Russian Nationalism and Vladimir Putin's Russia

Astrid Tuminez
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Nationalism is a political ideology which holds that: 1) a nation exists with identifiable members and unique collective characteristics; 2) the nation is the chief source of political authority; and 3) the individual's highest loyalty must be to the nation's core interests or mission. The term "nation" refers to a concept or category that connotes kinship based on any number of criteria, including race, ethnicity, language, religion, territory, or citizenship. As an ideology, nationalism has become the hallmark of modern states--i.e., states where political authority has been reconstituted in the name of the people or nation, and has ceased to be an endowment of God or noble birthright. In the last 150 years, in particular, nationalism has served as a powerful legitimizing and mobilizing tool for political actors seeking to exercise, maintain, or seize political power.

Contrary to common assertions, nationalism is not a uniformly malevolent ideology. In fact, its power to create and consolidate a collective identity and to posit common goals is one that can be harnessed toward propitious ends. Nationalism can help create an emotional foundation for political community and can inspire impulses toward economic development, collective welfare, and political stability.

The Legacy of Nationalism in Russia

Russian rulers during the tsarist period never fully employed nationalism to consolidate relations between state and society. The process of nation-building, a prerequisite to the political empowerment of nationalism elsewhere, was stunted in Russia. Nation-building entails: 1) the cultivation of belief in common origins, destiny, and the distinctiveness of a people; and 2) the development of a shared sense of participation in matters affecting a group, and a shared understanding of the rights and duties among all members of a collective (both rulers and ruled). Why was nation-building stunted in Russia? First, because Russia was a multiethnic empire, its rulers had great difficulty in developing a specifically Russian ethnic identity or belief in a common Russian origin. In court and among the nobility, there tended to be a disproportionate number of "foreigners," as opposed to ethnic Russians. And among ethnic Russians themselves, there was a persistent and deep cultural divide in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between a massive peasantry and a narrow, westernized nobility.

Second, nation-building was stunted because of Russia's autocratic government; the component of nation-building that encompassed the development of a shared sense of participation in governance also lagged. The tsarist government, for example, looked with great fear and suspicion upon any autonomous movements in society and punished severely those individuals and groups who attempted to redefine duties and obligations between the tsar and the people.

In contrast to stunted nation-building, the process of state-building developed tremendously in Russia. The historian Vassily Klyuchevsky summed up this phenomenon in his aphorism that, in Russia, "the state grew fat, while the people grew thin." State-building, particularly in imperial Russia, required all meaningful resources to be harnessed toward serving the state and maintaining its imperial, great power status. As the historian Geoffrey Hosking has argued, up until its demise in 1917, imperial Russia was not an emerging nation but a "multiethnic service state" where "[social] hierarchy and status were shaped by the need to provide the sinews of empire…."

Following the collapse of tsarist Russia, the phenomenon of an overdeveloped state and an underdeveloped nation persisted. As was the case under the tsars, rulers of the multiethnic Soviet state harnessed and demanded the resources and services of the people without effectively consolidating a common national identity (whether based on Soviet citizenship or the predominant Russian culture). In addition, the Soviet regime effectively failed to redefine duties and obligations between state and nation and never acknowledged the nation or people as the repository of political power. Although different types of Russian nationalism existed during the Soviet period, nationalist ideology, at best, coexisted uneasily with Communist ideology. It occasionally flourished in underground publications and was propagated by some civic organizations, or was sometimes wielded by the regime to legitimize itself and to mobilize the population. Perhaps the most salient use of Russian nationalism for mobilization was during World War II, when Joseph Stalin urged Russians to fight for their motherland. But throughout the seven-odd decades of Communist rule, Russian nationalism never became dominant as an official ideology, nor did it serve as the basis for consolidating relations between state and society.

Nationalism and Vladimir Putin's Russia

The collapse of the Soviet Union has been marked by a widespread search for a "national idea" in Russia. Although official attempts under former President Boris Yeltsin to come up with a "national idea" failed, questions underpinning this search have nonetheless persisted. Who are the members of the Russian nation, and what makes Russia distinct in its post-Soviet and post-imperial incarnation? What are the state's obligations to the people or nation? What is Russia's mission, if any? How should Russia define itself as a great power, and how should it interact with the rest of the world?

Vladimir Putin, Russia's relatively new and vastly popular president, is unmistakably a nationalist and has offered some answers to vexing questions of Russian national identity

and purpose. He openly calls himself a "patriot," avoiding the negative connotations of the term "nationalist" in Russian. His nationalism is apparent, however, in such statements as one he made in a September 2000 interview with the Indian newspaper, *India Today*: "[Russian] basic values are none other than patriotism, love of one's motherland, love of one's home, one's people, one's cultural values….Everything that makes us a nation, that is the source of our uniqueness, everything that we can be proud of--all this will be the foundation of [the national] idea."

Putin's nationalism largely falls in the category that may be called moderate statism. Moderate statism defines the Russian nation largely in civic terms, including ethnic Russians, Russian speakers, and all others who live on the territory of the Russian Federation. It favors the creation of a strong state and emphasizes Russia as a "great power." Moderate statism identifies the national mission as the restoration of Russian great power status, the unification of state and society, and the cultivation of patriotism to revive national discipline. In terms of behavior toward the outside world, moderate statism favors an assertive policy in the former Soviet space as well as a strong defense of Russian national interests, even if it means occasionally pursuing a path that diverges from the favored policies of Western powers.

Putin's moderate statist nationalism is peppered with what may be termed "the good, the bad, and the ugly." On the "good" side, he inspires support with his rhetoric on love of motherland, a "worthy life" (*dostoinaia zhizn'*) for all Russians, and pride in Russian history and achievements. Putin constantly extols the virtue of national pride, without which Russia "will deteriorate as a people" and "no longer have the capacity for great deeds." He has condemned the imperialism of the past--e.g., calling the Soviet invasion of Hungary and Czechoslovakia as "major mistakes whose fruit is the present Russophobia among Eastern Europeans." He stresses the importance of internal needs and welfare over external ambitions, and has argued that the nation's most pressing goals are to restore moral values and national dignity, eliminate poverty, and build a Russia that Russians would not be ashamed to pass on to their children. The "bad" side of Putin's nationalist rhetoric involves pronouncements that show a lack of belief in democracy as an organizing principle for Russian state-society relations. He speaks of liberal values as having no "deep historical roots" in Russia and emphasizes the state as the "source and guarantor of order, the initiator and main driving force of all change." Putin also favors a "super-centralized" state as a desirable feature "laid down in Russia's genetic code, its traditions, and the mentality of its peoples." This overemphasis on the state threatens a repetition of the old path of development of an overbearing state and a weak society in Russia. Finally, the "ugly" aspect of Putin's nationalism is best encapsulated in his conduct of the Chechen war and wholesale characterization of Chechens as "bandits, terrorists, scum [and] dark forces." These pronouncements denote a chauvinism that does not augur well for a Russia whose population is at least a fifth non-ethnic Russian.

Should Putin's nationalism be feared? It is too early to conclude. What seems evident is that this nationalism currently serves some necessary purposes. First, it helps to legitimize Putin as a leader. By putting on the nationalist mantle and claiming to speak on behalf of the nation and its core interests, Putin--previously a relatively unknown political

entity--is able to legitimize his political position and his exercise of power. Second, in a destroyed empire, nationalism helps offset feelings of humiliation, resentment, and helplessness, and creates some space for generating collective optimism and self-esteem. Nationalism creates a new basis for collective beliefs and consensus, without which it would be extremely difficult for Putin to implement the economic and political measures that he believes necessary to improve Russia's internal welfare and external status.

Inherent in Putin's nationalism are some dangers. First, by pumping up Russian great power identity and a "super-centralized" state, there is a risk that, as in the past, the goals of internal welfare and civic empowerment may be sacrificed in the name of military glory, regional hegemony, and Moscow-centered authoritarian government. Second, chauvinistic rhetoric (even if limited only to the Chechens) reinforces a nationalism that is *against* another group rather than *for* such beneficial purposes as the pursuit of national unity and collective welfare.

Policy Implications

The foregoing analysis points to a few policy implications:

- It is important to monitor the evolution of Putin's nationalist rhetoric and gauge the level of support for his ideas among the population at large. Such monitoring will be necessary to sharpen our analysis down the road of what ideas might influence Russian behavior in policy areas that are of importance to the United States.

- It would be prudent to adhere to the general principle of avoiding further national humiliation of Russia. In particular, we would do well to avoid measures that heighten Russian resentment against the West without adding much palpable benefit to US security. For example, US support for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion to the Baltic states may be a dubious proposition if it legitimizes the rhetoric of extreme nationalists and intensifies Russian antagonism toward the US without necessarily bringing the US direct security benefits.

- It is important to continue support for programs that enhance Russian democratization and the development of civic society. Granted, not all these programs may be uniformly effective, but they are focused on the right track. Specifically, they help nurture those actors and forces that could potentially offset the impact of "ugly" aspects of nationalism that might come to the fore in Russian politics and decision-making.

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