Summary: The recent electoral upheaval in Moscow and the Kremlin’s response to it have led to a wave of xenophobic jingoism, and filled the Russian public discourse with ethnocentrist and conspiratorial ideas. Russian officials have been more ardently espousing anti-Western ideas, and some high posts are now occupied by outspoken critics of an alleged U.S.-inspired plot against Russia. While these developments are worrying, success of the current Russian attempt to redemocratize would eventually imply a new rapprochement between Moscow and the West.

Russia’s Spreading Nationalist Infection

by Andreas Umland

Reports on developments in domestic Russian politics have recently, after years of depressing news on the growth of Putin’s authoritarianism, become more encouraging again. Reminiscent of the perestroika period, the Russian state appears currently to be in a phase of gradual liberalization, which may, like in the late 1980s, eventually lead to a redemocratization. In the 1990s, the emerging Russian proto-democracy was under the threat of being overthrown by the Soviet Union’s old elites. This danger culminated with President Vladimir Putin’s neo-Soviet restoration started in 1999. But these liberalizing tendencies are also in danger of being reversed by anti-democratic forces.

The most worrying anti-liberal force today is the growing post-Soviet ultranationalist movement with deep links to both Moscow’s government institutions and Russian civil society. The various radically nationalists groupings and circles have so far been fractured, and are often more engaged in quarrels among themselves than in challenging their (also fractured) anti-nationalist opponents within and outside the regime. Yet, the evolving democratic movement could provide an incentive for the Russian extreme right-wing forces to consolidate. Should this happen, Russia could again become a major matter of concern for international security.

In contrast with the 1990s, Russian nationalist ideas are now prominent in the political mainstream, and nationalists are well-represented in Moscow’s establishment. Putin himself follows this creed, recently admitting: “I am a Russian nationalist, too.” Moreover, ethnocentric, xeno- as well as homophobic, and neo-imperial arguments have become a part of everyday political discourse, on both the elite and mass level. Many, if not most, political discussions in Russia today end up with speculations about the nature, role, and future of the Russian nation. Where did the fixation on the Russian question come from?

Being neither fully European nor Asian, Russia is in a geopolitically difficult position. It has a long, insecure border with China, and is still experiencing syndromes of a post-imperial trauma. Twenty-five million Russians are living outside the borders of the Russian Federation. With over 12 million immigrants, Russia is the second biggest recipient of inward migration in the world after the United States, and a large portion of it is unregulated or/and illegal. For

1 As quoted in: Leokadia Drobizheva, “Most Russians won’t support nationalists,” Russia Beyond the Headlines, February 21, 2012.
instance, 700,000 Tajik citizens are legally registered to work in Russia, yet there are estimates that up to 2 million Tajiks may actually be living there.\textsuperscript{2}

While these factors have played a role in the post-Soviet rise of Russian nationalism, its recent upsurge appears to be a result of deliberate manipulation rather than a grassroots movement from the Russian population. In reaction to the well-known electoral uprisings or colour revolutions in some post-communist countries (Serbia 1999, Georgia 2003, Kyrgyzstan 2005, and especially Ukraine in late 2004), since 2005, the Russian government has increased its use of propaganda through state-directed mass media and civil society. The Kremlin reinforced the already present anti-American and conspiratorial bias of television reporting and debates, and created an array of novel pseudo-civic structures designed to spread nationalist ideas and an isolationist world view.

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These initiatives included new TV stations like the Orthodox religious “Spas,” pro-military “Zvezda,” and English-language “Russian Today” channels, and print outlets like the misnamed “Evropa” Press, a publisher of pro-Putin pseudo-academic texts. Within months after the Orange Revolution, the Kremlin also created several pro-government, state-financed youth organizations like “Nashi” (Ours), “Molodaya gvardiya” (Young Guard), Evraziskii soyuzy molodezhy (Eurasian Youth Movement), “Mestnye” (The Locals), and “Rossiya Molodaya” (Young Russia), which have been conducting numerous defamation and intimidation campaigns against supposed enemies of Russia, including liberal politicians, modern artists, Western diplomats, non-compliant journalists, and pro-democratic civic activists. 2005 saw also the establishment of the so-called Public Chamber as the presidential administration’s conduit to pro-government civic groups and intellectual circles, and the introduction of the Day of National Unity on November 4\textsuperscript{th}, which has since been hijacked by the neo-fascist fringe’s notorious Russian Marches. Later on, the government created further propaganda institutions including the infamous presidential commission “against the falsification of history to the detriment of the Russian Federation,” and the “Institute for Democracy and Cooperation,” with offices in Paris and New York and the writ to criticize Western democratic practices.

A particular escalation of Russian anti-Westernism happened during and after the August 2008 Russia-Georgia War, which also saw, for the first time, a rapid decline in the Russian public’s usually favorable opinion of the European Union. The West had already been shocked the year before by Putin’s anti-American speech at the February 2007 Munich Security Conference, but another scandalous joint public appearance of the old and new presidents of the Russian Federation in the same year may have been even more consequential. In his parliamentary election address of November 2007, Putin previewed his future strategy of identifying Russian democratic oppositionists as national traitors by calling Russia’s extra-systemic liberals those “who like jackals are skulking around foreign embassies.”\textsuperscript{3} In his 2012 presidential election speech at Luzhniki Stadium, Putin continued this line, warning that: “We won’t allow anybody to interfere with our internal affairs and we won’t allow anybody to impose his will on us because we have a will of our own!” He has repeatedly portrayed the confron-


\textsuperscript{3} As quoted in Andreas Umland, “Russia at the Abyss,” \textit{Russia Profile}, November 30, 2007.
tation between his regime and the protest movement as one between patriots and foreign agents. Putin has apparently had some success with this. A recent survey showed that 23 percent of those Russians polled believed that the 2011 December protesters were paid by the United States, while 43 percent had difficulty answering the question.

Several high positions have been filled during the last weeks by known anti-Western political spokesmen. Alexey Pushkov, host of the rabidly anti-American television show “Postscriptum,” has been selected to head the International Affairs Committee of the State Duma. The prolific nationalist politician and hawkish former Russian ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, was promoted to deputy prime minister in charge of defense in late December 2011. In January 2012, he speculated that the United States could launch a simultaneous, “lightening-speed, massive and paralyzing” missile attack against all of Russia’s land-based nuclear weapons. In apparent response to this and similar supposed foreign threats, Putin has announced plans to spend $772 billion on 400 new intercontinental ballistic missiles, 2,300 late-generation tanks, 600 modern combat aircraft (including 100 military-purpose space planes), 8 nuclear ballistic missile submarines, 50 surface warships, an inventory of artillery, air defense systems, and about 17,000 military vehicles during the next years.

In February 2012, Rogozin was allowed to create a new quasi-party, the “Volunteer Movement of the All-Russia People’s Front,” in support of the army, the navy, and the defense-industrial complex. Rogozin, at the Movement’s founding congress, set the tone by complaining “how very mean and disgusting this liberal anti-Russian propaganda really is.” Putin sent a message of greeting to the congress participants, saying the creation of a new organization was an “exceptionally important and useful business.” The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, also addressed the congress, warning that, even with a functioning economy and army, the country may lose “freedom, sovereignty, and independence” as there are “well-organized and coordinated information flows” working against the masses. Kirill lamented that “historical Russia, which we had called the Soviet Union, fell apart without a single shot fired, and the once great country is no more.” Today, according to him, sinister forces are still exerting “an information impact inside the country and outside it.” Mass media and the Internet, he said, are propagating an ideology of “consumption and richness.” Kirill concluded “that these forces may come to power in Russia some day. I am praying to God for protection from deceitful, ugly, disgusting, and slanderous propaganda.”

The public presence of Russia’s prominent ultra-nationalist theorists and publicists is increasing further.

As Putin and his entourage have been engaging in election campaigning and whipping up fears of foreign subversion, the public presence of Russia’s prominent ultra-nationalist theorists and publicists is increasing further. Anti-Western conspiracy theorists are getting more and more exposure via widely watched TV shows. Some of the most radical and illustrious among them have been joining forces during the last two months in a so-called Anti-Orange Committee. The new grouping views Ukraine’s Orange Revolution as an anti-Russian Western plot, and has set the goal of the prevention of a similar scenario in Russia. It is led by the political publicist and flamboyant TV host Sergey Kurginyan, who has brought together a “who’s who” of Russian anti-Westernism. The Committee includes two of Russia’s most well-known and ardently anti-American TV journalists, Mikhail Leont’ev and Maksim Shevchenko, the notorious apologist of fascism and Moscow State University Professor Aleksandr Dugin, and the founding father of the post-Soviet Russian extreme right and editor of the most important ultra-nationalist weekly newspaper Zavtra (Tomorrow), Aleksandr Prokhanov. The self-assigned task

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of the Committee is to promote an ideological reinvention of Putin’s regime in ultra-nationalist terms, and Russia’s reconstitution as a Eurasian empire. While the Committee is skeptical of the ability of Putin to carry out such a transformation, it still supports the current authorities in confronting the pro-democratic protesters who are seen to be, consciously or unconsciously, serving nefarious foreign powers, and be engaged in undermining Russian national identity, interests, and sovereignty.

While the recent upsurge of democratic sentiments in Russia gives reasons for hope, it may also intensify the already apparent rapprochement between Russia’s systemic and anti-systemic radically nationalist forces. In spite of such risks, the partial political opening that the recent protests have brought about creates opportunities for a more rational and balanced as well as less conspiratorial and Manichaeian public discourse. Ultimately, a Russian redemocratization would cause a marginalization rather than escalation of anti-Western sentiments in the post-Soviet world.

About the Author
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