

The Specter of Russian Nationalism

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WHEN HE WAS named acting president of Russia on December 31, 1999, Vladimir Putin inherited a country still reeling from the Soviet Union's breakup: economic woes caused by the rapid privatization of state assets and the August 1998 financial crisis, ethnic unrest and war in Chechnya, and Russia's demotion from super-power status. Over the next seven years, the Putin government introduced a series of national reforms aimed at making Russia once again a major player on the world stage. Dmitry Medvedev's election as the new president means that his term will be a continuation of the policies set in place by his predecessor and mentor, who stays on as prime minister and seems literally prime—"first in rank, authority, or significance," as the Oxford English Dictionary says.

Putin's time in office has left its mark. Until recently, the economy had grown steadily for ten years, largely because of Russia's oil and natural gas reserves, which make up around 60 percent of its export earnings. Gazprom, the energy monopoly once chaired by Medvedev, supplies a quarter of Europe's natural gas. The inflow of foreign investment capital contributed to growing prosperity in large cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg; reflecting this growth, for the last three years Moscow has been ranked as the world's most expensive city. According to *Forbes*, it is also the world's billionaire capital, with seventy-four; the total number of billionaires in the country is eighty-seven, second only to the United States. However, this economic growth has slowed since the summer because of the global decline in oil prices, as well as the war with Georgia, which made foreign investors

wary and caused a capital outflow of thirty billion dollars within just a month of the end of the conflict.

Despite these sobering prospects, recent times have been a far cry from the tumultuous years under Boris Yeltsin, and the result is widespread support for Putin, Medvedev, and their United Russia party. In the eyes of many Russians, Putin represents a stabilizing force, ready and able to advance the national interest after the country was eclipsed by the West for too long. Although much has been written about his consolidation of power, silencing the opposition, and curbing the free media, it can't be denied that he retains a high degree of popularity among young and old. A candidate like Medvedev, almost completely unknown and never having held elective office before, could never have won the presidential election without Putin's backing.

With Russia's reemergence and Putin's popularity, there are more than enough factors to worry any democratic observer. Aside from the steady accumulation of power—the Kremlin authorities call it "sovereign democracy"—there is a revival of populist nationalism at home that coincides with Russia's increasingly hard-line foreign policies. The looming presence of nationalism in Russia's public discourse has gone hand in hand with the Kremlin's stance toward the former Soviet republics, Western Europe, and the United States. The political climate is increasingly anti-American, the world increasingly polarized, in Putin's representation of it, into an irreconcilable opposition between Russia's national interests and those of the West. Suspicious popular sentiment is focused on American expansion into Ukraine and Georgia under the guise of NATO. The result is a growing parallelism between nationalism at home and the renewed effort to build regional and international influence.

THE QUESTION OF Russian national identity is far from new. Anticipating the key internal struggle over the next two centuries, Rousseau remarked in the *Social Contract* that Peter the Great went wrong because “he wanted to make Germans and Englishmen, when he should have made Russians.” While the nation’s cultural and literary life bloomed during the nineteenth century, the intelligentsia was unable to agree on the extent to which Russia was part of the West, eventually ceding to the crash-course westernization of the Bolsheviks. During the Soviet period and under the guise of Marxist internationalism, Russia asserted its cultural dominance over its neighbors. However, the *perestroika* years of Mikhail Gorbachev allowed for the revival of ethnic identity politics among the people of the republics, resulting in an upsurge of nationalism that contributed to the fragmentation of the Soviet Union. It was during that time of socio-political crisis that Russians once again began to seriously think about their own national selfhood.

Under Yeltsin in the 1990s a wave of xenophobia began that remains today, particularly with regard to the ethnic groups from the Caucasus and Central Asia. The influx of these people into Russia, either as refugees or laborers looking for work, was met with hostility by many Russians. For example, the notorious Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, spent much of the past decade calling for state patriotism and Russian territorial expansion in Asia. It is true that Zhirinovskiy values statist over ethnic nationalism and accepts the multi-ethnicity of the Russian nation. This past spring, in a sign of things to come, he appeared on the popular debate show *K Barieru!* (*To the Barricade!*), arguing for Russian military involvement in the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia to protect Abkhazians who were granted Russian citizenship—a tactic that the Georgians saw as a step toward annexation. Even then, for Zhirinovskiy the interests of the “Russian people” are the driving force of the country’s policies.

Other right-wing organizations that appeared in the nineties were even more threatening. An extreme example is the disbanded

Russian National Unity, which was the closest group that post-Soviet Russia has seen to a true fascist paramilitary group. Its members adopted a modified swastika and other Nazi symbols, while simultaneously portraying themselves as marching in the footsteps of the Black Hundreds, the pre-1917 monarchist and Orthodox reactionaries. The ethno-racial nationalist ideology of the RNU appealed to mostly unemployed and working-class urban youth who had experienced the social disintegration of the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years. Formed in 1990, the group grew rapidly in size, and although membership estimates ranged from 15,000 to 50,000 according to different sources, it is known that it infiltrated high ranks in certain government agencies, most notably the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The RNU also found official support in regional administrations, particularly in the Stavropol and Krasnodar territories of southern Russia, where substantial numbers of ethnic immigrants from the Caucasus lived. RNU members “patrolled” public parks and harassed demonstrators, gradually becoming an arm of the regional governments. However, in 1998, Moscow’s mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, a nationalist sympathizer himself and a Putin ally today, forbade a planned RNU gathering, as part of a larger federal anti-RNU campaign. The group’s influence began to wane after that, and two years later it split into a number of smaller factions, which are still active today.

Violence against minorities and foreigners has risen in recent years. Small but well-organized neo-Nazi skinhead gangs stage random attacks on unsuspecting civilians—mostly people of darker complexion. The SOVA Center, a Russian nongovernmental organization that tracks radical right-wing organizations, reported that from 2004 to 2007 there were 1,049 racially motivated attacks in Moscow and St. Petersburg alone, with 140 fatalities. While the government officially condemns these acts, victims complain that too often the police response has been nonexistent. Indeed, police often tacitly support anti-immigrant discrimination. Racially motivated attacks by skinheads are often recorded as minor incidents of hooliganism rather than serious offenses. People of foreign appearance are also consistently tar-

geted for passport and registration checks. In the fall of 2006, when tensions between Russia and Georgia were rising, the Russian government cracked down on Georgians living in the country, deporting hundreds of people and urging Moscow schools to produce lists of students with Georgian names for local police. Instances like this show that although there may not be an outright link between racial violence and the Russian state, there is an ideological convergence based on a crude nationalism that has created an environment conducive to xenophobia.

Paradoxically, one of the ways that Putin's government has attempted to redefine national identity at home is by invoking Russia's struggle against fascism. Authorities have used the "fascist" accusation as a rallying cry against any opposition, whether it comes from actual neo-Nazi groups or democratic reformist parties such as *Yabloko* (Apple). The word designates a sort of bogeyman, a coalition of secret conspiratorial forces striving to undermine the country for their own benefit. The government youth movement *Nashi* (Ours), founded in 2005 in the wake of Ukraine's "Orange Revolution," which has gained attention in the West for being something of a Putin personality cult, claims to be an anti-fascist movement. Its 120,000 members have staged demonstrations against British and Estonian diplomats, protested against the adoption of Russian children by Americans, and clashed with demonstrators from other parties—all under the pretense of combating fascist forces. *Nashi's* allegiance lies with the Kremlin, and its mission always falls in line with the political needs of the governing elite. Its members have also held rallies against neo-Nazi groups' persecution of minorities, showing that *Nashi* is a nationalist, not a racist, organization. What is troubling is that in today's Russia the line separating the two has become unclear.

As of now, Kremlin policy has been to oppose neo-Nazi violence—in order both to save face on the international scene and to maintain state authority over public life. But the state's overt nationalism is indirectly spurring radical activity at home, something that it has been reluctant to acknowledge. *Nashi's* ideology taps into the hostility that many young

Russians already feel toward America and Europe, reaffirming it with a dose of Manichaean patriotism. *Nashi* not only provides an emotional outlet for the young but also gives them the opportunity to ascend the government ladder by making important connections—much as the *Komsomol* did during the Soviet era. While this year the government has announced plans to scale back and reorganize *Nashi*, it remains an active organization that reveals the state's new focus on promoting nationalism and Russian identity.

THE FORMS OF nationalism in Russia are not limited to a single, state-endorsed ideological movement. They derive from diverse and sometimes obscure intellectual sources. One such source is Aleksandr Dugin, a philosopher and public intellectual whose work ranges from historical reflection to myth and occultism. An outspoken admirer of the Italian traditionalist philosopher Julius Evola, he has also on more than one occasion sympathized with the left (Strasserite) branch of National Socialism. Virtually unknown during the nineties, Dugin's ideas now reach a wide audience. He is a regular guest on the country's most popular political shows. More important, Dugin is known to be an especially close adviser to Vladislav Surkov, a top Kremlin insider currently serving as the deputy chief of staff and the government's chief ideologue. Dugin's 1997 book *Osnovy Geopolitiki* (*Foundations of Geopolitics*), with its promotion of a neo-Eurasianist doctrine, has generated an ongoing debate about Russia's role in global politics.

Influenced by the work of the German geostrategist Karl Haushofer and the Russian historian Lev Gumilev, Dugin has revived the idea that Russia is a unique geographical entity culturally affiliated more with Asia than Europe, which therefore must seek its own path. World politics is a recurring confrontation between the commercial materialism of the maritime West and the organic spiritualism of the Eurasian heartland, of which Russia is the center. His fascination with traditionalism and mysticism leads him to trace this opposition to a pre-historical and elemental origin, but Dugin's prescriptions for Russia remain concrete. Eurasian geopolitics must

serve the interests of the states involved; there must be an undemocratic order so that leaders preserve the right of decision-making; Russia must seek to expand itself into a new Soviet space, not only in eastern Europe and central Asia but also in China; and an alliance must be formed with Germany, Japan, and Iran, to act as the Eurasian counterbalance to the Atlantic powers, mainly the United States and United Kingdom. Despite his intellectual affinities with far right thought, Dugin does not propagate an explicitly ethno-nationalist or pan-Slavist position. Instead, neo-Eurasianism is a doctrine based on a nationalist patriotism and the necessity for the state's survival in today's global alignment. But empire and expansionism are at work here, as Dugin argues for a campaign of coercion and political maneuvering (although not necessarily military force) to extend Russia's influence across the two continents while simultaneously blocking Western encroachment.

Since 2005, Dugin has criticized Putin for not taking a firm enough stance against the United States. As Russia has become an increasingly important economic force, the Kremlin's foreign policy has split into a pragmatic desire for Western integration and a rhetorical anti-Western nationalism. This is not a contradiction but the product of the economic liberalization of the post-Soviet era (which has brought great material gain) and the simultaneous ideological backlash against the perceived loss of national prestige. There is undoubtedly a "realist" element in the Kremlin's current policies that will displease the autarkic neo-Eurasianists. The prospects of Western capital, especially with Russian energy companies reaping massive profits from sales to Europe, are too enticing for the Kremlin elite. This means that Russia under Medvedev will continue to be a key player in the world economy, despite the anti-Western rhetoric of its government and the political tensions that result from it. Nevertheless, it is clear that Russia looks to solidify its presence in both Europe and Asia, maybe not to a full-fledged Eurasianism but to a more assertive foreign policy.

The Georgian crisis remains the clearest example of Russia's new involvement within the

former Soviet sphere. The short August war over the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia has brought relations between Russia and the West to a post-cold war low. Georgia's hope for NATO membership heightened Russian fears of Western encirclement, and after years of mounting tensions and Georgian-Ossetian skirmishes, the conflict rapidly escalated. Russia's swift invasion, which not only secured the disputed regions but also led to a partial occupation of Georgian territory, has shown the West that the country will take drastic measures to reclaim its traditional sphere of influence. The long-term effects remain to be seen, but South Ossetia and Abkhazia are on the way to becoming Russia's new satellite states. The war has brought new instabilities, yet it demonstrates Russian opposition to what Medvedev calls a unipolar world that is itself "unstable and fraught with conflict."

RUSSIA HAS claimed that NATO's 1999 war in the Balkans and Western recognition of Kosovo's independence from Serbia provide moral precedents for its own involvement in the Caucasus. According to *Time*, the Russian government recently purchased a 51 percent stake in *Naftna Industrija Srbija* (NIS), Serbia's national oil company, further expanding its dominance over the East European energy supply. Russia's relations with another Slavic nation, Belarus, have in recent years oscillated between distrust and cooperation, but last year the controversial Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko, named Putin prime minister of the Belarus-Russia Alliance. Like other former Soviet states under Russian pressure, Belarus faces an important question: will it be able to enter such an alliance without effectively giving up its sovereignty to its huge neighbor?

There are other instances of Russia's renewed involvement in nearby regions. When, in the wake of the Georgian War, the Polish government reluctantly agreed to host U.S. missiles on its territory, the reaction from Moscow was fierce and threatening. Now Ukraine finds itself in a tug-of-war between the West and Russia on the issues of NATO membership and possession of the Crimea. The uneasy coalition government of pro-Western

president Viktor Yushchenko and pro-Russian prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko collapsed in September, almost four years after the Orange Revolution that first swept Yushchenko into office. Elsewhere, the Moscow-Tehran axis spoken of by Dugin is solidifying, with Russia acting to delay UN imposition of sanctions on Iran, to which it has been selling weapons and nuclear technology. For Russia, Iran is a valuable counterforce to American interests in the Middle East.

Russia's military presence in what is known as Transnistria, an unrecognized breakaway republic in Moldova, is little known but emblematic of Kremlin policy. This tiny sliver of land bordering Ukraine and cut off from Moldova by the Dniester River declared its independence in 1992 after a short war. Although there is comparatively little ethnic tension among the population—composed in almost equal proportions of Moldavians, Ukrainians, and Russians—the region is potentially volatile due to alleged human rights violations, organized crime, and arms trafficking. The Russian Army currently maintains 1,200 troops there, which were initially part of a temporary peacekeeping force. In 2004, however, the army halted its withdrawal. Citing Kosovo's independence, the Kremlin has denounced the West for its hypocrisy in recognizing a breakaway region only when it is politically useful.

ALL THIS BRINGS us back to Russian nationalism. The rise to power of the Kremlin elite colloquially known as the *siloviki* (approximately, “the forceful”)—composed of former Soviet military and intelligence operatives with ties to Yeltsin and Putin—has led to a new era of statist conservatism in Russian politics, emphasizing stability over democratic proceduralism. The *siloviki* promote an economic nationalism where the state controls the distribution of natural resources in the name of the Russian people—countering the privatization of the nineties. The state takeover of numerous oil and gas industries has come with a dose of xenophobic rhetoric. For example, one agent of the FSB (the institutional heir to the KGB) was quoted as categorizing the Russian oligarchs in two groups—the good, ethnically Russian ones and the foreign ele-

ments: “All Jews are traitors, oriented toward the West. That's how it's always been.”

The increasing corporatism of the Russian state, where government officials, bureaucrats, and business officials together form the insider elite, has made policies that are good for profit centrally important. Some observers have argued that this means Putinism is ideologically empty and that the government remains fundamentally realistic and pragmatic when balancing between Western integration and nationalist posturing. Yet it would be a mistake to overlook the role that nationalism plays in the Kremlin's strategy of building popular support for its geopolitical aims. In fact, there has been a noticeable attempt by the government to make modern Russia the focus of patriotic sentiment in the national consciousness. One small example of this is the introduction of a new holiday, the Day of People's Unity, first celebrated in 2005, to replace the official commemoration of the Bolshevik Revolution. Meant as a celebration of the expulsion of Polish-Lithuanian forces from Moscow in 1612, its patriotic message of homeland resiliency against foreign antagonists has allowed far right-wing organizations to appropriate it for their own cause. During the first year of celebration, some thousand members of these groups rallied in Moscow, chanting “Russia for Russians!” and “Russia against occupiers!” The following year Luzhkov banned such demonstrations, showing that the government's top priority regarding nationalist sentiment is to cultivate it through its own official means but not to condone radical groups that could potentially challenge its rule.

Even the fledgling liberal opposition to these developments has not avoided contamination by one or another form of nationalist politics. In 2007, chess master Garry Kasparov, the face of liberal opposition to Putinism in the Western media, entered into an alliance with the fascist writer and countercultural icon Eduard Limonov and his National Bolshevik Party. The National Bolsheviks—for whom Dugin was the chief ideologue before breaking with Limonov in 1998—have acquired a reputation as a group of extremist hooligans, adopting a Nazi tricolor flag but replacing the swastika with a sickle and hammer and featur-

ing Limonov's own taste for radicalism on both ends of the political spectrum. Not surprisingly, the government has attempted to outlaw the party in the last few years. Indeed, one of the purposes of creating *Nashi* was to crack down on the NBP and counter its activist presence. United in their mutual dislike of Putin, Kasparov and Limonov joined with a small number of other parties to create the Other Russia coalition. The liberal anti-Putin parties, *Yabloko* and *Soyuz Pravykh Sil* (Union of Right Forces)—with no representation in the state Duma—refused to cooperate because of their concern over the inclusion of such radical elements. Kasparov fired back that the URF was Putinist as well. The coalition was prohibited from registering in time for the December 2007 presidential election, but its efforts highlighted the fragmented nature of democratic opposition in Russia's stifling political atmosphere. Kasparov's choice to align himself with Limonov and the NBP reduces the already marginal chances for a liberal or social democratic movement untainted by questionable alliances. Unfortunately, it seems that questionable alliances are necessary for any opposition to United Russia.

MORE THAN EVER before, nationalism is a political tool that makes for an increasingly volatile Russian society. Under mounting pressure, the government has stepped up its efforts to prosecute hate crimes and prevent any further activity by far right groups. But these measures by themselves will not be enough to suppress xenophobia and chauvinism in which the government is itself complicit. Even more troubling is the chance that the line between the more "benign" nationalism of the Kremlin and the violent ultranationalism of the fascist groups will begin to blur. There is certainly some overlap between the ideology of the far right and the general feelings of some members of the government

elite about the meaning of Russian patriotism. And if Dugin's gradual ascension from the radical fringes to the center stage of national politics is any indication, a further shift toward a radical nationalism by the government is not out of the question.

Nationalist ideology in Russia has a constantly shifting purpose, determined by the political ends toward which it is applied. There is no single, large-scale nationalist movement uniting the Kremlin elites and the far right neo-Nazi parties; ideologically they are too disparate ever to be completely reconciled. Even a populist demagogue like Zhirinovskiy, known for his xenophobic attitude toward minorities, was an eager supporter of Russia's policy of handing out passports to Abkhazians, because he saw this as an opportunity to expand Russia's influence. Russian fascists are unlikely to accept such a policy: for them a true Russia means one purified of all foreign elements. Despite this divergence, both groups have actively perpetuated an aura of hostility and mistrust, which has only been intensified by the government's rhetoric. Nationalism is a dangerous political tool, and the Kremlin's resentment over its loss of empire and the encroachments of the West into its traditional sphere of influence makes for a dangerously virulent politics.

Although Medvedev was not counted as a member of the *silovik* group prior to his election and was thought by some to be a more moderate and "liberal" figure, his allegiance clearly lies with the Putinist Kremlin. He may be a more pragmatic face to the West, but the political machine behind him is firmly in place, with Putin as prime minister, pushing for a more aggressive Russian foreign policy and beating the nationalist drum. ●

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