

Official Patriotism in Russia

Its Essence and Implications

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After a brief burst of optimism following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia fell into a funk. The economy failed to take off, and by the end of the decade it was no better – and in some ways even worse – than it had been at its start. In foreign affairs, relations between Russia and the West became increasingly strained due to a series of perceived diplomatic setbacks and snubs (including resistance to Russian membership in the World Trade Organization and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s interventions in the former Yugoslavia). There was deep humiliation and rage over the failed campaign in Chechnya from 1994 to 1996; as the decade wore on, this was coupled with anxieties about the emergence of a terrorist threat associated with Islamic radicalism emanating from Russia’s southern fringe. Not only did this threaten national security from without, it also raised concerns about the viability of a civic national identity for polyglot Russia, whose population was composed of well over 100 ethnic groups, including roughly 20-25 million Muslims. Yet another disturbing trend was globalization and the loss of national identity it seemed to portend, particularly its negative effects on the younger generation’s worldview. By the late 1990s, it was impossible to ignore the evidence of rampant drug abuse, crime, anomie, and alienation.

The upshot of all this was a pervasive feeling of embattlement and insecurity, which in turn fostered a wave of nationalism in social and political discourse. In this context, calls for “increasing security” implied not only the enhancement of traditional military power, but also something more diffuse and elusive – a thoroughgoing reconstruction and reinvigoration of national identity. Although former Russian president Boris Yeltsin took belated and faltering steps in this direction, not until Vladimir Putin came to power did this groundswell for change find a vigorous champion. The new president

quickly moved to institute a series of federal programs designed to transform the worldview, physical condition, and professional prospects of Russia's youth. Part of this overarching project was the Program for Patriotic Education (as distinct from the Federal Program on Education, which dealt with traditional issues of curriculum, degree conferral, and technology). Now in its second phase, the Program for Patriotic Education is dedicated to fostering several key values: national identity, social order, state strength, and the symbolic role of the military for each of the above. As such, patriotism is understood as an integral part of the emergence of a cohesive and self-confident Russia, capable of asserting itself as a great power on the world stage.

The Substance of Patriotic Education

As laid out in the official program for 2006-2010, as well as in various ancillary statements and projects, the primary thrust of patriotic education is the cultivation of loyalty to the fatherland, including obligatory military service (and calls not to evade it). Indeed, the single most striking and important feature of the Patriotic Education Program is the extent to which it extols the military and militaristic virtues. This is entirely in keeping with the recent drift in official attitudes. As Putin stated during a May 2006 meeting with representatives of a pro-presidential youth group:

We must explain to the entire generation of young people that the question of whether or not to serve in the army should not even come up for a young person to begin with. We must all realize that without the army there would be no country. Nobody should have the slightest doubt on this score. No army, no Russia.

The Patriotic Education Program strongly encourages the teaching of national history, especially historical approaches that emphasize the continuity between Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. Throughout this sweep of Russian history, the focus is on outstanding achievements, particularly military victories. As a result of this combined orientation, an increasingly widespread phenomenon is the organization of youth military exercises. Intended for youths aged 14 to 16, these exercises have emphasized military tactics, drills, and sports, as well as Russian history, law, and heraldry.

Yet while military and military-historical themes are key, a panoply of other, seemingly unrelated, values fall under the patriotic education umbrella. For example, traditional and national values are also exalted and are contrasted with relatively undesirable cosmopolitan values. The Program includes planned activities aimed at promoting "traditional folk culture as an active means of patriotic education." Not only are these envisioned to help consolidate a fundamental pan-Russian identity, they are also intended to promote interethnic and interracial harmony. By sharing their national folk cultures, it is hoped that young Russians of all backgrounds will learn lessons of tolerance and appreciation for diversity. This, in turn, is intended to help prevent racist violence, such as the widely publicized skinhead attacks on minorities, and counter separatist tendencies in certain parts of the country, especially the turbulent North Caucasus.

As a reflection of its wildly heterogeneous nature, the Patriotic Education Program

lists a series of new awards designed to honor the insertion of patriotism into all areas of public life, from teaching to sports to literature. Another cherished and supposedly patriotic value is entrepreneurship, which is to be pursued by a set of planned activities under the rubric of “patriotism and business.” Patriotism apparently extends even to private morality, including the inculcation of “proper reproductive behavior.”

Still another seemingly discordant dimension of the Program is its claim that patriotism constitutes “one of the foundations of the spiritual-moral unity of society.” On one level, this embrace of spirituality is designed to encourage binding attachments to state and society, especially insofar as feelings of awe and devotion can be aroused in connection with military exercises and learning about military sacrifice. This, however, leads to improbable linkages between disparate institutions: for example, the opening in 2004 of a museum dedicated to the traffic police (GAI) of Tver oblast, which included exhibits extolling patriotic education as a way of counteracting the “devaluation of spiritual values” during the post-Soviet period. Also noteworthy, and potentially troubling, is the sectarian interpretation of such spiritualism; while ostensibly ecumenical, the prevailing mode of spirituality is overwhelmingly Christian and Orthodox. Thus, despite the fact that the top-level official steering group which supervises the Program (the “Russian organizing committee Victory”) includes prominent Muslim and Jewish clerics, the thrust of spirituality in practice – the typical services surrounding reburial of soldiers’ remains, for example – tends to be provided by Russian Orthodoxy. Not surprisingly, the Russian Orthodox Church has been a stalwart supporter of the Patriotic Education Program.

The State-centric Nature of Patriotic Education

In its lionization of the military, official patriotism tends to conflate national identity and citizenship with devotion to state institutions. Even aside from its programmatic content, however, the high degree of state-centrism apparent in its conceptualization and implementation is striking. It is also unsurprising, however, since it dovetails with Putin’s broader efforts to transform Russian society by strengthening central institutions, more closely subordinating regional governments, and placing limits on independent media and grassroots organization.

Organizationally, the Patriotic Education Program brings together a number of agencies at the ministerial as well as the local level. Its top-down character is evident in the carefully orchestrated initiatives and responsibilities which have been apportioned among federal actors, including the Russian State Military Historical-Cultural Center, which is the main coordinator of the Patriotic Education Program; the Ministry of Science and Education; the Ministry of Defense; and the Ministry of Culture and Mass Communications. The Ministries of Health and Social Development and the Ministry of Internal Affairs are also expected to be extensively involved in implementing various aspects of the program. In 2001, a new agency, known as the Russian Patriotic Center, was created to coordinate the activities of central, regional, and local institutions within the framework of the national program and to serve as a liaison between the state and various nongovernmental organizations. While institutional integration was already a hallmark of the first program, covering the period 2001-2005, a key feature of the current program for 2006-2010 is even closer integration. One result is a plan to

establish interregional coordinating councils, as well as similar organs at the intraregional and local levels. Ideally, this multiplication of state oversight mechanisms is supposed to promote consistency and uniformity in propaganda work, in order to counter the “anti-patriotic” attitudes allegedly appearing in the “liberal-dominated” mass media.

Another state-centric aspect of the program involves an effort to co-opt elements of civil society active in this area. Numerous “patriotic” clubs have sprung up, comprised of nostalgia buffs devoted to searching for artifacts from battlefields of World War II. Youth patriotic clubs also engage in such excursions, focusing in particular on recovering and burying the remains of the dead. Such ventures are laden with military and historical symbolism. Typically, they are overseen by representatives of veterans’ groups, who are keen to impart lessons about the great sacrifices made for the fatherland. The practice of youth patriotism is thus bound up with reestablishing and honoring a deep connection with the Red Army and the Soviet past. Similarly, one also finds a proliferation of regional youth camps, which place an emphasis on patriotic and moral values as well as military training.

To some extent, these developments are clearly linked to the official promotion of patriotism, but they also appear to be riding a wave of local enthusiasm. After all, as mentioned above, patriotism is a highly popular theme among Russians today. In a 2004 survey, 89 percent of respondents agreed that it was necessary to devote greater attention to the patriotic education of young people. Interestingly, this was not only true of all age groups, it was especially true of those with the highest levels of education, who voiced the highest level of support. In sum, the clamor for patriotism is perhaps as much bottom-up as top-down.

Implications

Despite its grandiose aspirations on paper, the Patriotic Education Program sports a rather measly budget of about \$17 million, of which three-fourths is to come from central and local government budgets and one-fourth from unspecified private sources. This, in itself, indicates that the entire project is largely symbolic and exhortative, intended to foster voluntary support and to dovetail with ongoing school-based and extracurricular programs. Nevertheless, even on a symbolic level the program is revealing as an insight into the dominant discourse in Russian political life, which is distinguished by the connections it draws between social order, spirituality, a seamless national history, and the primacy of the state. In addition, the program is important inasmuch as it corresponds to and directly furthers Putin’s view of how to transform Russian state and society from the top down, while seeking to limit grassroots democratization and freedom of expression. It is also fully consistent with Putin’s goals of pursuing modernization, international economic integration, and enhanced military strength. Achieving these goals will require a shared commitment and willingness to sacrifice, in order to build a reinvigorated and self-assured Russia able to stand at the front rank of nations. Precisely by emphasizing the state, including its achievements and military trappings, as well as the primacy of obligations over rights, the practice of patriotism provides a milieu in which the youth can be socialized for a lifetime of service. In all the above ways, the Program for Patriotic Education has profound

implications for Russia's political future.