

## “Nationalization of the Elites” AND ITS IMPACT ON RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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One of the consequences of Russia’s recent political foment has been a phenomenon experts have labeled “nationalization of the elites.” The goal of the policy, which Vladimir Putin launched soon after his return to the presidency, was to reduce the odds that public servants and politicians would have multiple allegiances making them less loyal to the Kremlin. The most conspicuous element of the policy has been a recently adopted law banning government officials from owning financial assets abroad and establishing a requirement that they declare all real estate outside of Russia. This has been accompanied by a more infamous crackdown on the liberal part of civil society, perceived as a fifth column acting on behalf of the West.

The “nationalization of the elites” has multiple implications, mostly for the domestic balance of power within the Russian ruling class. This memo addresses the potential foreign policy consequences of “nationalization.” I argue that the phenomenon relies on an intensified hostility toward the West as the main external “other” in Russian identity politics. However, the very intensity of this antagonism points to the fact that Russia is dependent on the West and unable to sustain total isolation. Accordingly, the authorities’ harsh rhetoric is primarily a tool for achieving domestic political goals; it does not imply aggressive intentions in the international arena that would truly isolate Russia. That said, spontaneous aggression resulting from a new domestic crisis cannot be excluded.

### **The West as the Key Security Concern**

Throughout the history of post-Soviet Russia, it has not been easy to determine the extent to which the country’s elites have been genuinely concerned about the West as a potential security threat, as opposed to using anti-Western rhetoric as a means to achieve other goals. After the mass protests of 2011–12, authorities appear to be taking the Western threat more seriously than ever before. All aspects of Russia’s relations

with the West are now evaluated through the prism of one overwhelming concern: the survival of the regime, which is perceived to be in danger from outside intervention.

A closer look at the Russian security discourse can illustrate the qualitative change that has occurred in elites' threat perceptions. To begin with, military security is not a top priority. Russian elites might have perceived NATO to be a real threat to post-Soviet Russia's military security at certain times, in particular after the start of the military campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999. Since then, these fears have abated. The fact that Russia's military planning remains disproportionately focused on NATO as a potential adversary does not constitute sufficient proof that the political leadership perceives the West to be a significant military threat.

Other aspects of security politics are more telling. The Western threat to Russia's standing in international affairs, for instance, has always been more tangible to the Kremlin. Russia's status is jeopardized, in its leaders' view, by Western policies like democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention that undermine the basic principles of the current international legal order.

After Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, "hostile intervention in domestic affairs" moved much higher up the list of potential threats. It was around this moment that "stability" likely came to be equated with the survival and self-perpetuation of the regime. If security concerns previously focused on Russia's status in the international system and alleged Western attempts to undermine this status, now Russian authorities came to view Western intervention anywhere in the world as a step toward regime change at home and, hence, as a direct security threat.

Since the start of the Arab Spring, and especially after the mass protests in Russia, Moscow has further hardened its stance on the principle of non-intervention. Avoiding political change has become an overwhelming concern and taken unquestionable priority over all other political tasks. While authorities viewed the color revolutions as signs of a potential risk to regime survival, urban protests became a symptom of a genuine and imminent threat. Preventing outside intervention has become the main prism through which the Kremlin views nearly all items on the agenda, domestic and international. "Nationalization of the elites," as well as the recent attacks against independent civil society, must also be viewed in this light. Over the last year or so, the ruling elites have also viewed cybersecurity almost exclusively through the prism of domestic politics, the aim being not to secure critical infrastructure but to seal off domestic political space against any attempts to "rock the boat" from outside.

### **Anti-Westernism as a Strategic Choice**

There is no way of knowing how seriously each and every member of the Russian leadership takes the image of the West as potential enemy. The question has no practical significance, however. When Putin speaks about "structures directed and financed from abroad, and thus inevitably serving foreign interests" as a key security concern, this sets into motion a powerful political and institutional dynamic, regardless of whether or not he is being sincere. The adoption of repressive legislation against opposition activists, nongovernmental organizations, and media unfolds independently of anyone's

subjective perception. Even if Putin decides one day that he wishes to stop the witch hunt, he might be unable to do it without significantly damaging his reputation in the eyes of his core electorate. But he is in no hurry to call off the attack.

One key indication of this are the ongoing inspections of NGOs, which the prosecutor general's office initiated in late February 2013. The main declared goal of the inspections was to expose NGOs receiving funding from foreign sources and determine whether they were in violation of the infamous "foreign agents" law adopted in July 2012 and in force since November. The Ministry of Justice, which was supposed to conduct such checks, was not particularly eager to start. Minister Alexander Kononov even declared in January that the "foreign agent" law was unfit for implementation, as it contradicted the basic legislation on NGOs. Then, speaking at the Federal Security Service Board meeting on February 14, Putin explicitly demanded that all regulations concerning NGO activity, "including those related to foreign financing,...must be unconditionally implemented." This was a forceful reminder to the bureaucracy that the typical slipshod attitude to policy initiatives would not be tolerated in this instance.

Measures to establish tougher control over all individuals holding public office may be viewed in a similar light. They cannot be explained exclusively by a desire to assuage the general public's irritation at corrupt elites. Rather, the aim is to make the bureaucracy less vulnerable to instruments like the "Magnitsky list," a travel and asset ban imposed by the U.S. government on Russian officials involved in human rights violations like the prosecution of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in detention in 2009. While the new measures have led to the resignation of several MPs, the Kremlin really appears to be trying to sever any threads Western manipulators could pull to influence domestic political outcomes.

"Nationalization" in the face of Western interventionism appears to be less a sequence of isolated policy steps than a strategic choice based on fundamental ideological considerations. It stands in sharp contrast to the ideas about "sovereign democracy" and the "nationalization of the future," promoted by then-first deputy head of the presidential administration Vladislav Surkov back in 2005-07. At the time, talk of sovereignty was needed to dismiss Western criticism and to ensure Russia's right to independently interpret universal values. Today, it is a concrete policy aimed at ensuring effective autonomy from all foreign influence.

### **"Nationalization" as a Search for the Impossible**

Even though the Kremlin probably takes its search for autonomy very seriously, one cannot fail to note that it is based on a number of extremely naive assumptions. It completely ignores the interdependent nature of today's world, not to mention the fact that the idea of sovereignty as total freedom in domestic affairs has always been an ideal-type device and not a description of empirical reality.

In Russia's case, these measures are particularly ill-founded, as they presuppose the existence of some kind of substantive "Russian Idea" in need of realization. In his December 2012 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin famously deplored the shortage of "spiritual bonds ... which have always, throughout our history, made us stronger and

more powerful, which we have been always proud of." These spiritual bonds in his view are supposed to consolidate society against the hostile outside world.

In reality, however, the search for the essence of "Russianness" ends up either in repression or caricature. Attempts to ground a sovereign Russian identity in Orthodox Christianity are extremely divisive and can ultimately only be sustained by repression. The Pussy Riot case of 2012 split the country deeper than any event since the 1996 presidential elections. This split has been particularly painful as it relates to many things that people take very personally and consider private – not just their attitude to religion, but also their family life, sexuality, entertainment, and potentially their whole lifestyle.

If the Pussy Riot affair was in many respects a tragedy, the story of the "anti-Magnitsky law" was a farce. Even the initial idea was absurd: ban adoptions and invest in future improvements, leaving today's generation of orphans with no opportunity for proper care. In the months after the law's passage, anti-adoption campaigners tried to position themselves on the side of good versus evil, repeatedly accusing American families of deliberately mistreating Russian children and even crying that it would be better for orphans to die in their home country.

From a certain viewpoint, the very logic of "nationalization" demonstrates its political hollowness and the impossibility of achieving autonomy through opposition to the West. It is premised on a deep suspicion of any form of grassroots politics: if a political initiative is not sanctioned from above, it is classified as being instigated by outside forces. It follows that the Russian people do not and cannot have any autonomous political existence outside the narrow limits of presidential politics. It is only the president who can act in the name of the people.

The self-proclaimed mission of the presidency, however, is to preserve stability and prevent any genuine political change. The state pursues gradual development and incremental improvements through the paradigm of technocratic management, consciously avoiding any bold political choice. It turns out that Russia needs sovereign autonomy as a means to escape politics. The authorities claim autonomy for the sake of inaction: sovereignty to do nothing at all. Paradoxically, the only truly sovereign political subject remaining on the horizon of Russian politics is the "interventionist" West.

### **Foreign Policy Implications**

In practice, the ideology of "nationalization" points toward isolation. But given Russia's economic and normative dependence on the outside world, coupled with the inability of the ruling class to develop an alternative economic or political vision that is not a caricature, this isolation is unachievable.

Russia needs the West to buy oil and gas, and it needs the Western mirror to reflect its illusory sovereign greatness. Looking for alternatives outside the West does not work. The BRICS grouping has succeeded to a certain extent at the symbolic level, but any honest comparison of social and economic indicators is not in Russia's favor. Moreover, Brazil, India, and South Africa do not share Russia's anti-liberal attitude. Only China largely satisfies the demand of the Russian political class for a model of

gradual, top-down development in which a strong sovereign power keeps external intervention in check. The problem is that Russia risks ending up in a position that is dependent on and inferior to China, similar to that which it finds itself in with regard to the West.

Given a lack of alternatives, Russia's relations with the West are bound to remain in a state of unstable equilibrium. It is evident that the Kremlin has no aggressive foreign policy plans. All recent hostile moves, such as the "anti-Magnitsky" law or the expulsion of USAID, have been purely defensive in nature, ultimately motivated by domestic concerns.

As far as the latter go, the current anti-Western frenzy is self-sustaining and can go on for an indefinite period of time. In practice, it will continue only so long as the Kremlin can deliver on its promise to preserve stability and makes no bold political moves. If Russia's fragile economy forces the leadership to cut spending on welfare or raise utility costs, domestic support for the regime could dissolve quickly.

In a situation of growing expectations and shrinking resources, postponing painful decisions will be increasingly difficult. The recent economic and political crises have turned a game of position between the government and its opponents into a gambit. Whether the gambit will lead to an end game, and what kind of end game it will be, depends first and foremost on domestic factors and the state of the Russian economy.

From a foreign policy perspective, the bad news is that the Western "other" will inevitably be blamed for any domestic crisis. Since the government's top priority will be to regain control, it is unlikely that the Russian leadership would risk a major confrontation with the West even in a major crisis. That said, in situations where the regime's survival is not at stake, aggressive international outbursts appear more likely than ever since Putin became president once again.