

Russia in Search of Itself: Nationalism and the Future of the Russian State

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Nationalism is an ideology that specifies who are members of a putative "nation," describes the nation's self-image relative to other groups, and advocates political actions congruent with a national mission. The story of modern European states is, in large part, a story of nationalism. Using nationalist ideology and employing homogenizing institutions such as the army and public schools, France, Italy, Germany, and others managed to bind their states and societies together in a more or less common understanding of national identity, loyalty, and duty. Russia, unlike its western European neighbors, did not undergo a similar process. Instead, as a multiethnic, imperial state, Russia always faced a dilemma over nationalism: it could only use homogenizing, Russian nationalist ideology at the risk of alienating major, non-Russian constituents of the empire. Because Russian rulers wanted to keep relative peace among the empire's different ethnic groups, they never used nationalism in an effective or sustained manner as a basis for state-society cohesion.

The dilemma of Russian nationalism remained during seventy-five years of communist rule. The Soviet Union's leaders tolerated and/or supported different forms of Russian nationalism at different times, but none of them successfully harnessed nationalism as a force for the long-term unification of ruling elites with the masses whom they ruled. Even Stalin's remarkably successful exploitation of Russian nationalism to consolidate and mobilize Russians against German foes in World War II did not translate into a long-term nationalizing policy after the war ended.

The dramatic breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a new beginning for the Russian state. With its territory reduced by a quarter, and its population more ethnically homogeneous than ever before (i.e., the post-Soviet Russian Federation population is 80% Russian), Russia may have the best chance yet to consolidate itself into a modern nation-state, forged by the very powerful force of nationalism.

Russia's Competing Nationalisms

There are many schools of nationalist ideology competing in Russia today. The most benign of these, from a western perspective, are the nativist and westernizing democratic strands. Nativism is ethnically tolerant, focused on Russian spiritual and cultural values, and inward-looking in its prescriptions for Russian behavior. Westernizing democracy defines the Russian nation in terms of citizenship and advocates behavior in line with the standards of western nations. Both nativism and westernizing democracy, however, are politically weak and not widely resonant in Russian society.

A third and extremely malevolent school of Russian nationalism is known in Russia as "national patriotism." National patriots define the Russian nation in terms of blood, argue that Russians should be treated better than other ethnic groups, and emphasize force as a means to restore order at home and respect and power abroad. The most extreme proponents of this school squarely fall into the fascist camp--they even sport a modified version of the swastika as their symbol. If these people come to power, there is little doubt that they would use violence to get rid of "enemies of the nation"--Jews, Chechens, western-oriented Russians, and others. Fortunately, national patriotism remains largely in the margins of Russian political life--this despite the much publicized electoral victory of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in the Russian elections of 1993.

The most resonant strand of nationalism in Russia today is statism. It has two sets of proponents: one ethnocentric and another civic. All statistes deplore the breakup of the Soviet Union and define the national mission as one of rebuilding Russian strength and great power status. Differences exist, however, between ethnocentric statistes and their more civic counterparts. Ethnocentric statistes--including Lebed, Ruskoi, and Zyuganov--argue that Russia should become a great power again with a more ethnically defined Russian base. They are ambivalent about the legacy of communism and about democracy as an effective system of government for Russia. They are also more likely to view the West, especially the United States, as Russia's foe and to advocate measures, including the use of force, to defend Russian national interests.

Civic statistes include as members of the Russian nation not only ethnic Russians, but all others assimilated into Russian language and culture and faithful to the Russian motherland. They reject communism and seek to reconcile democracy with strong patriotism. They view the West as occasional partner or foe, depending on what vital Russian interests are in question. Although they are assertive about maintaining Russian territorial integrity, restoring order and strength at home, and defending Russian economic and political-military goals abroad, civic statistes are unlikely to advocate external behavior that would lead to Russia becoming a pariah in the international system.

Civic Statist Nationalism Dominant

The competition among different nationalist ideologies for the hearts and minds of Russian citizens is not over. But six years after the creation of the new Russian state, the relatively benign ideology of civic statist nationalism is clearly dominant. This is evident in three ways:

No widespread elite or mass support exists for an ethnocentric or ethnocratic approach to the Russian state. In a February 1996 poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Social and Nationalities Problems in Russia, 74% of respondents saw Russia as a "common home" for all nationalities, while only 8% preferred "Russia for Russians." Even with the traditional Russian prejudice against "dark people" from the Caucasus, the war in Chechnya never gained wide, popular support, and Yeltsin failed to turn the war into a struggle of the Russian people against the Chechen nation. In fact, Yeltsin's strongest allies for the war were no more than fringe minorities, like Alexander Barkashov, one of Russia's better-known fascists.

Neither Russian elites nor masses give broad support for policies of aggressive neo-imperialism in the "near abroad," even on behalf of Russian kin stranded in the newly-independent former Soviet republics. Many Russian politicians and opinionmakers, of course, issue strong words on Russia's role in neighboring states and on protecting "Russians abroad." In addition, the decentralization of power after the Soviet Union's demise created situations when there have been "rogue Russian interventions" in conflicts in neighboring states. A disintegrating army has also become the source of weapons and military assistance that have added to destabilization in some states in Russia's "near abroad." But, when the smoke clears, it is clear that there have been no sustained, forceful, and state-directed actions on neo-imperialism or Russian diaspora populations. In my interviews with leaders of the ethnic Russian civic movement in Kazakstan, for example, I have heard many times the complaint that Muscovite politicians never deliver on promises to help ethnic Russians in their demands vis-a-vis the Kazak government. Further, in a joint western-Russian poll conducted in 1995, 83% of Russian respondents rejected the use of force to protect Russians outside Russia.

Despite such inauspicious developments (from the Russian viewpoint) as NATO's eastward expansion, the majority of Russians continue to identify with western countries and western values. In the February 1996 poll cited above, pollsters asked Russians to choose which of ten countries they most sympathized with: France was their first choice, followed by the United States and Britain. Clearly, in many Russian minds, Russia is part of the West. This conclusion becomes stronger when one considers that there is a vocal minority, including high-level leaders in the Russian government, who envision and have proposed Russia as a potential member of NATO, an exclusive western club that, to date, has deigned to exclude Russia. Domestically, while Russians have consistently expressed their preference for strong leadership, this does not mean a desire to return to an authoritarian system. They yearn for greater law and order in their lives--a very rational and understandable yearning--but very few want a dictatorship. In a 1995 poll, only 12% expressed support for a military regime, while 56% in a 1996 poll emphasized the importance of democratic procedures and 88% wanted Russia to be a lawful state with a developed legal system.

In numerous political and philosophical discussions today, Russians are increasingly looking inward and seeking to maximize welfare, order, and development at home. Consistent with civic statism, such a focus argues that only when the homefront is well can Russia rightly and effectively claim its place as a great power abroad. This preference for an inward orientation might help explain the popularity of such politicians as Moscow's mayor, Yurii Luzhkov, who occasionally spouts nationalist claims against a state like Ukraine but, more importantly, his actions at home speak louder for a doer who cares about his city and people. The dominance of civic nationalism is contributing to what I would identify as a rising trend of healthy Russian recognition of the need to modernize Russia and integrate it into the larger community of developed western states, while simultaneously preserving a core of Russian historical identity and culture and avoiding unwarranted and destructive aspects of westernization (à la Japan).

Russian Nationalism and US Foreign Policy

The conventional wisdom among many western analysts and policymakers that Russian nationalism is synonymous with malevolent ideas and behavior is simplistic and wrong. We should rightly condemn extremist Russian nationalist ideas, but more important, we must acknowledge nationalism as a legitimate force for uniting Russian state and society, and encourage the healthiest strand that is proving resonant today with a bulk of the Russian people.

What are the implications of rising Russian civic statist nationalism for US policy? First, American policymakers should articulate the view that not all nationalism is bad and that, indeed, the search for a "national idea" to bind Russian state and society together is a critical undertaking for Russia's future. They should encourage the most benign aspects of civic statist nationalism--for example, its focus on peace, welfare, and strength at home as a key criterion for Russian greatness. In the past, many Russians supported the expansionist policies of the state, but now they are exhausted with the imperial mode of statecraft and seek mainly to improve their lives inside Russia. Words are cheap, but they can have positive effects. At a time when Russia is in difficult straits and feels in some ways snubbed by the West, words of sympathy regarding Russian nationalism and future state development can improve the atmosphere of US-Russian relations.

Second, to help strengthen the evolution of healthy Russian nationalism, the United States must, in the next decade, clarify as much as possible its own benign intentions toward Russia and affirm its support for Russian integration into western political, economic, and security networks. Support for Russian integration does not mean that we shower Russia with privileges it does not deserve or positions it cannot fulfill. It means, rather, that we acknowledge genuine Russian concerns and interests (e.g., forms of non-coercive integration in the former Soviet region), recognize Russian progress (e.g., in economic reform, in relations with Ukraine), and operationalize cooperation on as many fronts as possible (e.g., the Russia-NATO Founding Act, START III, and others).

The success of a benign form of nationalism in consolidating Russian statehood will be key to Russia's evolution as long-term friend or foe of the West, and normal member or pariah state of the international system. The importance of a healthy nationalism cannot be underestimated. As one Russian has put it:

There is nothing to be feared from the growth of the Russian...national consciousness...Only nations with a developed sense of self-esteem can be friends with other nations. Faceless mobs are capable only of oppressing each other.