The rise of nationalism in Putin’s Russia

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The problem of political nationalism, especially radical nationalism, from the very first moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union, became one of the most discussed questions concerning Russia. A great deal was written on this topic; nevertheless, the interest in the topic is still alive. On the other hand, political life in Russia in the middle of this decade is so very different from the 1990s, that the place and role of nationalism could not remain the same. That is why it is impossible to limit oneself to what has been previously written.

First of all, it is important to explain that the question concerns Russian ethnic nationalism and not any other form of nationalism. Of course there are different forms of ethnic nationalism in Russia, but their peak occurred at the start of the 1990s and ended a long time ago. They have totally exhausted their mobilizing potential, since regional separatism has long ceased to be any kind of real goal, and the mechanisms of autonomy have been learned and ‘privatized’ by regional elites, most of which are moderately ethnocratic. The topic of cultural renaissance reached the ‘defending’ phase and is now more linked to the notion of ‘human rights of ethnic minorities’ rather than with the notion of ‘ethno-nationalism’. In some of the regions of North Caucasus the protest potential of ethno-nationalism was utilized by radical political Islam (it was most visible in Chechnya, but similar processes are also occurring in some other North Caucasus republics). But it was Russian ethno-nationalism that grew significantly at the beginning of Putin’s rule, and I will consider this form of nationalism here.

It is also important to define briefly those changes in the ideology of Russian nationalism between the periods of ‘perestroika’ and the second presidential term of Vladimir Putin. In particular we are interested to what extent Russian nationalism can be considered as a form of ethnic nationalism. This question has always been problematic for Russian nationalists themselves and for their critics. It is no coincidence that in the 1990s instead of the term ‘Russian nationalists’ the term ‘national patriots’ was used which allowed one to emphasize the complicity of the attitude of Russian nationalism to the topics of ethnicity and of imperialistic patriotism. The basic nationalistic slogan ‘Russia for Russians!’, i.e. the idea of the empire ruled by Russians, was very controversial regarding what ‘Russians’ mean, where the empire’s borders are located and which social and political order is preferable for the empire.

Russian nationalism, when it was emerging from its semi-underground
and underground state during the latter soviet decades\(^2\), was inclined to aff irm
the values of the Russian empire, especially its nationalistic traditions. Moreover, the differentiation between the legacy of the Soviet empire (ideally the late Stalin empire) and the pre-revolution empire (there was and still is the division between the imperial, post-Peter the Great ideal, and the more patriarchic ideal of the XVI-XVIIth centuries) was weak. The subsequent differentiation, even if it still has not finished (in the least differential form Russian nationalism is still preserved in the Communist Party (CPRF) of Gennadiy Ziuganov), nevertheless made it possible to separate the development of various ideological tendencies.

By the end of the 1990-ties all the country realized that capitalism had become a long-term reality, and, if not accepted, it should at least be tolerated. Accordingly, ‘left-wing nationalism’ in the form of Soviet ‘restorationism’ almost disappeared. Now nationalists can either support various variants of a free economy, or exploit the populist ideas in the spirit of paternalistic state regulation. Anyway, economic problems never play a very important role for most of the nationalists. We can suppose that populist paternalism is so spread out probably not because of the preferences of the nationalistic leaders, but because of its great mobilizing potential compared to the liberal economic ideas.

In the second half of the 1990s the illusions of even the partial resurrection of the USSR disappeared (the topic of an Union with Belarus is still marginal). As a result the nostalgic Soviet component of Russian nationalism has weakened significantly and continues to weaken. But the beyond-ethnic imperial component in the nationalistic movement also weakened together with the hopes for the rebirth of the Soviet Union. Therefore, only ethnical identity remains the basis for the construction of the Russian nation. The dreams about the mighty Russia have not of course disappeared, but the attention is now wholly concentrated on inner-Russian problems (the majority of nationalists and of citizens as a whole have finally agreed with the appeal of Alexander Solzhenitsyn to reject outward expansion — exactly because there is no strength to do so).

The process of construing the nation through withstanding the external enemy leads to the same result. Starting with the famous incident when Evgenij Primakov turned back over the Atlantic ocean in 1999 and declared the West (and first of all the USA) to be the main enemy of Russia soon became the semi-official and constantly stressed ideology of Russian authorities. This is even more so the further anti-Westernism becomes the core of president Putin’s politics, who tries to turn Russia into an empire that would compete with the US (it happens more on the propaganda level rather than in reality, but this is the level we are now interested in). Of course, Russian nationalists support such