

## Analysis

# Imperial Nationalism in Russia

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## Summary

Russian nationalist ideas and organizations are rapidly spreading through Russia now. Contemporary Russian nationalists stress the idea of rebuilding the Russian empire. However, their focus on the idea of “Russia for the Russians” is incompatible with efforts to bring other ethnic groups together in one political entity. The authorities support Russian nationalist ideas, in the mistaken idea that they will be able to manage nationalist forces. In fact, the rise of Russian nationalism is likely to encourage separatism among other ethnic groups.

## The Dynamics of Russian Nationalism

Sociological theory usually counterposes the concepts of nationalism and imperialism. Here I will try to show that these phenomena complement each other in the ideology and practice of contemporary Russian nationalism.

Post-Soviet Russia is surviving a process combining the disintegration of the empire and a simultaneous attempt to restore it. This process is accompanied by the rapid growth of ethnic self-consciousness among its many peoples. In the beginning of the 1990s, the minority non-Russian ethnic groups began asserting their rights. By the end of the 1990s, it was the majority ethnic Russians who had become vocal. Although the ethnic Russians became ethnically conscious later than the other groups, their feelings are quickly growing and now the ethnic majority considers itself to be more threatened than the minorities. From the beginning of 2000, the share of ethnic Russians who feel threatened by members of other ethnic groups living in Russia is almost twice the number of other groups. During the Soviet era, the ethnic Russians were the most tolerant of the ethnic groups in Russia.

The Russian’s fear of other ethnic groups was particularly noteworthy after the series of terrorist acts in the summer of 1999 and beginning of the “second Chechen war” that fall. Initially, the feelings were directed against the Chechens, but after 2000, they spread to a variety of other ethnic groups. Since that time, approximately two-thirds of respondents feel some form of antipathy toward other nationalities. Anti-Semitism grew particularly quickly and now the level of anti-Semitism among Russian nationalist leaders has even outstripped their anti-Chechen and anti-Muslim feelings.

The number of nationalist organizations is growing as quickly as nationalist consciousness. In the beginning of the 1990s, most nationalist organizations were

based on the “national movements” of the various republics within the Russian Federation, including the Chechens, Tatars, Lezgin, and Avars, among others. Since the end of the 1990s, most activity has focused on the organization of ethnic Russians groups, a sector which today is the largest and fastest growing part of the nationalist movement in Russia. The number of youth organizations supporting the slogan “Russia for the Russians” has grown by a factor of 10. (These groups are often labeled “skinheads” but the skinheads only make up a fraction of this movement.) In 1991, only several hundred individuals were members of Russian nationalist organizations; in 2001, there were more than 10,000. In the subsequent two years, their numbers tripled, reaching 33,000 by 2004. While these numbers reflect official data, experts indicate that significantly larger numbers of youth participate in ultra-radical nationalist organizations.

In the 1990s, the skinheads belonged to small groups that numbered from 3 to 10 individuals. After 2000, they began to create large organizations, bringing together up to 500 individuals. In Moscow, the first large organizations to appear were Skinlegion and the National Socialist Group 88. In Moscow, there are more than 6,000 young Nazis. In St. Petersburg, there are more than 3,000, including at least 500 in Russian Fist and no less than 100 in the Kolovrat organization. In Nizhny Novgorod, there are more than 2,500 skinheads and 300 of them are in North, the largest group.

If the growth of the youth national-fascist groups continues at this rate, and they continue to focus their attention on Russia’s large cities, their numbers could quickly become comparable to the numbers of law enforcement officers. The members of these groups are well coordinated across cities and can quickly move from place to place. In fact, their level of organization is much higher than the police forces who must

deal with them. Deputy Interior Minister S. Shadrin recently admitted this fact, pointing out that his colleagues had little information about the nationalist groups.

The youth Russian nationalist organizations are quickly becoming politicized under the influence of radical political parties, such as the National Great Power Party of Russia (NDPR), the Party of Freedom (PS), Russian National Unity (RNE), and the Russian All-National Union (ROS). All of these parties exist illegally, but act openly. For example, two NDPR leaders presented their books in the Union of Writers of Russia hall in the center of Moscow. Aleksandr Sevostyanov presented "Time to be Russian" and Boris Mironov, who is formally wanted by the authorities, presented "The Jewish Yoke." At the latter presentation, organizers announced that they were collecting signatures for the notorious Appeal of the 500, which demanded the closing of the all Jewish organizations.

Various pickets, demonstrations, rallies, and other acts of mass protest conducted by nationalist activists are becoming regular occurrences in Russian cities. Force is used with increasingly frequency. In 2004, skinheads committed 12 murders and 40 beatings in Moscow, and 7 murders and 24 beatings in St. Petersburg. In 2006, the number of violent incidents based on nationalism increased. During the first six months of the year, 137 fell victim to such attacks, with 18 dying from their wounds.

The police have noted the upsurge in violence. In 2003, they filed 20 cases of murder on nationalist grounds and 44 in 2004. These cases represent the most clear cut examples of murder for nationalist or racist reasons. Most of the time, the authorities are reluctant to qualify the murders as being connected to nationalist causes. Usually they list the cause as hooliganism or domestic quarrels.

The Russian authorities try to ignore the growth and activities of Russian nationalism in order not to cloud the picture of political stability in the country. Nevertheless, the nationalist groups became so active that Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev described them as fascist. Putin indirectly admitted the same thing during a 2005 speech in Poland.

Unfortunately, there are enormous reserves for the growth of national-fascist organizations. Levada Center senior researcher Leonid Sedov claims that the latent support for the "Russia for the Russians" slogan is 17 million. However, the overall number of people sympathetic to this idea is much larger. According to the polls of numerous sociological organizations, the share of the population supporting the slogan "Russia for the Russians" in one form or another has not

dropped below 53 percent and in some years reaches as high as 60 percent. Today, supporters of this idea include Communists, Soviet conservatives, and traditionalists seeking to restore the empire and monarchy, but also Russian (*rossiiskii*) pragmatists and supporters of radical market reform. Among the latter group, 30 percent support the slogan. Such nationalist ideas are equally wide-spread among members of parties on the right and the left. About half of the people who today support "a special Russian national path" 15 years ago backed such democratic leaders as Andrei Sakharov, Galina Starovoitova, and Yegor Gaidar. The most prominent member of this group is Mikhail Yur'ev, once a State Duma member from the Yabloko party, who has recently penned a best-selling book which is the most consistent and effective expression of imperial nationalism currently available.

### On the Phenomenon of Imperial Nationalism

In my view, the classic contradiction between empire and nation needs to be redefined, at least in Russian conditions. Thanks to the lack of development of all peoples in Russia, few adopt a civic form of nationality, in which the state is built on the basis of popular sovereignty. Ethnic nationalism, however, proclaiming the dominant position of one ethnic, racial, or religious group in the state, is growing. This ethnonationalism is not the same among different ethnic groups. The national movements of the ethnic minorities set the goal of creating their own states and succeeding from the Russian empire, Soviet Union, and now Russian Federation, using the rhetoric of "the nation against the empire." The leaders of Russian nationalism are filling out their ranks with an alternative idea: the resurrection of the empire as the geographic expression of the Russian nation.

What is the relationship between the growth of Russian nationalism and the conduct of the imperial project? These phenomena would seem to be mutually exclusive: the growth of ethnic suspicion is incompatible with the desire to preserve peoples in a unified government. The slogan "Russia for the Russians!" contradicts the traditional imperial slogan of "All peoples are subjects of one state and sovereign." However, the supporters of the new imperial project have not set themselves the goal of establishing a stable, functioning empire, making their project entirely utopian. Their goal is to mobilize the ethnic majority to take power and ultimately establish an entity in which the Russian people can dominate. When a people does not feel like the owner of its country, it begins to assert itself, at least in respect to the ethnic minorities.

All contemporary national-imperial projects in Russia play on these feelings.

### **The Russian Authorities and Russian Nationalism**

The federal authorities use standard nationalist ideologies to consolidate society. Thus they rely on the military heroic past, emphasizing the glorious victories of the empire; fear, focusing on the image of an enemy; and strength, pressuring the national movements of the ethnic minorities.

This policy is suicidal for the authorities. They are victim to the illness typical of personalistic regimes: conceit. Many regime ideologists claim that if it is possible to create “managed democracy,” then it is also possible to manage nationalism. They are deeply mistaken since nationalism has a completely different nature than democracy. It is based on the weakly-controlled mythological consciousness and demands constant emotional support. It is easily awakened, but difficult to direct toward the goal of preserving power. Today we see that the main thing is that nationalism has escaped state control and is developing beyond the desire or goals of the current Russian establishment. All types of nationalists do not consider the current regime their ally. Thus, Yur’ev notes that “no one likes the current pseudo-model [Putin’s regime], some less than others, but nevertheless no one.” This mood among the imperial nationalists dooms all attempts by the authorities to work with them.

In order to consolidate the people who revere the past, the Russian authorities created a new holiday, “the Day of National Unity,” marking the events of 1612. However, the holiday was quickly monopolized by the Russian nationalist organizations united in the Russian March movement. Now the authorities fear this holiday, placing Russian police on guard in Russian cities. The authorities tried to scare the people with an enemy image, but instead became the enemy themselves. In numerous flyers, the nationalists explain to their readers that all of their problems are the result of the so-called “antinational government,” where people with non-Russian last names dominate, particularly ministers Zurabov, Levitin, Nurgaliev, and even Prime Minister Fradkov.

In the throes of “managed nationalism,” the authorities created the nationalist party Rodina, but soon it almost slipped out of control. The authorities managed to reorganize the party’s leadership, but seem incapable of dealing with its electorate, which could turn into a crowd of people willing to conduct a pogrom. The authorities are extremely afraid of this crowd. It is capable of using force against the Chechen

nationalists and the Islamic fundamentalists in the republics of the North Caucasus. But the authorities do not want this force used against the Russian people and, as a result, are being dragged along behind a growing xenophobic outburst. After the ethnic pogrom in Kondopoga from August 30 to September 3, 2006, the authorities talked about the need to “guarantee the priority of the indigenous population,” signaling support for the idea of Russian dominance. After the excesses with Georgia in the fall of 2006, in which hundreds of illegal Georgian migrants were deported, the authorities announced the introduction of quotas for foreigners living in Russia. The Russian authorities undoubtedly are drifting toward a policy of imperial nationalism. However, a new generation is rising and they are hungry wolf cubs, who have studied Dugin’s textbooks, becoming brainwashed xenophobes. For a start, why shouldn’t they try to take the place of those with non-Russian last names in the government?

### **The Future of Imperial Nationalism in Russia**

Thanks to contemporary Russia’s democratic procedures, these forces cannot win political office. Naturally, they have no interest in democracy. Their ability to take power through a coup is also unlikely, although they discuss the possibility among themselves. More probable is a “quiet” and gradual replacement of the authorities and the growth within the bureaucracy of the national-imperial forces. Thus I am in agreement with Yur’ev, who writes that “the strategic appearance in the depths of the Russian power structures of an orientation favoring the second model (a full-blooded empire - E.P.) is completely logical and facilitated by the pressure of conditions.”

In its drift toward imperial nationalism, Russia is similar to Germany at the end of the 1920s. However, I remind you, that the Nazi’s premier idea, in the final analysis, did not bring them to power in Germany. In Russia, the likelihood of the success of the national-imperial model is even smaller, taking into account the complicated territorial structure of our country, with large sections populated by non-Russian peoples and with their growing share of the Russian population. In these conditions, the divide between imperial policy and the real demands of the country would appear very quickly and, as a consequence, the national-imperial regime would not have any chance for a stable existence.

Empires can long fight the nationalism of the minorities living on the periphery or in the colonies, but against the nationalism of the majority, they are defenseless and will be quickly destroyed. Russian his-

tory testifies to this fact. Provoked by the defenders of the empire and supported by the authorities, the rise of Russian nationalism in 1905-1906 was the beginning of the end of the Russian empire. The paradox of imperial nationalism is that it is made for saving the empire, but in reality is the base for its destruction. If the current rise of Russian nationalism brings it to power, it will not be possible to preserve Russia's uni-

ty. Russian nationalism will stimulate quick growth among the nationalist and religious-fundamentalist movements of the ethnic minorities in the Russian republics. This situation confirms the indeterminate fragility of the national-imperial system. The threat of a fascist Russia is real, unfortunately, but this outcome is not foreordained. The country has a choice.

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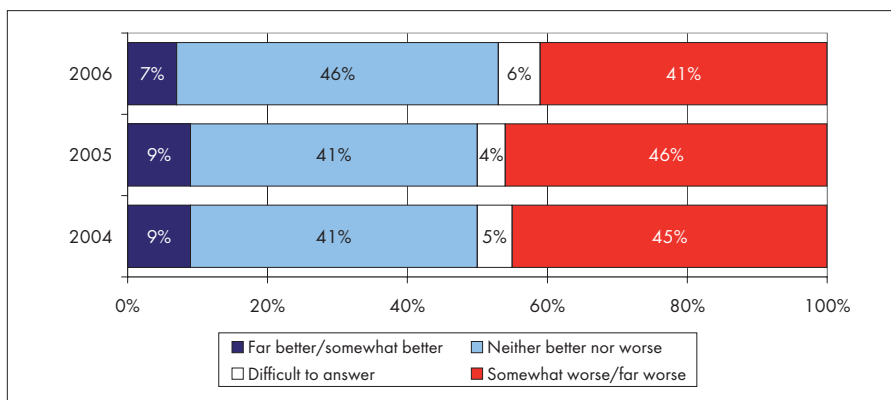
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**Opinion Survey**

**“Russia for the Russians?...”**

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**Do Russians in Russia Live far Better than Other Ethnicities?**



**What is Your Attitude Towards the Concept „Russia for the Russians“?**

