

## Russia's Ethnic Minorities

### PUTIN'S LOYAL NEO-IMPERIAL "FIFTH COLUMN"

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From his insistence in early 2012 on the preeminence of ethnic Russian culture in Russia to his claim in March 2014 that Moscow annexed Crimea to defend the 1.5 million ethnic Russians living there, President Vladimir Putin's shift from civic to ethnic nationalism has been all too evident. With guards in elaborate regalia evoking Imperial Russia standing behind him, Putin's signing of Crimea's incorporation into Russia signaled a reliance on ethnic nationalism to expand Russia's territory and dominance in the former Soviet space.<sup>1</sup>

With this shift, to what extent is Putin risking to turn against him non-Russian ethnics, a group that makes up one-fifth of Russia's population and is concentrated in geopolitically vulnerable areas of the Caucasus and Central Asia borderlands? To what extent might Putin's expansionist rhetoric reanimate common memories of imperial and Soviet-era oppression among Russia's ethnic minorities? Might Putin face especially severe backlashes in Tatarstan, home to Russia's largest ethnic minority, given the not-so-distant history of discrimination, repression, and the horrifically murderous wholesale deportation of Crimean Tatars under Stalin? Could ethnic minorities turn into an anti-Kremlin "fifth column" of Putin's own making?

So far these apprehensions have not materialized. According to a poll from the reputable Levada Center taken March 20-23, 2014, 88 percent of Russia's adult population (with a sampling error of 3.4 percent) supported Crimea joining Russia.<sup>2</sup> Only 6 percent of respondents opposed it. This means that most ethnic non-Russians supported Putin's Crimea policy. In regular Levada polls, Putin's approval rating surged from 61 percent in November 2013 – when hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians publicly protested their

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<sup>1</sup> For a review, see The University of Sheffield's Nuray Aridici, "How Vladimir Putin has changed the meaning of 'Russian'," posted at <http://theconversation.com/how-vladimir-putin-has-changed-the-meaning-of-russian-24928>, accessed July 11, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/26-03-2014/proiskhodyashchee-v-ukraine-krymu-i-reaktsiya-rossii>

former president's decision to forego an association treaty with the EU – to 83 percent in May 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea. At the same time, the willingness of Russians to protest against their government sank to an all-time low of 14 percent.<sup>3</sup> In Tatarstan, challenges to the Kremlin on Crimea have been mostly restricted to the separatist blogosphere (see photo). When some public protests took place in Tatarstan this past spring, they were, symptomatically, not over the predicament of Crimean Tatars but against real estate development along the Volga River that jeopardized cottage (*dacha*) smallholdings. In a twist, the anti-development protesters likened their allegedly corrupt local officials to the Ukrainian and U.S. governments and asked Putin to protect them – hardly a sign that the local public had lost confidence in Putin over his Ukraine policy.<sup>4</sup>

### **Public Opinion: The Window of Insights**

Survey data from Russia shortly before the Ukraine crisis can help us identify the bases of robust, if paradoxical, support among Russia's ethnic minorities for Putin's expansionist ethnic Russian nationalism. The data captures long-held and likely durable public views then unaffected by the Kremlin's anti-Ukraine patriotic media barrage since late 2013. The respected ROMIR agency conducted the polls in Russia on May 8-27, 2013 as part of "The New Russian Nationalism (NEORUSS)" project run by principal investigators Pal Kolsto and Helge Blakkisrud through the University of Oslo with support from the Research Council of Norway. The present memo uses data from all of the project's four surveys based on representative multistage probability samples of adult populations across the Russian Federation (1,000 respondents) as well as in the cities of Moscow (600), Krasnodar (600), and Vladivostok (601). Two subsamples were created. One includes all 180 respondents in four polls whose primary ethnic self-identification was non-Russian--24 percent among them Tatars, 22 percent Ukrainians, 10 percent Armenians, and 17 percent other ethnicities of the Caucasus or Central Asia. The second subsample includes respondents who identified themselves only as ethnic Russians (2,199), with a random undersampling in Krasnodar to match regional distribution in the non-Russian subsample. Age, sex, education level, and household income among respondents, as well as the size and location of the sampling units were similar between the subsamples.<sup>5</sup>

The polls provide time-tested measures of public support for Russia's expansionism in the former Soviet space, allegiance to Russian citizenship, intent to vote for Putin as president, and valuations of Russia's economic performance (typically a correlate of support for a country's leadership). Comparing responses to the related questions across the ethnic Russian and non-Russian subsamples yields nontrivial findings.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/indeksy>

<sup>4</sup> <http://kazan.mk.ru/article/2014/04/07/1009967-tatarstantsam-ustroili-kryim-na-volge.html>

<sup>5</sup> Based on the independent samples t-tests with equal variances assumed and not assumed. The variance tests indicate that the difference in subsample size had no significant effect on subsample means.

## *1. Backing the USSR*

Even moreso than ethnic Russians, the non-Russian ethnics in the poll wanted to see Russia's territory expand. When prompted by interviewers that state borders may shift in the course of history and asked how they would like Russia's borders to change, 47.3 percent of Russian and 53 percent of non-Russian ethnics said they wanted to see Russia's territory enlarged.<sup>6</sup> This was significantly more than 36.7 percent of non-Russian ethnics and 38.1 percent of Russian ethnics who said they were content with Russia's present borders.<sup>7</sup> Almost as many ethnic non-Russians as ethnic Russians—19.3 percent vs. 21.8 percent of respondents, respectively, backed the idea of Russia expanding to a "Slavic Union" of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Significantly more non-Russian ethnics (33.7 percent) wanted to see Russia's territory expand to the borders of the former Soviet Union than did ethnic Russians (25.5 percent) (see Figure 1). Statistical tests showed that while ethnic Russians were no more likely to support the Slavic Union than non-Russians, the latter were non-randomly more likely to back the USSR. With Ukraine being both part of the former Soviet Union and of the putative "Slavic Union," the survey data suggests that incorporating Ukraine into Russia or into a Russia-led interstate union would get strong support among both Russian and non-Russian ethnics. In particular, the ethnic non-Russians would derive considerable motivation from a preferred common institutional identity—with the data testifying to the enduring, if mythical, allure of a specific form of Soviet-era multiculturalism.

## *2. Proud Citizens*

The polls found that non-Russian ethnics were just as proud of their ethnic identity and Russian citizenship as ethnic Russians. About 95 percent of both ethnic Russian and non-Russian respondents said they were proud of their ethnicity, and about 90 percent of both said they were proud to be Russian citizens (Figure 1). One might expect aggrieved and alienated ethnic minorities to exhibit stronger pride in their ethnicity than titular ethnic majorities, yet weaker pride in their citizenship. This was clearly not the case in the 2013 survey, which suggested Russia's ethnic minorities could be just as patriotic and support Putin's Ukraine policies just as adamantly as the ethnic Russian majority.

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<sup>6</sup> Excluding the "don't knows" and refusals to answer the question, with valid N=166 (non-Russian subsample) and N=2,219 (Russian ethnic subsample).

<sup>7</sup> One more option respondents had was to exclude the republics of the North Caucasus from Russia, which was supported by about 10 percent of non-Russians and 14.5 percent of ethnic Russians. Even though these respondents appear to support Russia's territorial contraction, it is worth noting that ethnic nationalist motivation probably factored strongly into their exclusionist preference—a motivation that in the context of heightened nationalistic fervor could translate into support for Russia's expansion outside the North Caucasus in places like Ukraine.

### *3. Backing Putin*

Of likely voters among respondents, ethnic non-Russians expressed as much willingness to support Putin as president as did ethnic Russians (Figure 1). About 71 percent of non-Russian ethnic respondents from among those who voted in the 2012 presidential election said they had cast their ballots for Putin. This is slightly more than the 67 percent of ethnic Russians who said they voted for Putin. When asked who they would vote for if a presidential election were held at survey time (May 2013), the difference between the ethnic Russians and non-Russians remained about the same (50 and 47, respectively), even though the total level of support had declined. These percentage-point differences between subsamples were not statistically significant, meaning Putin could count on about the same number of votes from non-Russian and Russian ethnics.

One important proviso here is that ethnic non-Russians were significantly more likely to say they had abstained or would abstain from voting, but even these numbers were nowhere near the same scale as the refusal of Crimean Tatars to vote in the hastily organized “referendum” on Crimea independence during the Russia-led military invasion and takeover in March 2014. In ROMIR surveys, over 43 percent of non-Russian ethnics said they did not vote in 2012, compared to about 30 percent ethnic Russians. These numbers were 15 and 23 percent, respectively, when asked if they would vote in a presidential election held at survey time in 2013. For 2012, though not for 2013, the difference on non-voting was statistically significant, possibly pointing to latent tensions between Putin’s government and Russia’s ethnic minorities. However, this issue hardly poses a political threat to the Kremlin. First, the scale of estimated non-participation declined from 2012 to 2013 and the between-group difference in 2013 was no longer statistically significant. Second, the data suggests overall that even if ethnic minorities develop grievances against Putin, they are more likely to express them by withdrawing from politics rather than by marching on the Kremlin.

Putin can also be satisfied with the overwhelming perception among ethnic minorities that Russia’s economy was doing well and had decent prospects for the future. About 77 percent of both ethnic Russians and non-Russians in 2013 said the economy was just as strong, if not stronger, than the year before. Minorities, in fact, had a somewhat more optimistic economic outlook, with more of them—26.4 compared to 21.9 percent among ethnic Russians—saying the economy was improving (Figure 1).

### *4. Heeding Putin*

A split-sample experiment embedded in the surveys showed ethnic non-Russians to be more responsive than ethnic Russians to statements from Putin. A randomized half of respondents in Krasnodar, Vladivostok, and Moscow were asked if they believed ethnic diversity strengthened Russia. The remaining half of respondents were asked the same question, but this time the question was preceded with the following cue: “Putin claims

that ethnic diversity of Russia’s population strengthens our country.” Among ethnic Russians, this cue practically had no effect (Table 1), but among ethnic non-Russians, it had a sizeable and statistically significant effect, with no more than a 0.1 percent probability that the difference between the Putin-cue and no-Putin-cue results was due to chance alone.<sup>8</sup>

However, the Putin cue influenced ethnic non-Russians in a way that poses a challenge – though hardly a pressing or sizeable one – to the Kremlin. After hearing that Putin said diversity strengthened Russia, fewer non-Russians agreed with that statement than without the prompt. The Putin cue reduced the percentage of non-Russians who believed diversity strengthened Russia by almost a fifth – i.e., from 32 to 26 percent in absolute terms. They seemed to trust Putin's intent, but mistrust its unintended consequences -- thus, probably feeling that if Putin wanted ethnic diversity to strengthen Russia, the end result may well be the opposite. In the final count, similar to the issue with non-voting, the percentage of respondents apparently swayed by the Putin cue was still small relative to the total sample size. When considering these results, one may also recall that the Soviet regime managed to survive for decades despite an abiding mistrust of its leaders among ordinary citizens.

### **Implications for Russia and the West**

Putin’s expansionist policy in the former Soviet Union under the banner of Russian nationalism – as paradoxical as it may seem – is unlikely to alienate a significant number of Russia’s ethnic minorities. Moreover, ethnic non-Russians who might potentially protest the rise of Russian chauvinism or the resurgence of Soviet legacies of ethnic minority oppression are most likely to do so in silence.

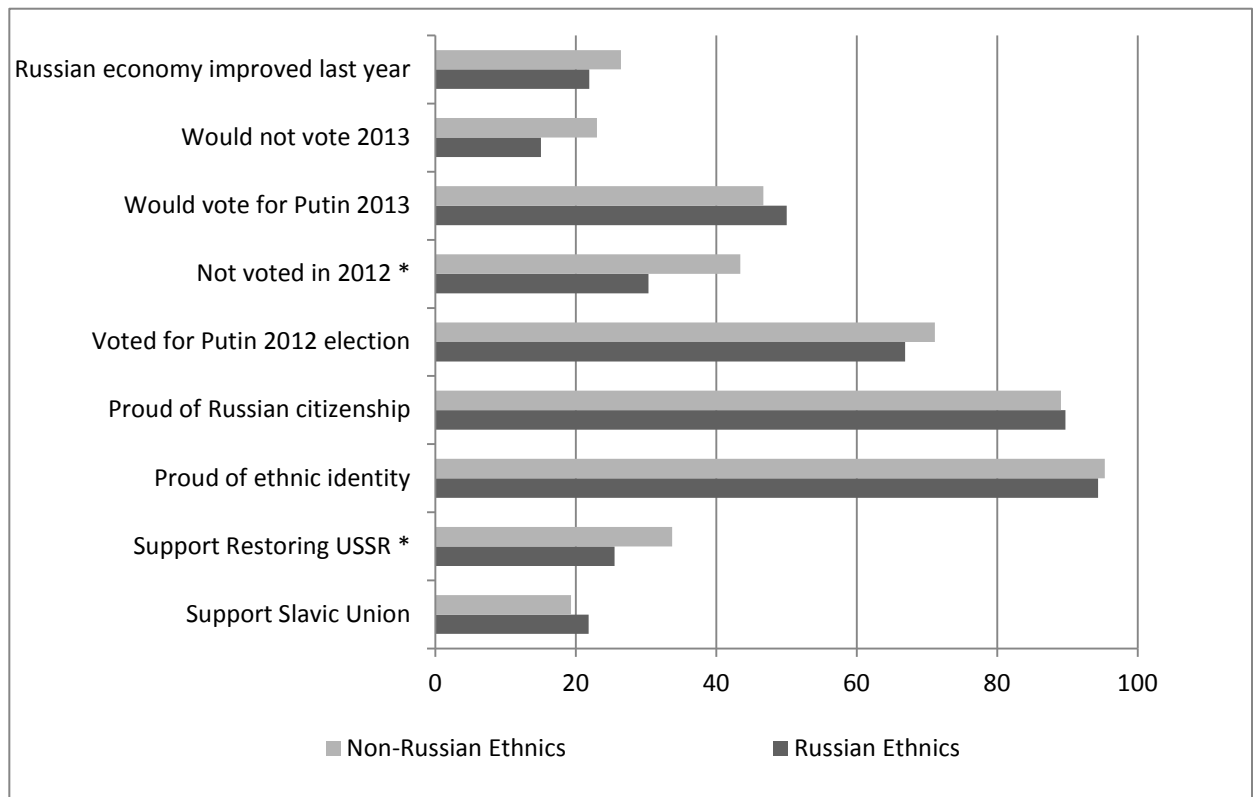
Moreover, territorial expansion in the former Soviet space not only has a solid basis of support among non-Russian ethnics, it also appears to be reducing exclusionist sentiments among ethnic Russians that had stayed consistently strong for more than a decade. A moderately reliable VTsIOM poll found that support for the slogan “Russia for ethnic Russians” dropped to 38 percent in May 2014 compared to 50 percent in September 2013. Over the same time period, support for Russia being a multiethnic state spiked to 57 percent from 44 percent. If nationalist expansionism reduces ethnic tensions within Russia as this data suggests, the Kremlin gets an added motivation to carry out expansionist policies in the former Soviet space, so as to boost the longevity of Putin’s rule, even beyond 2024, if desired. If Russia’s ethnic minorities turn into a “fifth column,” it is more likely to be one helping Putin build up a USSR 2.0, not one subverting his expansionist designs.

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<sup>8</sup> Based on a one-sample t-test.

To the extent that Western leaders count on domestic vulnerabilities, in part arising from possible ethnic tensions within Russia, to constrain Putin’s expansionist drive toward a Russia-dominated Eurasian Union, they would be discounting Putin’s resolve for expanding Russia’s domain. This only puts more of a premium on concerted external pressure on Moscow – especially of an economic and military nature--if the goal of the world’s leading democracies is to preserve the freedom, independence, and integrity of post-Soviet states like Ukraine.

**Figure 1.**



Note: (\*) marks statistically significant (nonrandom) differences in an independent samples t-test.

**Table 1.**

	RUSSIAN		NON-RUSSIAN	
	<i>No cue</i> (N=1467)	<i>Putin cue</i> (N=592)	<i>No cue</i> (N=122)	<i>Putin cue</i> (N=42)
Strengthens	10.3	11	32	26.2
Partly strengthens, partly weakens	62.3	62.8	55.7	59.5
Weakens	27.4	26.2	12.3	14.3

An illustration in the Tatar nationalist blogosphere of views condemning support among Russia's ethnic minorities of Moscow's intervention in Ukraine.

"Chechen Shame in Donbass" ("[Чеченский позор на Донбассе](#)"), May 31, 2014



This photo was posted on the web blog of the All-Tatar Center, a Tatar nationalist group, with the following comment: "The Chechens are ripping up the flag of Ukraine. Kadyrov's dictatorship (*kadyrovshchina*), following Putin's instructions and participation in the aggression against Ukraine will be added to their list of sins sending them directly to Hell."

Source: [http://tatar-centr.blogspot.com/2014\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://tatar-centr.blogspot.com/2014_05_01_archive.html)

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