ANALYSIS

Natives, Foreigners and Native Foreigners—the Difficult Task of Coexistence in Russia[1]

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Abstract

The violent clashes in Biryulyovo on 13th October, ignited by the murder of a "Russian" by a "foreigner", is another example of the growing nationalism and xenophobia in Russia. This nationalism and the assertion that there are too many "foreigners" is utilised by both the regime and opposition figures, such as Aleksei Navalny, alike. The sources of this xenophobia are, however, much more complex than is often acknowledged, and indeed the terms of popular discourse is often confused, with "non-Slavic" Russians often regarded as "foreigners". The complexity of the nationalist question in Russia is perhaps epitomised by the statement that "Russia was an empire for centuries and is now reluctantly faced with the task of becoming a nation state".

The pattern is always the same. A "Russian" is killed somewhere in Russia by one or more persons of "non-Slavic" or alternatively "Southern", "Caucasian" or "Central Asian" appearance, terms used widely by the public or even in official documents despite their intrinsic racism. In response, a disgruntled mob of "locals" make it known that they've finally had enough of foreigners and that it's time to send them "home". Demonstrations are held, followed by violent clashes, and shops and markets—the preferred stamping grounds of the "foreigners"—are laid to waste.

This was what happened in the small Karelian town of Kondopoga in 2006, in Moscow city centre on Manezh Square in 2010, in the central Russian town of Pugachev near the Volga this summer, and recently, on 13 October 2013, in the Moscow suburb of Biryulyovo. Events such as those in Biryulyovo are therefore fundamentally nothing new. In each of these cases the police immediately embarked on a whirlwind search for the perpetrator and managed to find one or more culprits, at record speed by Russian standards, with politicians at all levels up to the President promising tough punishments. After a relatively short time, everything always calmed down again. But after Biryulyovo, things are different.

Strange as it may sound, this stems from the protests of the winter before last and the political upheaval which has both resurrected and intensified them. The liberal protests of the past two years against electoral fraud, government despotism and corruption and the nationalist-tinged conservative protests, targeted ostensibly at the excessive number of "foreigners" but in reality at the state's growing inability and reluctance to provide public services (which means that they are also anti-corruption protests), are two sides of the same coin. Putin's system has not yet been seriously challenged, but a growing number of people no longer believe in its immovable stability or its capacity to solve the problems the country is facing. In other words, and as noted by Kirill Rogov: "The time of the equilibrium built on oil and apathy is over". Politics has returned to the public arena. This applies not only to those demonstrating against electoral fraud in 2012, with whom I sympathise, but also many others whose political views I find abhorrent.

I cannot at this point provide a comprehensive and structured analysis of the problems which have led to these nationalist and xenophobic protests, but I will attempt a brief run-through of some of them. Hopefully this will suffice to reveal the magnitude of the problems, the enormity of the challenges and the difficulty involved in finding any answers.

My starting point will be the motto of my blog, which has appeared at the top right-hand corner of my homepage for the past five years: "Russia was an empire for centuries and is now reluctantly faced with the task of becoming a nation state." According to its Constitution, Russia is a "multinational" state, or more accurately a multinational people as per the preamble. Yet no one knows what this is or how it is supposed to work. On the one hand the country boasts a single, unified citizenship, but on the other hand 21 of these "nations" are small states within a state, granted special—mainly cultural—rights, and anyone can choose to have their "nationality" included in their internal passport. The largest of the Russian "nations", the ethnic Russians, are often referred to as the "elder brother" of the other smaller nations (a term first used by Stalin, hence the lack of sisters), but have no institutions of their "own" below state level. This is regarded as unfair or even degrading by many people who regard themselves as ethnic Russians. Attempts to argue that the state as a whole is dominated by ethnic Russians, with Russian as the manda-

1 This article is a slightly revised version of that found on Rights in Russia, which is available at: <http://www.rightsinrussia.info/advisory-council/advisory-committee-international/siegert-15>

tory official language and ethnic Russians being at a huge numerical advantage, accounting for around 80% of the population, regularly prove futile.

At the same time, in recent years the political leadership has invoked ever more strongly the dominance of an ethnic Russian majority culture and an accompanying "traditional" way of life. The main aim is to demarcate Russia from the "West" and "Western" ways of life, or in other words to defend the country against the impositions of the modern-day Hells Angels of individualisation, accountability and globalisation.

The Russian state, or Russian Federation, is therefore predominantly "ethnically Russian", but chooses to lay particular emphasis on this at times when the political elite believes itself to be at risk. Yet this is a dangerous move, since it results in corresponding counter-movements in parts of the country in which the populace is predominantly not "ethnically Russian". The liberal protests which started back in winter 2011/2012 have led to Putin playing the nationalist/traditional card on an increasingly regular basis. In this deliberately inflamed atmosphere, it is easy to predict the reactions to an event such as the murder of a young (ethnic) Russian in Moscow by someone with a "foreign appearance". Protests by outraged and alarmed citizens, who are legitimately concerned for their own safety, intermingle with deeper-running resentment and a fundamental (and unfortunately often justified) mistrust of everything linked to the state, and in particular the police. Well-organised Russian nationalist groups, some of which have close ties to the Orthodox Church, take advantage of the situation by creating violent disturbances.

This makes Putin's state somewhat reminiscent of Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice; spirits were summoned to relieve the burden of staying in power, but now no one can remember the magic word to banish them again. On top of that, the dangerous game of "We poor Russians against the nasty outside world" is a fine example of self-deception, since the most-hated (or feared) "foreigners" are not foreign at all, but come from the North Caucasus and have Russian passports.

For some time now, surveys have shown that it is Chechens, Dagestanis and Ingushetians (all of whom belong to the "multinational people" referred to in the Constitution) who are most hated in the heartland of Russia, even more than migrant workers from Central Asia. The murders referred to at the beginning of this article were all committed by Russian citizens of North Caucasian origin, with the exception of Biryulyovo, the alleged perpetrator of which was Azerbaijani. The Russian state has responded to this problem by misrepresenting the situation: it has called for "illegal foreigners" to be tracked down—even the broadsheets now commonly use the term "nelegalny" in this context—and is not shy to use false statistics to support its case.

When Dagestani traders, or in other words Russian citizens, got mixed up in a market brawl with police officers during Moscow's mayoral elections this summer, the police responded with raids on markets, building sites and factories. Over 3,500 foreigners, most of whom came from Central Asia and Vietnam and had nothing to do with the original fight, were detained in hastily erected camps. Dozens were later deported. The whole process was repeated following the murder in Biryulyovo in October, with 1,200 foreigners arrested within two days, and the deportation proceedings are still on-going.

Large swathes of the population—including the political opposition—are perfectly happy to go along with this misrepresentation. The foreigners from Central Asia or Vietnam are an easy target. Their status as legal residents is often genuinely questionable, and a veneer of civilisation and legitimacy can be gained from references to similar practices in the EU. Aleksei Navalny, the rising star of the opposition, has also hastily launched a petition for the introduction of compulsory visas for citizens of the CIS states. In defence of this move, he has stated that better regulation and control is needed in the field of labour migration because the wrath of the Russian population will otherwise continue to grow and violent outbursts such as those in Biryulyovo will soon be out of control. These arguments have made a deep impact, even in liberal circles, and it is unlikely that Navalny will have any problem collecting the 100,000 signatures he needs to force Parliament to examine the issue.

This is where things get tricky for President Putin, which is likely to be Navalny's main motive and the reason why part of the liberal public is supporting him. Putin's minions do indeed regularly talk about imposing restrictions and tightening up controls on migration, in particular from Central Asia, but compulsory visas do not gel in any way with Putin's (foreign) policy plans, hence the express opposition he voiced in the only public statement he gave on the Biryulyovo disturbances. The introduction of compulsory visas would be the final nail in the coffin for Putin's fervent endeavours to create a Eurasian Union, or even a preliminary customs union involving as many CIS states as possible (to date: Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia). Compulsory visas would therefore be a major blow to Putin's geopolitical ambitions in Central Asia and his goal of restoring Russia to something at least resembling a Great Power.

The current debate on compulsory visas is thus masking the much more fundamental problem of how to deal with the increasing alienation of the "nations" within

Russia. A more or less gradual process of ethnic segregation has been a long-standing feature of many ethnically-defined republics and regions, as can be seen most clearly in the North Caucasus. When the Soviet Union collapsed 22 years ago there were as many non-Chechens (primarily ethnic Russians) as Chechens living in Chechnya. Today, after two wars, the population is almost exclusively Chechen (95.3% according to the census in 2010). The same is true in Dagestan and Ingushetia, where the titular nations are also expanding at the expense of other North Caucasian ethnicities, i.e. a process of regional homogenisation can be observed. The share of ethnic Russians is also steadily dropping in the other republics of the North Caucasus region.

The North Caucasus is also the poorest region in Russia, which only survives on the strength of handouts from Moscow and because its residents, particularly young men, move to other regions of Russia to look for work. At the same time, the birth rate there is up to three times higher than in the Russian heartland, where ethnically homogeneous settlements of "non-ethnic Russians", particularly those of North Caucasian origin, are gradually forming in the larger cities, heightening anxieties and tensions. The Soviet state controlled the ethnic composition of its population by means of housing allocations, but the residential market provides no such opportunities for the modern Russian state.

Vladimir Putin took power in 1999 with the promise of defending "Russia's integrity", and ensuring that the country remained a "single country". To all appearances he has succeeded in this task; apart from a few terrorist groups, no one in the country is now calling for the independence of one or more of Russia's constituent republics, thanks to the brutal methods of the Russian army and the terrorist tactics of the Chechen leader Kadyrov. Yet the fact that both sides have now distanced themselves to the point of hatred is a taboo subject, even though ignoring such problems only makes them worse and fuels the wrath.

Perhaps this unique Russian schizophrenia is best described by a saying which is making the rounds of the Russian-speaking Internet. It bears the heading "The two-headed Russian dream" (a reference to the two-headed eagle on the Russian coat of arms, which allegedly turns one head to the West and one to the East): "The Russians want two dreams to come true at the same time: for all non-Russians to be expelled from Russia and for themselves to move abroad."

Translated by Joanne Reynolds

About the Author

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For more of Jens Siegert's analysis of contemporary developments in Russia, you can follow his *Russland-Blog* (in German) at <http://russland.boellblog.org/> and in the "Notizen aus Moskau" section of *Russland-Analysen*, available at: <http://www.laender-analysen.de/russland/>. English translations of some of his blog posting can be found on the *Rights in Russia* website, at <http://www.rightsinrussia.info/archive/comment/siegert/>