Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party and the Nazi Legacy: Titular Nations vs Ethnic Minorities

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Background

The National Bolshevik Party (Natsional-bol'shevistskaia partiia, or NBP), founded by the writers Aleksandr Dugin and Eduard Limonov as 'the most left-wing among the right-wing parties and the most right-wing among the left-wing parties' (Limonov 1996a),¹ is one of the most interesting (although highly controversial) phenomena in Russia's recent political history. The NBP burst onto the Russian political scene in the early 1990s with self-styled 'legislative initiatives', such as establishing an institute of Russian sheriffs (empowered to shoot first, without warning, and to deliver the culprit dead or alive) and broadcasting executions of Russian criminals on television.² The party members threw tomatoes at the NATO Secretary General in 2002 (in protest against the NATO expansion), and mayonnaise at the Chairman of Russia's Central Electoral Commission in 2003 (to attract public attention to the issue of unfair general elections). They also attacked and unlawfully occupied the premises of various Russian ministries and major companies in 2004-06, as a sign of opposition to their unpopular policies. This led to harassment by the police and security services, a number of high-profile court trials, and ultimately the party's ban in 2007, at a point when it reportedly had some 57 000 members, many of them very young, in more than 50 regional party branches in Russia and abroad (including Belarus, the Czech Republic and Canada). Yet Limonov and many of his associates have remained active in politics. Now that Limonovites are successfully forming the so-called InterBrigades to supply military and humanitarian aid to the breakaway republics in Eastern Ukraine,³ it is perhaps an

1 Translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

2 For a detailed account of the NBP's activities on the verge of the new millennium, see Rogatchevski (2007).

3 Between May 2014 and April 2015, over 1,500 people joined the republics' armed forces with the InterBrigades' assistance. The Brigades' title is obviously meant to suggest parallels with the Spanish Civil War. For more details, see <<https://vk.com/interbrigada>> (accessed April 29, 2017).

opportune time to engage in an in-depth study of various aspects of the NBP's activities, as its influence on the Russian (and Russia's neighbours') affairs is likely to grow.

Is the NBP a Neo-Nazi Party?

These days, the NBP (or rather its successor, the Other Russia <Drugaiia Rossiia> party⁴) often positions itself as an organization that puts human rights and care for the socially and economically disadvantaged segments of the population at the very core of its political platform. On the other hand, the media often portray the NBP as a party of nationalist extremists who would stop at nothing to promote their racially discriminatory agenda. Ever since its inception, the NBP has been linked to an ideology forged and promoted by the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) in 1919-45. Is the NBP really a new face of Russian Fascism?⁵

There are similarities between the NSDAP's and the NBP's (early) party insignia (cf. their party flags):

4 For the party's website, see <<http://www.drugros.ru/>> (accessed April 29, 2017).

5 Hereafter, to follow a common Russian practice of substituting *fashizm* as a generic term for Nazism, both terms will be used synonymously.

anthems (at least one of several NBP anthems was reportedly in part inspired by the Horst Wessel Lied, see Limonov 1998, 450) and vocabulary (e.g. the use of *Parteigenosse* and *Gauleiter*, when addressing fellow NBP members and regional party leaders).⁶ These similarities are not coincidental. The NBP leaders consciously and constantly invoked Nazism, because, according to Limonov's 1996 article:

what the insensitive Russian citizens, who react only to extremely brutal, horrifying and shocking events, really want is the arrival of Fascists. Fascists are fearsome, able-bodied and young. They would solve all the problems. Russian Philistines (*obyvateli*), who vote against Fascists out of fear, dream of them at night and want them to come at long last and sort things out. The Philistines want to be arisen from slumber by lively heroic music and bright flags. They dream of their sons joining the Fascist movement, and of their daughters marrying the movement's members. [...] Fascism is needed by everyone and suits everyone. Russia is waiting for it with fear and trepidation, just like a broken household is expecting the one and only, powerful and beautiful if somewhat dangerous, husband-to-be. He will destroy the enemy and restore the household with his fresh pair of hands, while singing feisty songs. And the household will be full of children, strength and happiness [once again]. No other husband-to-be will be able to succeed in this enterprise (Limonov 1996b).

In this context, it is hardly surprising that Dugin's 1996 poem 'An Unexpected Avatar' links the world's future with the resurrection of Himmler (Из замшелой могилы восстанет сияющий Гиммлер/И туманом глазниц обоймет Абсолютный Рассвет (Shternberg 1996),⁷ while the first party programme encouraged NBP members to aspire to become someone like Goebbels and Goering, among others (see point 24 of Programma NBP-1994).

And yet, with Dugin's departure from the NBP in 1998; Limonov's arrest and a four-year custodial sentence in 2001 (for more on this, see below); and the rise of the influence within the party of the journalist and businessman Vladimir Linderman (a former head of the NBP's Latvian branch, forced to relocate to Moscow in 2002-08), the neo-Nazi overtones of the NBP discourse have

6 For a longer list of parallels (some of them exaggerated), see Iakemenko (2006).

7 Translation: "Himmler's shiny body will arise from a mossy grave/and his misty eye sockets will follow the Eternal Dawn". In his youth, Dugin reportedly was a member of the clandestine esoteric "Black Order of the ss", with the self-styled *Reichsführer* Evgenii Golovin (1938-2010), a philosopher, as its head and founder (see Kaledin 2003; and Umland 2007).

gradually dissipated (Linderman is a Jew of left-wing persuasions).⁸ By early 2006, even the look of the NBP flag had been altered, partly to make it more difficult to associate it with the Nazi one:⁹

The NBP's second programme (known as the 'minimum programme'), put together by Linderman in order to secure the party's registration as an all-Russia organization (which had been repeatedly denied to it by the Ministry of Justice, although at that point the NBP still retained its status as an inter-regional organization, granted in 1997), can be defined as non-controversial and moderately liberal, as, unlike the NBP's first programme (dominated by Dugin's pet concepts), it contains virtually nothing about economic protectionism and imperial-style expansionism, and is free of anti-globalist rhetoric. Moreover, its first item ('let the civic society in Russia develop freely; the state's interference in the public and private life of its citizens should be limited', see *Programma-minimum NBP*, 2004) directly contradicts the fourth item in the old programme, which says: 'when the NBP comes to power, <...> the nation's rights will take precedence over the rights of an individual' (*Programma NBP*-1994). Nevertheless, the new programme was approved at the Fifth party congress in November 2004 (Limonov, released on parole in June 2003, now apparently a reformed man, lent Linderman his full support). However, this did not help the NBP with the registration (moreover, even its inter-regional status was revoked by the Supreme Court on 15 November 2005) – but led instead to the schism of March 2006, when a number of activists, unhappy about Linderman's de-racialization of the party agenda, either left or were expelled from the party ranks. One of those expelled explained the evolution of the party thus:

8 Nazism was not the only source that the NBP borrowed from. The NBP's ethos has been perceptively described as that of general extremism: 'one has to be an extremist to join, but <...> it does not matter what kind of extremist one is. Anarchists, fascists, Stalinists, Christian and Islamic religious extremists are all welcome' (Shenfield 2001, 209).

9 See Vladimir Linderman's e-mail to Andrei Rogatchevski of January 12, 2011.

From the outset, the NBP was established as an ultra-rightist party. The theoretician and philosopher Dugin shaped it according to a past model, to repeat the NSDAP history. [...] During Limonov's imprisonment, it transpired that the only defense against his abuse by the special forces came from the bourgeois liberals. Appreciative of their help and support, Limonov starts leaning towards them after his release. Paradoxically, the NBP's ideology makes a shift towards left-wing liberalism. Gradually, the right-wing and even socialist slogans become overshadowed by something resembling a revolutionary democratic ideology, reflected in a struggle against the authoritarian regime of Lieutenant Colonel Putin under the banners of basic democracy and human rights (Zhurkin n.d.).

In July 2006, the NBP even formed an alliance with mainstream liberal movements in opposition to the Kremlin, such as the former World Chess champion Garry Kasparov's United Civil Front (Ob"edinennyi grazhdanskii front, or OGF) and the ex-Prime Minister Mikhail Kasianov's Russian People's Democratic Union (Rossiiskii narodno-demokraticeskii soiuz, or RNDs). Raimonds Krumgolds, a member of the NBP's Latvian branch, made the following comment in the Latvian press with regard to the alliance:

It is not ideological but tactical, dictated by our current common goal to do away with the oligarchic regime of the RF, which has adopted patriotic rhetoric without changing its nature that is opposite to the interests of the people (*antinarodnaia*). To achieve this, we have deemed it possible to join a temporary alliance with the most decent representatives of liberalism, who did not betray their beliefs in Putin's epoch. Time will tell how long the alliance is for (Veretennikov 2008).¹⁰

Ethnic Russians in the Near Abroad

Against the background of the NBP's remarkable progression 'in reverse to its initial views' (Zhurkin n.d.), it is noteworthy that one particular point, repeatedly made in the first party programme, was reiterated in the second programme too, although in a more moderate form. In compliance with Ernest

10 Symptomatically, Kasianov had left the alliance in July 2007, i.e. even before Krumgold's words were published. However, he did so not because he was provoked by the NBP's radicalism, but because his wish to be nominated as the opposition's single presidential candidate did not materialize (see Tirmaste 2007).

Gellner's definition of nationalism as 'primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner 1983, 1) – frustrated by the disintegration of the USSR and clearly seeking solace in the founding principles of the Third Reich (which, *inter alia*, required the return of German-speaking Austria 'to the great German mother country', because 'one blood demands one Reich' (Hitler 2005, 3) – the first NBP programme threatened to:

revise the Russian borders. All the Russians will be united in one state. The territories of the splinter [former Soviet] "republics", where Russian population exceeds 50% (such as the Crimea, Northern Kazakhstan, the Narva region, etc.) will be subsumed by Russia after local referendums, supported by Russia. The separatist aspirations of ethnic minorities will be ruthlessly suppressed (Programma NBP-1994).

According to a February 1995 all-Russia poll, conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, in the mid-1990s similar views were shared by 33% of respondents (see KIAMKIN and LAPKIN 1995). It is hardly surprising that the NBP members regularly engaged in actions promoting their sympathy with the ethnic Russians in the so-called Near Abroad (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*), most notably in Ukraine, Latvia and Kazakhstan (shortly before the collapse of the USSR, in Ukraine the Russian minority comprised about a fifth of the population; in Latvia, about a third; and in Kazakhstan – with 39,7% of the Kazakhs, 37,8% of the Russians and 22,5% of other ethnic groups, such as Ukrainians and Germans – the titular nation itself was in the minority).

Thus, on 6 September 1994, Limonov attended pro-Russian separatist rallies in the Crimean cities of Sevastopol' and Simferopol' and was expelled from Ukraine several days later. In March 1996, Deputy Procurator General of Ukraine, Ol'ha Kolin'ko, instituted proceedings against Limonov for instigating attempts to damage the territorial unity of Ukraine. In accordance with the NBP's policy on the 'Near Abroad', Limonov had declared that the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol' was Russian property that had been captured by a hostile state and should be defended by force of arms, if necessary; he was liable to be prosecuted if he entered Ukraine, where his parents resided (see Limonov 1995; ODIN LIMONOV 1996; GRIM PO-LIMONOVSKI 1997; and Limonov 1998, 163-64).

In Latvia, in August 1998, the retired policeman Vasili Kononov (1923-2011), a Latvian citizen, was arrested and charged with war crimes (a member of the underground resistance, in 1944 he had organized a killing of nine Latvians who were suspected of collaborating with the Nazis). The local NBP cell (in

existence since spring 1998; at this point led by Konstantin Mikhailiuk, with Vladimir Linderman among its most important members) took up Kononov's case as part of the NBP policy of protecting the interests of ethnic Russians abroad. In Riga, walls were daubed with slogans in Kononov's defence, and rallies championing his cause were organized.¹¹

On 17 November 2000 (the Latvian Independence Day), three NBP activists – Sergei Solovei, Maksim Zhurkin and Dmitrii Gafarov – climbed to the observation floor of the St Peter Cathedral in Riga, barricaded themselves there and threatened to blow themselves up, together with the Cathedral, unless Russian Second World War veterans were released from Latvian jails, Latvian Russians were guaranteed equal rights with ethnic Latvians and Latvia refused to join NATO.¹² They surrendered to the authorities after a talk to the Russian ambassador in Latvia, Mr Udal'tsov. They were charged with illegal crossing of the Russian-Latvian border and terrorism (although two hand grenades that the three young men had on themselves turned out to be wooden). On 30 April 2001, Solovei and Zhurkin were sentenced to fifteen years in jail, while Gafarov got a five-year sentence as a minor.¹³

11 Eventually, the mainstream Russian media and high-rank politicians interceded too. In January 2000, Kononov was sentenced to six years in jail by a district court in Riga, but on 25 April 2000, under a considerable pressure from the Russian Federation, the Latvian Supreme Court overturned this decision and released Kononov after a twenty-month imprisonment. Shortly after the release, President Putin issued a decree making Kononov a Russian citizen. For an update on the subsequent twists and turns in this lengthy and convoluted legal saga (which saw Kononov's case repeatedly examined by the European Court of Human Rights), see e.g. Bartul (2010).

12 This action copied an early one in Ukraine, when on 24 August 1999 (the Ukrainian Independence Day) sixteen NBP members (the future NBP caretaker leader Anatolii Tishin among them) chained themselves for two hours to the railings of the tower of the Sailors' Club in Sevastopol' in order to attract attention to the problem of the Crimean peninsula, which, according to the NBP, Ukraine should return to Russia. Later they were arrested and charged with attempt to damage the territorial unity of Ukraine (article 62 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code, with a possible imprisonment for up to ten years). In January 2000, following the pleas of several State Duma deputies, Tishin and other NBP members of the Sevastopol' fame were deported to Russia, after their charges have been amended to article 187 (part 5) of the Ukrainian Criminal Code (the capture of state or public buildings, punishable by corrective labour for a term of up to two years, or by deprivation of liberty for a term of up to five years). Once in Moscow, Tishin and Co. were set free.

13 The verdict's disproportionate harshness was accompanied by public protests, such as throwing eggs at the Latvian Minister for Agriculture Atis Slakteris during the opening of the Made in Latvia exhibition in Moscow. On appeal, in November 2001 Gafarov, Zhurkin and Solovei's actions were re-qualified as hooliganism, and their sentences were commuted to one, five and six years respectively. Gafarov was released shortly afterwards, while Zhurkin and Solovei got out on parole in 2003 (after a transfer to Russia).

As for Kazakhstan, at the end of April 1997 Limonov and seven NBP activists went there to take part in a Cossack assembly, which was expected to raise the issue of making autonomous the Kokchetav region of Kazakhstan (where the Russians outnumber the Kazakh population). On arrival they found out that the Assembly had been cancelled and the Kokchetav region had been abolished. In 2000-01, the NBP almost alone publicly championed the cause of a group of fourteen people (led by Viktor Kazimirschuk, a former employee of the Russian Book Chamber), who were arrested and imprisoned in November 1999 for an alleged attempt to establish Russian autonomy in Northern Kazakhstan by force of arms (the so-called Ust'-Kamenogorsk case, reportedly based on forced confessions; see Kazimirschuk et al. 2000; Molotova 2001; Airapetova 2000; and Starostin 2006). In April 2001, Limonov himself, as well as several of his NBP associates, were detained in the Altai region, near the Kazakhstan border, in a joint operation of the FSB and the KNB (Kazakhstan's National Security Committee), under suspicion of planning an armed invasion into the Russian-speaking regions of Kazakhstan. In the end, Limonov spent two years in custody on the spurious charges of gun running. His affair is widely believed to be an FSB fabrication.¹⁴ In a related development, Vladimir Linderman, who gave a partially exonerating testimony as a defence witness at Limonov's trial in 2002 (Nekhoroshev 2004), had to spend the next six years on the run in Moscow under the false charges of harbouring explosives in his flat in Riga and planning to assassinate the Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga (see Farber 2008a and 2008b; Savina and Mikhailova 2008).

Undeterred by the heavy-handedness of the FSU security forces, in 2004 the NBP leadership reconfirmed its commitment to the cause of the Russian minority in the Near Abroad in item 8 of its second party programme, which reads: 'using all acceptable (*dopustimye*) methods, concentrate on defending the rights of the Russian and Russian-speaking population in those FSU countries (such as Latvia, Estonia and Turkmenistan) where these rights are infringed upon' (Programma-minimum NBP).

Practical measures to highlight this agenda continued, especially with regard to Kazakhstan and Latvia. Thus, in January 2005, the NBP publicly denounced the Russo-Kazakh agreement about the border between the two states, signed in Moscow by Presidents Putin and Nazarbaev. The NBP disputed the designation of Uralsk, Aktiubinsk, Kustanai, Petropavlovsk, Pavlodar, Semipalatinsk, Ust-Kamenogorsk and other territories as Kazakh, and blamed

¹⁴ See, for example, Bondarenko (2001); and Dzhemal' (2003). For a comprehensive account of the campaign to set Limonov free, see Patrick Gofman *présente* (2003).

President Putin for betraying Russia's national interests¹⁵ (about 300 ha of Russian land had reportedly been conceded in the process of border delimitation, see Gafarly 2005). In August 2005, when picketing a Vester supermarket in Kaliningrad, members of the local NBP branch threw a Latvian national flag into mud and stomped it as part of their call to boycott foodstuffs from Latvia, Estonia, Georgia, Ukraine and other countries deemed hostile to Russia. Latvia demanded a criminal investigation, which was duly instigated but eventually produced mere accusations of an unsanctioned rally (even though only three activists took part in the picketing, see Orekhov 2005).

As for Ukraine, the NBP in Russia (but not in Ukraine where there are several autonomous NBP branches, too) virtually stopped, for a while, being vocal in its criticism of the Ukrainian power structures. The NBP's breakaway faction, the National Bolshevik Front, which had emerged after the 2006 schism, did stage a protest action, together with the Dugin-led Union of the Eurasian Youth (Evraziiskii soiuz molodezhi, or ESM),¹⁶ in late November 2006 near the Ukrainian embassy in Moscow, objecting against a recent Ukrainian law that had defined the 1932-33 famine in Ukraine as an act of genocide (the NBF/ESM rejected the law's apparent implication that Russia should take responsibility for this act of genocide against the Ukrainian people, see Atakovano 2006). The NBP itself, however, stayed away from the fray, partly because its new immediate objectives of free elections and free mass media, reflected in the second party programme, roughly coincided with the goals, achieved by the Ukrainian 'Orange revolution' of 2004-05 – but also perhaps partly for Limonov's personal reasons too. On 25 July 2003, on his way to visit his parents, who lived in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, Limonov was detained for several hours by the Ukrainian security forces at the border crossing on the motorway linking Belgorod and Kharkiv, accused of an attempt to enter Ukraine illegally, and sent back. Limonov's Russian passport was adorned by a stamp forbidding him entry to Ukraine until at least 2008 (see Diurich 2006). He was not even allowed to attend his father's funeral in March 2004. However, in September 2007, after the abolition of the *persona non grata* lists as a step to improve the Russo-Ukrainian relationship – and possibly in recognition of the NBP's evident self-restraint on Ukrainian issues – Limonov did return for a short stay in Ukraine after years of absence (see Aslanov 2007). Moreover, after the NBP's 2007 ban, several NBP activists (such as Ol'ga Kudrina, Mikhail Gangan and Anna Ploskosova), either sentenced or under investigation for their part in protest ac-

15 See <http://www.nbp-info.ru/archiv/131204/180105_kazakhstan.html> (accessed November 12, 2011).

16 For more about Euroasian ideas see the chapter by Torbakov in this volume.

tions in Russia, sought refuge in Ukraine – and were granted asylum there.¹⁷ The Russian Embassy in Kyiv is used by NBP activists from time to time as a target to express their criticism of Russian internal policies. Thus, it was picketed in February and December 2005 and in January 2009, whereas in May 2008 ten NBP members entered the Embassy demanding to meet Ambassador Chernomyrdin to hand in their demands, such as dissolving the State Duma, calling for new parliamentary elections in Russia and lifting the ban on the NBP (see, for example, Aktsiia NBP 2005; and Natsboly sobiralis', 2008).¹⁸

Which Nationalist Brand Does the NBP Belong to?

Defending the rights of the Russians abroad clearly remained high enough on the NBP's agenda even in their second party programme (which is otherwise dominated by concern about the lack of civil liberties in Russia).¹⁹ Does this automatically make the NBP a nationalist party, and if yes, is it a Nazi variety of nationalism? The established patterns of relationships between the titular nation and the ethnic minorities in each particular case can help us draw a distinction.

Nazi Germany was a nation-state striving to become an empire while the USSR, with its pledge to produce a new ethnic entity (Soviet people, or *sovetskii narod*), was an empire striving to become a nation-state. The process of nation-building in Nazi Germany can be described as selective, as it singled out certain ethnic and ethno-religious groups (eg Jews and Gypsies) who could never be Germanized. By contrast, 'Soviet people' was a much more inclusive concept, which, at least in principle, was not supposed to discriminate anyone

17 In Russia, Kudrina is wanted for scaling the Rossiia hotel in the centre of Moscow and displaying the 'Putin, resign!' (*Putin, uidi sam!*) streamer (for this, she was sentenced to three and a half years in jail); Ploskonosova, for vandalism (daubing walls with NBP slogans) and beating up two policemen (she is of slender build and is not known as a martial art expert); whereas Gangan had an unspent non-custodial sentence for his part in a non-violent takeover of a Presidential Administration visitors' room in 2004. Clearly enjoying her asylum status, in May 2009 Ploskonosova was fined UAH204.00 for chanting 'Yushchenko, resign!' (*Yushchenko, het'!*) at a Labour Day demo in Kharkiv (see Khar'kovskii sud 2009).

18 Two hours later they were received by Chernomyrdin's deputy and vacated the building (see Natsboly sobiralis' 2008).

19 Incidentally, this very item was identified as contravening Article 9 of the Federal Law 'On Political Parties' (which expressly forbids mentioning the defence of ethnic interests in party programmes and statutes), and served as a reason to deny the NBP registration in January 2006 by the Federal Service of State Registration (see Ofitsial'nyi kommentarii 2006).

along the ethnic lines (as for religious beliefs, they were expected to fade away in due course more or less by themselves).

The NBP's first programme defines the party as:

a national party of the Russians. Russianness is not determined according to either blood or creed. A Russian person is someone who considers Russian language, culture and history his native; has shed and is ready to shed his/her and other people's blood in the name of Russia alone; and cannot imagine [belonging to] any other nation and Motherland (Programma NBP-1994).

Lofty rhetoric aside, this definition of Russianness has evidently more in common with the inclusive declarations of the late Soviet nationalities policy than with the discriminatory practices of Nazi Germany. There have been Jews (eg Arkadii Maler), Gypsies (eg Artur Petrov) and even Blacks (eg Aijo Beness) among the NBP members, and there is an NBP branch in Israel²⁰ – something hardly imaginable, had the party really been following in the Nazi footsteps. The problem for any supporter of the master race notion is, of course, that after hundreds of years of co-habitation and inter-marriages on the territory of the Russian empire, past and present, it is not easy to find a pure Russian blood-stock.²¹ That is presumably why the NBP's second programme openly recognizes the rights of not merely the Russian but also the Russian-speaking (i.e. ethnically non-Russian) population in the Near Abroad.²² Also, given the authorities' attitude to the NBP, its activists have to be ready to withstand harassment. Therefore, when recruiting its members, the NBP could not afford to be too choosy about their ethnic origin. Unsurprisingly, it is hard to hold the party together when it is based on such an eclectic foundation, just as it was difficult to eliminate ethnic tensions in the USSR (let alone in post-Soviet Russia). Ethnic slurs are not unheard of among the NBP associates and sympathisers, especially when it comes to verbal internet attacks on Linderman, whom the ex- (usually more radical) members of the party blame for altering the NBP's course almost beyond recognition.²³

20 See, for instance, NBP-Izrail', 2003; NBP-Izrail' 2005; and Demonstratsiia solidarnosti 2010.

21 Limonov himself claims that there are Tartars and Ossetians among his ancestors (see Zarifullin 1998).

22 Cf. Limonov's 2012 presidential election pledge that, if elected, in his foreign policy he would concentrate first and foremost on defending the interests of the 'Russophone diaspora' in the Near Abroad (see Limonov 2008a).

23 See, for example, the blog posts "Narkobarygi" (of December 10, 2006, by istukov), <<http://istukov.livejournal.com/18844.html>> (April 29, 2017); and "Lindermonoliuby" (April 9,

Building a New Nation?

Most importantly, however, it is open to question, what the NBP members really mean when they refer to Russianness and the Russian nation and what kind of strategy they adopt in their nation-building efforts. The NBP leadership is well familiar with a theory of the Soviet neo-Eurasianist ethnologist Lev Gumilev (1912-92),²⁴ according to whom nations (or rather ethnic entities, big and small, whose development is similar to a lifecycle, when birth is followed by maturity and then by death) are formed by the so-called 'passionarity' (*passionarnost'*) bearers, i.e. those people, whose extraordinary vitality overpowers their self-preservation instincts, so that they selflessly devote themselves to a cause which is expected to result in a greater common good, even though they are likely to lose their lives in the process of advancing it (see, for instance, Gumilev 1990). There are indications that the NBP has been acting under impression that their party is a consortium (Gumilev's term describing proto-ethnic alliances that may or may not turn into stable, durable and easily identifiable ethnic groups) which consists primarily of such passionarity bearers, whose activities ultimately contribute to the formation of a new nation in place of an old one that used to populate the same territory but has come to the end of its lifecycle (on this occasion coinciding with the demise of the USSR). An article published in 1998 in *General'naia liniia* (an NBP-related Latvian newspaper) says when summarizing Gumilev's concept of ethnogenesis:

[Old] ethnicity does not disappear without a trace. In its place emerges a small group of like-minded people, united by the same goal, wanting nothing for themselves, ready to sacrifice everything for a common cause. These people become the core of a new nation while gathering together the remnants of the old one. [...] Our party has to become such a group. The NBP should become the centre of a new Eurasian unity and weld the peoples of Russia together. This is our goal. We should strive not for an ethnic purity, as primitive nationalists do, but for a creation of a new ethnic entity on the territory of Eurasia (Eti liudi 1998).²⁵

Paradoxically, the police, security forces and courts' violent overreaction to the NBP's relatively mild forms of protest seems to be assisting the party in its

2008, by general_ivanov), <<http://general-ivanov.livejournal.com/155003.html>> (April 16 2017).

24 On Limonov's knowledge of Lev Gumilev's work, see, for example, Zarifullin (1998).

25 See also Terskoi (2004).

ambitious task of forging a new national identity for the people, irrespective of their actual ethnic background. Over a hundred NBP members (some of them, several times) have gone through jail stints of various lengths,²⁶ and criminal brotherhood reportedly knows no ethnic distinctions (see Demin 1981, 312).²⁷

Only time will tell if the NBP's rather Utopian grass-root nation-building project yields any results.²⁸ Given that the party is working with roughly the same multi-ethnic material that the USSR used to have at its disposal, and employs methods of creating a supra-ethnic identity similar to those favoured by Stalin (i.e. tossing this material into the melting pot of GULAG to obtain a Homo Sovieticus as a final product), a certain amount of pessimism about the NBP's possible success would be understandable and perhaps even forgivable, if only because the number of NBP convicts is too small to reach a critical mass.

From Neo-Nazism to Human Rights Activism – and Back?

What seems much more certain, though, is that the NBP is indeed a nationalist movement which did have Nazi (or Fascist) roots, but, judging by appearances, has largely distanced themselves from it since the early 2000s, perhaps temporarily. The programme of the Other Russia party (the NBP's successor) states that its nationalism is 'merely a healthy manifestation of a national identity' (Programma politicheskoi partii 2013), which is difficult to contest until proven otherwise. How did the party manage to evolve from neo-Nazism to human rights activism, and what are the chances of a relapse?

Limonov's countercultural past has a great deal to answer for when an explanation of his toying with Nazism is sought. A self-employed autodidact without a higher degree (it is not even clear if he completed his secondary education), throughout his life he has had to rely on staying in pronounced opposition to the powers-that-be, as well as popular taste and/or consensus, whatever

26 For a full list, see Politzakliuchennye natsboly (2013).

27 In his 2012 presidential election pledge, Limonov suggests moving the Russian capital to the 'geographical centre' of the RF in Southern Siberia, to strengthen the bond between European Russia and Siberia and to create an impetus for the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East. This idea can also be linked to the formation of a new national identity, as the acquisition of Siberian identity normally involves a transgression of ethnic distinctions (see e.g. Galetkina 2002). It is not accidental that Limonov is planning to use ex-convicts in settlement construction along the border with China, to put an end to what the NBP sees as Chinese encroachment on the Russian territory (see Limonov 2008a).

28 The programme of the NBP's successor, the Other Russia party, reveals that one of its long-term objectives is a recreation of a 'formerly strong union of the peoples that once formed the USSR' (see *Programma politicheskoi partii* 2013).

they are, as a means of self-promotion. A dissident under Communism, he could only be a Bolshevik after the fall of Communism, when virtually everyone, even Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (which has hardly ever been either liberal or democratic), shared a broadly liberal and democratic platform. The nationalist component in the NBP moniker was required, however, to separate the NBP from Gennady Zyuganov's Communist Party of the RF (the direct and undisputed heirs of the CPSU with its traditionally internationalist agenda). In the permissive atmosphere of the Yeltsin era, leading a small party with severely limited financial resources meant actively courting notoriety. Associating the NBP with the Nazi legacy in the country which lost tens of millions of lives fighting Nazism would guarantee media headlines and the authorities' attempts at a crackdown, which in turn would breed more headlines. However, with an assault on the basic freedoms under Putin, there was no need for the NBP anymore to be bracketed together with the morally reprehensible (neo-)-Nazis, when a mere demand for fair and free elections, or an attempt to exercise a constitutional right to a free assembly, could set forth the charges of extremism.²⁹

What is Fascism, Anyway?

'Fascism' is an emotionally loaded term in Russia (and elsewhere), and is therefore often imprecise. On the one hand, the Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia (Federatsiia evreiskikh obshchin Rossii, or FEOR) branded the NBP a 'neo-Fascist' organization in their 2006 letter to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, dispatched when they found out that Limonov had appealed there against the repeated refusals of the Russian Ministry of Justice to register his party.³⁰ On the other, Limonov calls his December 2010 – January 2011 fifteen-day detention for swearing, based on the false testimonies of two policemen, a sign of 'state-sponsored Fascism' (*gosudarstvennyi fashizm*), too

29 Before the 2006 amendments to the 2002 Anti-Extremist Law came into force, it had been very difficult to prove in courts that this or that activity should be deemed extremist, i.e. inciting national, religious and/or social hatred. After the amendments, it has become so easy to do so that the NBP has been banned largely on the strength of two counts of disrupting, by leaflet throwing, a session of the St Petersburg Legislative Assembly, as well as the voting process at a Moscow regional polling station (see Reshenie Mosgorsuda 2007). The leaflets did not seem to contain anything beyond criticism of the poor work of the Assembly and the unfair electoral practices, and the court verdict does not mention either Nazism or Fascism even once.

30 Limonov tried to challenge the content of the FEOR letter in Moscow courts but did not succeed, see Voronov and Savina 2006; as well as Presnenskii sud Moskvy 2006.

(the detention was actually imposed to prevent him from attending an unsanctioned meeting on the Triumfal'naya Square in Moscow, see Limonov 2011). Who is right, FEOR or Limonov – or, perhaps, both are, in their own way?

As Umberto Eco explains, Fascism has become 'an all-purpose term because one can eliminate from a fascist regime one or more features, and it will still be recognizable as fascist. <...> These features cannot be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other <...>. But it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it' (Eco 1995). According to Eco, among such features are irrationalism, the cult of action for action's sake, the concepts of life as a permanent warfare and heroism as an everyday norm, the cult of death, the cult of tradition and a rejection of modernism. The first five features are easily identifiable as typically Limonovian: self-contradictory behaviour bordering on a personality split,³¹ direct actions as a principal manifestation of the NBP's policies, self-identification with soldiers and heroes,³² active participation in armed conflicts on the territories of former Yugoslavia and Soviet Russia (see Limonov 1993 and 2008b) – and the official NBP greeting *Da, smert'!* (Long Live Death!), borrowed from the Falangists' *Viva La Muerte*. Eco's last two features (as well as the first one) are mostly characteristic of Dugin, whose 'sensibility leads him backward into deep history, which can mean either the archaic past "outside of time" or merely the past before recent centuries dominated by the European Enlightenment and modernity, which he wholly rejects for its universalist view of the human condition' (Clowes 2011, 57).

In addition, Eco lists social frustrations, leading towards an obsession with (international) plots by perceived public enemies (who provide a sense of common identity for a nation that feels besieged); a Leader who interprets/construes the Voice of the Nation (via mass media); and a very low tolerance to dissent. These are precisely the attributes redolent of post-Soviet Russian disenchantment with the West and the promises of capitalist prosperity after the Communist collapse, as well as the Kremlin's populist strategies and public messages that became patently obvious since the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in March 2014, under the pretext of defending the rights and inter-

31 Cf.: 'In fact, there isn't one Limonov but two, or two personalities coexisting within the same individual. One Limonov dreams of becoming a stern despot of Kazakh steppes. Another, to occupy a cosy Duma seat as head of a five-strong faction. One welcomes Russian troops entering Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Another scribbles articles full of anarchist hatred towards the Russian state and Putin as evil personified' (Eresilog 2008).

32 On a number of occasions, Limonov has claimed that his ideal housing is probably barracks; his 1998 book chronicling a period in his own life and cited several times in this article, is called *The Anatomy of a Hero* (see Limonov 1998).

ests of the ethnic Russians / native Russian speakers there. Curiously, the annexation has been carried out in accordance with the scenario laid out in the 1994 NBP party programme, i.e. border expansion after local referendums on the FSU territories where the number of ethnic Russians exceeds 50%. While the NBP has been moving away from its radical 1994 platform, the Russian authorities have been moving in the opposite direction!³³ This may be partially explained by Dugin's latter-day considerable influence as a lecturer at the Military Academy of the General Staff and a Kremlin advisor (he may have abandoned the NBP but not some of its ideas, it seems). Also, the sudden affinity between the Kremlin and their hitherto most implacable opposition may have something to do with yet another general attribute of Fascism, identified by Roger Griffin, namely the ideology's dependence on the myth of national rebirth, or palingenesis (see Griffin 1991, XI). In the palingenetic context, the results of the 1991 Soviet referendum, at which almost 78% of the electorate voted in favour of keeping the USSR – a wish subsequently ignored by the Belavezha Accords – provide a weighty if somewhat outdated argument in support of the drive for empire restoration, along the lines of a national rebirth, for many Russians involved, establishment and non-parliamentary opposition alike.³⁴

In such an atmosphere, it is hardly surprising that the NBP/Other Russia leadership has chosen to side with the government.³⁵ The benefits have been almost immediate. When in summer 2009 the NBP/Other Russia launched the so-called Strategy 31, which sought to promote Article 31 of the RF Constitution guaranteeing the right to a free assembly, by gathering on the Triumfal'naya Square in Moscow for a rally on the 31st day of every relevant month (for more detail, see Horvath 2015), the authorities tried every trick in the book to deny the demonstrators access to the Triumfal'naya. However, once the NBP changed their tack and started using Strategy 31 meetings to support separatists in Eastern Ukraine, access to the square has been restored (see Ragulin 2014). This brings to mind yet another definition of Fascism, by Robert Paxton, which highlights an 'uneasy but effective collaboration' between a 'party of

33 In Limonov's own words, 'It is Putin who has turned into a Limonov supporter, <not the other way round>' (Limonov 2014).

34 In his 2005 address to the Federation Council, roughly timed for the fifteenth anniversary of the Belavezha Accords, Putin called the demise of the USSR 'the largest geopolitical disaster of the XX century' (Putin 2005). For Limonov's attitude to the Accords, see, for example, Limonov (2014).

35 This has brought about yet another schism, with the Other Russia branches in Novosibirsk, Murmansk, Khanty-Mansiisk, Tver' and Volgogradsk, as well as up to fifteen members of the Moscow branch, leaving the party in February-March 2014, under the slogan 'Yes to revolution in Russia – no to war in Ukraine!' (see Pashkova 2014).

committed nationalist militants' and 'traditional elites', over the pursuit of 'external expansion', while dispensing with 'legal restraints' and 'democratic liberties' (Paxton 2004, 218). The NBP/Other Russia, known for its policy reversals, has delivered yet another U-turn, by revealing that it has more in common with the authorities than had previously been assumed. For one, both sides have opted for prioritising nation-building over international agreements and civil liberties.³⁶

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36 Obviously, the Kremlin's and the NBP/Other Russia's visions of further action in Ukraine overlap only partially. The Kremlin is reportedly interested in fostering an ongoing localised conflict, to limit Ukraine's chances for an EU and NATO integration. For the NBP, the more Ukrainian territory is taken under Russian control, the better (see Linderman 2015). While NBP members are welcome in Eastern Ukraine as potential cannon fodder, their concentration and political activity there are actively discouraged by both the separatists in charge and their Moscow minders (see Azar 2017).

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PART 2

Memory Politics