

Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (eds.),

The New Russian Nationalism. Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–15
(Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2016) ISBN: 978-1-4744-1044-1 (epub)

Federica Prina,

National Minorities in Putin's Russia. Diversity and Assimilation
(Routledge, Abington, New York, 2016) ISBN: 978-1-138-78082-8 (hardcover)

For those whose primary concern is minority issues, Federica Prina's careful and detailed study of national minorities will be of most immediate interest. However, *The New Russian Nationalism* edited by Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud illuminates the wider context in which, since the ending of the Soviet Union, larger and smaller 'ethnic' groups in the new Russian Federation have struggled to maintain their identity, or to find a 'civic' identity. Hence it makes sense to begin with a very brief background sketch for those who are not Russia specialists, discuss Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud's edited volume, and only then insert Prina's contribution into the picture.

Very briefly, the USSR was structured as a federal state of 15 republics (of which the largest, the Russian republic, stretching from the Baltic to Vladivostok, was itself a 'federation' of larger and smaller 'republics' and 'regions'). Russia's imperial past, followed by 70 years of Soviet rule, resulted in a 'Russia' which, with Russians constituting 80% of the population, was also home to more than 150 smaller ethnic groups or 'nations'. Some of these had their 'republics' or 'autonomous regions'. There were also sizable numbers of those who traced their origins, or who themselves had come, from other parts of the Soviet Union (Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia). And, in their turn, Russians had moved to (or had long been settled in) Ukraine, the Baltic states, Kazakhstan or other parts of Central Asia. Passports included an entry for 'nationality' as well as for Soviet citizenship. Inter-marriage complicated this even further. Russian was the *lingua franca* but the official language of a republic was also taught in school, and 'ethnic culture' had always had an official, however stilted, status. Ethnic identity was taken for granted. All of this reflected the nineteenth century attitudes to 'nations', attitudes which, in the twentieth century, brought new states into existence. The structure that had held the USSR tightly together, and ensured that all adhered to the officially proclaimed 'friendship of peoples' was the centrally controlled Communist Party of the Soviet Union with its headquarters in Moscow.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and Communist party rule, the new Russia, now a separate state, inherited a complex federal structure, and Soviet perceptions of 'ethnicity' or 'nationality'. But now its peoples had the freedom

to make claims and to act. Very soon the federation was in trouble. Republics and regions began to claim greater autonomy from a weakened centre; Russians from the near abroad began to flood back from former Soviet republics. Borders went up, Russian nationalists appeared, Tatars claimed greater autonomy, and the Chechens took up arms. It was not until the early years of the new century, with the Putin leadership in the Kremlin, and oil money fleshing out state finances, that the centre began to reclaim and regain greater control over the regional or republican governments. By 2005 the governors of the federal subjects were nominated by the Russian President, a republican leader no longer had to be able to speak the titular language, and United Russia had majorities in republican and regional legislatures. By 2012 the newly re-elected President, Putin, was talking of '*rus*sky' (an ethnic/cultural/imperial term) as well as '*rossi*sky' (a state term), and a new State Strategy on Nationalities Policy, after much consultation and discussion, described the *rus*sky *narod* (people) as constituting 'the system-forming core' (Blakkisrud) of the *rossi*skaya *natsiia* (nation).

Pål Kolstø introduces *The New Russian Nationalism* with a question: "Russian nationalism is back—but precisely what does that mean?" And this is a good question, as the edited collection of twelve articles demonstrates. It is the fruit of a research project, funded by the Research Council of Norway and the Fritt Ord foundation, led by researchers at the University of Oslo and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, and with contributions by specialists from Europe, Russia, and the United States. The focus is on developments since the turn of the century and the bulk of the research relates to the period before the annexation of Crimea, but the issues that have arisen since over both Crimea and Ukraine find a place.

Undoubtedly a very useful collection that deserves a place not only on library shelves and courses that deal with Russia, its readers will, I think, pick out those chapters that interest them. It is not a book to be read from beginning to end but even so, I suggest, its organization does not help the reader trying to grasp the meaning and relevance of 'nationalism' in Russia today. Kolstø tells us that the book deals first with "society-led Russian nationalism" and then "nationalism at the level of the state" (p. 7) but, in all honesty, the articles do not seem to fall into two such categories. They embrace a wide range of topics, some are quite general, others quite narrow. Kolstø provides a useful introduction to the complexity of the 'national' issue in Russia today, pointing out that the concept means very different things even to those who consider themselves 'nationalists'. They range from those who want to see a strong Russian state to those who wish for ethnic or cultural homogeneity. They inhabit a huge territory with administrative structures and practices, which reflect