within the nationalist Ukrainian diaspora. The Northern American émigré milieu was then dominated by adherents of the so-called Bandera faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B), which at the beginning of World War II had been a fascist underground movement. In spite of being marginal, the participation of nationalists returning from the Western diaspora of Ukraine, as well as of some native extremely right-wing splinter groups, like the mini-party UNASO (Ukrainian National Assembly—Ukrainian Self-Defense of the People), in the Orange Revolution constitutes a problematic legacy of the Ukrainian electoral rebellion. It is today being used by the Kremlin’s conspiracists as a welcome pretext to denigrate both the Ukrainian and the Russian democracy movement as a crypto-fascist “Orange plague”.

In any case, according to its website, the extremely anti-American Anti-Orange Committee has met only twice, in February 2012. Even though the website of the committee is still online and calls upon visitors to sign an “anti-Orange pact”, it remains unclear whether the structure is still in operation.

Prokhanov’s Isborsk Club

A project that is so far less well known—although it has a similar ideology—but has a broader political appeal and may well be more persistent, is the Isborsky klub,⁵ named after the place of its first meeting, the city of Isborsk in Pskov Oblast in northwestern Russia. This relatively big intellectual circle, brought to life by the grandseigneur of Russian right-wing extremism, Prokhanov, wants to unite the “Reds” (national Communists) and the “Whites” (anti-Soviet nationalists). It is based on the Institute of Dynamic Conservatism and is apparently intended to compete with the well-known Valdai International Discussion Club of RIA-Novosti. The latter consists of foreign experts and journalists working on Eastern Europe, as well as Russian politicians, sci-

entists, and intellectuals. Prokhanov is a member of the Valdai Club, and, for his new anti-Western Isborsk Club, he copied Valdai’s format of a geographical term as a name, the versatile composition of its membership, and the practice of holding large meetings outside Moscow.

Similar names appear in Prokhanov’s club as those found in the Anti-Orange Committee; for example, Dugin, Leontiev, Starikov, and Shevchenko. The Isborsk Club’s spectrum of members is, however, more widespread and includes many other prominent anti-Western publicists, such as Sergei Glaziev, Leonid Ivashov, Nataliya Narochnitskaya, Archimandrite Tikhon (a.k.a. Shevkunov), Yuri Polyakov, and Mikhail Khazin. The group’s connection to the Kremlin may be even closer than in the case of Kuginyan’s committee. This was illustrated, for example, with the participation of the Russian Minister for Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, mostly known for allegations of plagiarism in his doctoral dissertation, in the founding meeting of the club in Isborsk. Prokhanov’s club seems to be well-funded and has so far held meetings in the cities of Khimki, Yekaterinburg, and Ulyanovsk. The Isborsk Club publishes an illustrated journal of the same name, with a run of 999 copies.

Geidar Dzhemal’s Florian Geyer Club

The most astonishing new foundation in the extreme right-wing intellectual milieu, however, is a small circle, which calls itself Conceptual Club “Florian Geyer”⁶ that was founded on 22 September 2011. Led by the notorious Islamist and avowed anti-Western activist Geidar Dzhemal, the group uses the name of a figure from the German Peasants’ War of the 16th century. The historical figure Geyer is entirely unknown in Russia, and unfamiliar even to many Germans. The name “Florian Geyer”, however, is well known among experts on contemporary European history, as the byname of the Third Reich’s 8th SS Cavalry Division, which was deployed on the Eastern front in 1943–44.

Dzhemal, Dugin and Shevchenko, the founders of the Florian Geyer Club, claim to be referring to the former peasant warrior and not to the SS division. Dugin’s past in particular, however, indicates that the club’s founders are probably familiar with the use of the name in the Third Reich, which indicates that the twofold historical significance of “Florian Geyer” is actually intended. From 1980 to 1990, Dzhemal and Dugin were members of a small occult circle in Moscow that called itself the “Black Order of the SS”. During the 1990s, Dugin, both under his pseudonym “Aleksandr Shternberg” and under his own name, repeatedly expressed support for sympathizers, members, and divisions of

4 See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xg5K8TJqC0>

5 See <http://dynacon.ru>

6 See <http://floriangeyer.ru/>

the SS, for example the Institut “Ahnenerbe” (Institute “Ancestral Heritage”) of the SS, the Italian fascist theorist and admirer of the *Waffen-SS* Julius Evola, the *SS-Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler, and the *SS-Obergruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich (the initial organizer of the Holocaust).

The above-mentioned TV host Shevchenko—probably the best-known of the three founders to the greater Russian public, does not concede that the club’s title “Florian Geyer” referred to the SS division of the same name. However, in his opening speech for the foundation of the circle, he admitted: “This name was also used by those German National Socialists (the left wing), who were linked to National Bolshevism. And the Florian Geyer song, which the young generation is familiar with from the work of the group *Rammstein*, was very popular with those left- and right-wing circles that adopted an anti-elite and anti-liberal stance”.⁷ Thus, it is all the more astonishing that—in addition to several right-wing extremists—some well-known Russian intellectuals were participating in the club’s round-table talks, who do not fit this context, among them historian Igor Chubais, legal scholar Mark Feygin, and sociologist Boris Kagarlitsky. It is also worth noting that, at the meetings of the club, anti-American activists from abroad were also invited to speak, including, for instance, the notorious Italian “traditionalist” Claudio Mutti.

Another participant in the club worth mentioning is the infamous political writer Vladimir Kucherenko, better known under his pseudonym “Maksim Kalashnikov”, who is also a member of the Isborsk Club. Like Dugin, he sympathizes with aspects of National Social-

ism and also develops extravagant flights of political fantasy in his publications. In the book “Onwards to an USSR-2” (2003)—which had a large print run—for example, Kucherenko-Kalashnikov speculates about a future “neuro-world” that would be a “structure” combining the characteristics “of a church, a giant media conglomerate, and a financial empire” that is “equipped with a secret service”.

As in the case of the Anti-Orange Committee, despite its continued internet presence, it is unclear whether the club is still active. The last meeting documented on the Florian Geyer club’s website took place in June 2012.

Are Russian Anti-Western Activists on the Rise?

Since the announcement of Putin’s third presidency in September 2011, a restructuring of the ultra-nationalist intellectual milieu has been underway in which the Isborsk Club plays the leading role. Extreme right-wing publicists comment unfavorably and, sometimes, hysterically on today’s situation in Russia. They frequently conjure up apocalyptic scenarios for the future of their country and the world. Notwithstanding their dubious background, questionable academic credentials and tarnished reputation, they can act freely, often appear on governmental television, and are regarded with favor by the Kremlin, if not purposefully promoted. Should these tendencies continue, the already critical Russian public opinion towards the US will deteriorate even more, and the alienation between Russia and the West will increase further.

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Recommended Further Reading

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- Satter, David (2012), “The Threat of Russian Nationalism,” *FPRIE-Notes*, April. <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/2012/201204.satter.threat-russian-nationalism.pdf>
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⁷ See <http://www.floriangeyer.ru/lectures/sovremennaya-demokratiya-kak-po-liticheskij-institut>