

What Happened on Manezh Square?

IDEOLOGY, INSTITUTIONS, AND MYTHS SURROUNDING THE ANTI-MIGRANT RIOTS OF DECEMBER 2010

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The nationalist riots that swept over major Russian cities in mid-December 2010 took nearly everyone by surprise. Anti-migrant sentiment was on the rise, but no one expected the protests to be so massive, well organized, and violent. Another unexpected aspect of the events was the reaction of the police. It had been taken for granted that any unauthorized public manifestations would be perceived by the regime as an immediate threat, so everyone expected the nationalist riots to be put down in the same uncompromising manner as are demonstrations of the liberal opposition. However, the police proved to be extremely inefficient in coping with at least the first major clash on December 11 in Manezh Square in the heart of Moscow. This first bloodshed had an irreversible impact on the entire political situation. The apparent inability of the security forces to prevent or suppress the outbreak of violence gave rise to a wide range of speculation, including theories about the Russian special services, or even the Kremlin itself, secretly encouraging the ultra-nationalists. The fact that Russia was entering an election year gave additional credibility to various conspiratorial exercises.

In this memo, I argue that xenophobic attitudes as such can hardly be described as a unique feature of contemporary Russia. What makes the Russian situation distinct is the way these attitudes play out in an extremely centralized political system. The effective elimination of party politics and free media has led to a situation in which an increasingly wider spectrum of society perceives the official image of Russia as a multicultural community to be a false ideology imposed on the Russian people by the bureaucratic state. At the same time, official promotion of tolerance is often inconsistent and competes with contradictory signals and myths about the “true” agenda of the party of power. This uncertainty, in itself, is a systemic feature of Russian politics. The allegedly omnipotent center is held responsible for everything that happens in the country and thus often prefers to hedge political risks by withholding important

decisions and statements. A paradoxical outcome could be that xenophobic nationalism could consolidate into the only democratic (if anti-liberal) alternative to the current authoritarian regime.

Is Russia Unique?

In Western political thought, there is a long tradition of exoticizing Russia by describing certain aspects of its political culture as exceptional, resulting from either its location between Europe and Asia or its long history of authoritarian statehood, or both. There exists an equally long tradition of presenting the overall development of Russian society as being largely in compliance with certain universal standards. In the latter case, the obvious differences from the West are explained either by Russia's lagging behind or simply as local peculiarities. In this vein, one would follow [Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman's argument](#) that Russia is a "normal country," albeit not necessarily a Western one.

Without attempting to intervene in this debate, I would just limit myself to saying that in terms of xenophobic attitudes, Russia is as normal as any other society in the North. As any large country, it is internally diverse, and as any other industrial nation with a similar combination of demographic decline and economic growth, it has experienced a huge inward migration in recent years. The crisis of multiculturalism as a model of preserving civic unity in an ethnically and religiously diverse society has been experienced nearly everywhere in the developed world, especially in Europe and North America. Voters all over the European Union increasingly sympathize with anti-immigrant political parties, and widespread racist attitudes among football fans are typical for many countries. Immigration policies of EU member states are far more restrictive than in the case of Russia. The issue of Hispanic immigration and the rise of the Tea Party illustrate similar tendencies in the United States. The recurring riots in Paris' *banlieues* and underground terrorist networks in Britain and Germany are all symptomatic of a growing social tension. The rise of nationalist ideologies and movements is an extremely troubling phenomenon, but it would be unfair to say that it presents a more serious challenge in Russia than elsewhere.

Thus, it is not in terms of ideological development that Russia is different. What is particular to the Russian case is that mass violent protests – the riots – were conducted on behalf of the dominant cultural group, ethnic Russians. Unlike isolated hate crimes that regularly happen everywhere, such a massive public outburst appears exceptional and therefore merits special attention.

The Institutional Failure and the Rise of Democratic Ultra-Nationalism

The key reason why in the Russian case these ideological developments led to large-scale violations against public order is rather obvious. In fact, it has been spelled out by the rioters themselves. In established democracies, popular fears of immigration and/or cultural difference can be articulated in a number of institutionalized ways. Most importantly, they can be voiced in the media and expressed during elections, with all parties forced to address these issues in one way or another. These institutional

methods, among other things, account for the drift of all democratic governments toward increasingly restrictive migration policies. However, in an open and institutionalized public space, xenophobic voices have to enter into dialogue with more liberal ones, and their constant discursive confrontation and competition leads to a situation in which some basic rules of political correctness become almost universally recognized. When the debate is open and the state is responsive to people's concerns, the average citizen gravitates toward the middle ground, and only a few remain in the margins. The mainstream can still be deeply oppressive in relation to certain groups, but the system as such can remain stable for a long time.

It is in this institutional respect that the Russian situation is different. There are plenty of reasons to believe that the top leadership of the country understands the danger of rising ethnic tensions and tries to promote civic patriotism and rules of political correctness. The Russian leadership always emphasizes the fact that Russia is multicultural and multiconfessional, and despite their personal attachment to the Russian Orthodox Church, other established religious groups normally get what they want whenever any major decisions are taken. Examples include the 2005 amendments to the Law on Religious Associations, the introduction of religious education in secondary school, and the recent redistribution of historical religious buildings and other valuable artifacts in favor of religious organizations. The Russian Law on Citizenship complies with the strictest European standards, and the rise in hate crimes toward the mid-2000s has been countered by law enforcement cracking down on the racist underground. Even the situation in the North Caucasus is described in mainstream discourse in terms of Russian citizens suffering from bandits and extremists, rather than in terms of cultural or religious opposition.

As the reality on the ground testifies, the implementation of these policies has never been a great success, mainly because of dysfunctional social institutions. The level of tolerance in Russian society has never been terribly high; this intolerance has made it only easier for corrupt officials to extort money from people belonging to minorities, which, in turn, has contributed to their discrimination and alienation. It has also been the case that in their reaction to unexpected events (as opposed to their pro-active, premeditated policies) the top leadership has sent mixed signals, sometimes initiating discriminatory actions or at least failing to intervene. This happened, *inter alia*, when Georgian citizens were deported *en masse* as illegal immigrants in 2006 and when foreigners were banned from selling food in the markets in 2007.

The events on Manezh Square, however, appeared to indicate that this problem had acquired an entirely new dimension. The rioters presented their action as directed not just against migrants, but also against the corrupt and inefficient state that was, in their view, unable to protect the native population. This was not a trick aimed at concealing some "true" agenda; on the contrary, this was probably the key point that the protesters were trying to make.

Moreover, this self-depiction was to a large extent shared by Russian society at large. According to a poll conducted by the Moscow-based Levada Center in late December, 38 percent of Muscovites agreed with a description of the riots as "protest

actions by the Russian population against raging ethnic crime and corruption in law enforcement agencies,” while only 33 percent characterized them as “ultra-nationalist, fascist rebellion” and 15 percent as “mere hooliganism.” Thus, even though most of those polled in Moscow and across the country were inclined to condemn the actions of the protesters and to approve of how the police acted to restore public order, a significant part of the population evinced at least some understanding of the nationalist cause, if not of the form in which it was defended.

Everyday xenophobia is a large-scale and growing phenomenon in many countries. In Russia, however, it finds no way of being articulated in the public space. It is not just pro-Western liberals and human rights defenders who get censored in the media and who cannot set up political parties – the nationalist opposition is kept down in a similar way. The result is that ultra-nationalists acquire extra legitimacy by seeing and portraying themselves as a *democratic* alternative to the oppressive authoritarian state. In contrast, the principles of liberal civic nationhood as promoted by the authorities are increasingly associated with the anti-democratic, corrupt state machinery, which, in this view, promotes them against the people’s will.

Since moderate xenophobic attitudes are unfortunately much more pronounced in today’s Russia than liberal individualist opinions centered on human rights and freedoms, the nationalists’ claim of democratic legitimacy looks, from *within* Russia, much more credible than that of the relatively marginal pro-Western opposition. If this trend continues, the Russian ideological landscape of the not-so-distant future might be shaped by antagonism between ultranationalist democracy and neo-liberal authoritarianism, with a marginalized liberal opposition squeezed in between. This is the price that society pays for “the vertical of power.”

The Mythology of Power and Rule by Indecision

One more aspect of the current situation has to do with the mythology of power and with uncertainty as an essential element of governance. The myth of the omnipotent Supreme Leader is an extremely important element of the current Russian political system. This had an immediate effect on how the December events were assessed. Since the mythical Center supposedly controls everything, no important political event can occur without being initiated, or at least authorized, by the very top. Hence, the riots were immediately interpreted as having been instigated by the special services, on the Kremlin’s orders. This was also the reason why, according to this theory, the police were so timid in using force against the protesters.

In a situation where institutionalized channels of political communication do not work, the uncertainty created by conflicting myths can constitute an essential element of the system of governance. Contradicting myths abound in the existing interpretations of the nationalist riots. For example, many people suspect the Kremlin’s involvement in the protests themselves, as well as in the event that triggered them – the failure to keep under arrest the people allegedly involved in the killing of football fan Yegor Sviridov. Many liberal critics of the current regime accuse political elites of sympathizing with the extremists, whereas the nationalist opposition never ceases blaming the party in power

of conspiring to sell Russia out to the West. Both camps would probably agree that the ruling clique wants to take advantage of rising ethnic tensions in view of the upcoming elections. The signals sent by the authorities to the public were contradictory: statements condemning extreme nationalism alternated with promises to curb migration, ethnic crime, and escapades against the liberal opposition.

The unwillingness to take sides is a global trend, which comes down to democratic politicians being replaced by managers who follow opinion polls instead of providing true leadership. Even if Russia is no genuine democracy, both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev can only feel secure in their top positions so long as their popularity remains sufficiently high. Unambiguously taking a side in the conflict would alienate part of the population and thus could engender further unrest. Another contributing factor specific to Russia is the emphasis on unity and consolidation, so important for the ideology of the regime. Pluralism and partisanship are perceived as threats to stability and order. To legitimate their (real or imagined) role as the embodiment of national unity, the top leaders have to accumulate and channel all politically significant claims, even if they explicitly contradict each other.

On the other hand, the creation of the “vertical of power” has eliminated all independent sources of political authority, making the center responsible for everything that happens in the country, from terrorist acts to the rising price of buckwheat. In such a system, taking sides is also extremely risky since it means taking responsibility for a situation that has a far from certain outcome. Excessive centralization means that society cannot effectively influence and control the state, but it also means that the state is deprived of crucial channels to measure the political temperature of the country. It is thus fully understandable that the official reaction to the unexpected outburst was loud but hardly meaningful. The Kremlin preferred to let other levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy act and to take responsibility for their own words and deeds; however, it seems that this time there were no heroes in the Ministry of Internal Affairs either. This is probably why the riots were allowed to continue far longer than expected.

It took the Kremlin two months to articulate a clear position. On February 11, police were deployed to the center of Moscow ready to meet nationalist protesters (though very few showed up). Meanwhile, Medvedev spoke at a State Council meeting in defense of multiculturalism and against ethnic and religious discrimination. The measures proposed at the meeting, such as revising school curricula, launching state-sponsored media campaigns, and promoting cultural exchanges, all come down to imposing certain standards of tolerance and political correctness on the people of Russia, who are treated as passive objects rather than subjects of a democratic polity. Thus, national civic identity is still promoted by a corrupt state that increasingly alienates itself from its own citizens. With the liberal opposition being consistently repressed, xenophobic nationalism has a chance to present itself as the only credible democratic alternative to the current regime.