

“Russia has openly questioned the legitimacy of the international system, claiming the right to a distinctive sovereignty that makes the protection of its cultural body abroad a moral duty.”

## Russian Nationalism and Ukraine

MARLENE LARUELLE

“Nationalist” is probably one of the first adjectives that appear in most analyses of contemporary Russia and the ongoing events in Ukraine. But what is explained by saying that Russia or President Vladimir Putin’s regime has become nationalist? Nationalism is a catchall term that may do more to obscure than to clarify recent developments. Scholars have debated Russia’s nationalism for decades. Even during the final years of the Cold War, they were arguing over whether nationalism was Russia’s traditional “illness,” inherited from the czarist regime and its Black Hundreds anti-Semitic militia, and then reactivated by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Or was Russia actually an “a-national” country, a former empire that became a communist internationalist homeland and was then unable to transform itself into a “normal” (read Western-style) nation-state?

### Resurgent Nationalism

Second in a series

Since this kind of broad, overarching definition of what is and is not nationalist creates endless debate, let us try asking different questions: What are the groups that use nationalist agendas in Russia today, and in the service of legitimizing what kinds of actions or world views? How is the crisis in Ukraine a product of—or a game-changer for—nationalism in Russia?

### MULTIPLE NARRATIVES

There are myriad actors promoting a nationalist agenda in Russia. The regime itself (the presidential administration and the government) tends to manipulate references to Russia’s atemporal national identity both in domestic and international affairs. This is not something specific to

Russia. China has been using a growing number of references to its imperial and Communist past, as well as to an enduring Chinese identity marked by Taoist religious and philosophical canons. France has used its status as a former colonial power to claim a right and a duty to intervene militarily in various African countries, while on the domestic scene, Nicolas Sarkozy during his presidency organized public debates about national identity and created a Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity, and Codevelopment. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has led the charge for Canada’s new Arctic identity, competing aggressively with both Russia and the United States, to the annoyance of both French-speaking minorities and indigenous peoples.

What makes the Russian case so unusual, then? For one thing, a variety of interest groups produce varied nationalist narratives. The Kremlin is not alone in its public use of nationalist rhetoric—there are several “armed divisions” working in coordination with it. The military-industrial sector, which still employs millions, and the military itself, whose recruitment pool of young people is diminishing in terms of its size and enthusiasm for service, manage muscular patriotic campaigns in the hopes of protecting their interests.

Many public and private foundations and think tanks have sprung up around the Kremlin and the Putin-backing political party, United Russia, producing nationalist rhetoric on demand. They capture public funds while their leaders try to build careers based on nationalist slogans, seeking to become advisers to the regime. One such example is the Russian World Foundation, which promotes Russian culture abroad, mainly among the Russian-speaking diaspora. More recently, the Izborsky Club was created in 2012 as the main nationalist think tank, bringing together some 30 ideologues. Finally, the media,

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and television above all, serve to disseminate consensus-generating views on Russia's mission in the world, its national identity, and the soundness of current public policies.

Some institutions promote vibrant nationalist narratives with a larger degree of autonomy from the state. Such is the case with the Moscow Patriarchate, which represents the Russian Orthodox Church. The church's storyline is not totally in line with that of the Kremlin: It is more positive about the czarist legacy, and many of its politicized groups display monarchist convictions. The church's official memory also differs from the state's. This is obvious, for example, in its numerous canonizations of the Soviet regime's victims, while the state, by contrast, claims continuity with the Soviet Union. Last but not least, the church requested that it be recognized as a kind of *primus inter pares* among religious institutions, which would enable it to gain access to the public education system, but this attempt failed in part due to resistance from secular state structures.

## FROM ABOVE AND BELOW

It would be erroneous to see Russian nationalism only as a top-down production. Nationalist slogans also come "from below." Many political groups, with a range of legal statuses, claim to be nationalist in one form or another—for example, the two historical opposition parties, the Communist Party led by Gennadi Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's badly named Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (it is neither liberal nor democratic). There are also many groups that would qualify as national-populist or far-right on the European political spectrum: the movement *Russkie* (The Russians), which includes the former Movement Against Illegal Immigration as well as some skin-head circles; the Eurasianist Movement, led by the fascist geopolitician Alexander Dugin; and a plethora of smaller groups, which often have charismatic leaders and short shelf lives.

It should be noted that although the political orientations of these groups often favor an authoritarian regime, there is a growing trend of democratic nationalism. The so-called national-democrats call on Russia to follow the European model and become a democratic nation-state. Among them are Konstantin Krylov, leader of the unregistered National Democratic Party, and

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Aleksei Navalny, the blogger and main figure of anti-regime protests. This democratic movement emerged in the second half of the 2000s, but gained visibility and legitimacy during the anti-Putin protests of 2011–12.

Nationalisms from above and below should not be seen as two parallel phenomena that never intersect. On the contrary, they are in constant dialogue with a whole array of mediating platforms and personalities between them. The church plays a mediating role between the state and those who call for a nationalist agenda based on the promotion of conservative values, as well as Cossack organizations, Russia's traditional paramilitary militias. The Rodina party, led by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin, has a central place in creating a continuum of debate between bottom-up and top-down nationalisms and in fostering personal connections. A growing number of successful Orthodox businessmen such as Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev also contribute to this dialogue by funding grassroots activities while also safeguarding the business interests of the elite. (Malofeev is believed to be directly involved in funding the pro-Russian insurgency in eastern Ukraine.)

Grassroots nationalist claims are formulated according to two major narratives. The first one is civilizational: Russia is a unique country whose destiny is to be among the great powers, and whose culture both represents the distinctive "Russian soul" and carries a universalism that legitimizes messianic tendencies. This narrative can take many forms, emphasizing the imperial or Soviet history of the country, its geography (one-sixth of the land on earth), its achievements in arts and literature, its Orthodox religion and conservative values, or the contemporary geopolitical issues that allow Russia to appear as the antithesis of US unilateralism.

The second narrative is xenophobic: It claims that Russia's national identity is at risk from an invasion of immigrants from the southern areas of the former Soviet Union (Central Asia and the Caucasus), China, and the wider Islamic world. Approximately two-thirds of Russian citizens believe that there are too many immigrants in Russia (many consider Russian citizens from the North Caucasus, such as Chechens and Dagestanis, to be immigrants as well), want them

to be expelled, and support calls for establishing a visa regime with the former Soviet states. This narrative is not exclusive to Russia either; it is a phenomenon that can be observed in all countries in Western and Central Europe, and in other forms in the United States. What is unique is the high level of ethnic violence and anti-immigrant riots in Russia, which exceeds the European norm.

Russian nationalisms from above and below overlap on several points, but with a twist: The xenophobic aspect drives bottom-up nationalism yet is used sparingly by the authorities, who see in it the potential for social instability. In terms of political dynamics, bottom-up and top-down nationalisms can be mutually reinforcing or competitive. For years, the Kremlin has allowed grassroots nationalists to establish themselves relatively unimpeded, with the exception of those putting anti-Putinism at the core of their agenda (for example, the National Bolshevik Party of the writer Eduard Limonov). It detected their mobilizing potential in favor of a democratizing process during the anti-Putin protests, when the liberal opposition, in the minority, allied itself with nationalists.

## THE UKRAINIAN ESCALATION

This balancing act continues today with the crisis in Ukraine. Within months, the Russian nationalists shifted from support to criticism and vice versa in their relationship to Putin's regime. The first phase of the crisis in Ukraine, the events in the Maidan (central square) in Kiev, where demonstrations led to the ouster of Putin-backed President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, created deep divisions within Russia's nationalist movements. The (minority) national-democrats expressed solidarity with the Maidan, seeing it as an example of successful democratic revolution against a corrupt and authoritarian regime, and supported the Ukrainian nationalist Svoboda movement in its struggle for "national liberation." On the other side of the spectrum, the statist and imperialist movements shared the Kremlin's vision of the Maidan as a neo-Nazi coup organized with the support of the United States.

The second stage of the crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea in March, abruptly changed the stakes, creating a moment of near-unanimity around Putin. Very few nationalist figures have had the courage to challenge the annexation. There have been a few exceptions among the national-democrats, who saw it as a violation of

international law and did not want a new area to be subjected to Russia's nondemocratic and corrupt regime. For all others, the time had come for reconciliation with a regime that some of them had denounced for years as leading an a-national, or even anti-Russian, policy.

With the third stage of the conflict, the pro-Russian insurrection in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, nationalist circles have had to elaborate a more complex positioning. They support Putin in his interpretation of the conflict (that the Russian-speaking population's rights have not been respected by the new government in Kiev) but accuse him of having insufficient courage to defend the secessionist regions militarily. The more radical Russian nationalists now call for the fight to move from the Donbas to Russia and to overthrow the Putin regime itself.

Let us return to the question posed at the beginning of this essay: Why do Russia's expressions of nationalism seem different from those of other countries? The first response seems to be because they make Russia violate international laws. Here too, Russia is far from being alone. Many other countries, not only those defined at times as rogue states, but also the United States and Israel, break international laws on occasion—hence the classic Russian discourse about the West's double standards. Yet in the case of Ukraine, Russia has violated laws it issued and taboos it established itself. Moscow ratified the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, which guaranteed the inviolability of Ukraine's borders in exchange for the country's denuclearization, and campaigned for the preservation of internal Soviet-era borders on the grounds that renegotiation would threaten to make the entire Eurasian space erupt in fire and blood. Several breaches have appeared in Russia's position, but they all dated from the origins of "frozen conflicts" in the early 1990s. In these situations, Russian-supported secessionism in the breakaway regions of Transnistria in Moldova, and South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, was a legacy of the years of dramatic change that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union; local dynamics (competition between elites) were dominant.

The Ukrainian crisis redistributes the cards. Putin seems to have personally made the decision to annex Crimea against the advice of those close to him, including the ministers of foreign affairs and defense. But he has stood firm on a "wait and see" position, leaving eastern Ukraine to slide into civil war. Moscow does not support the

declarations of independence and the demands for annexation made by the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. Until August its assistance to pro-Russian insurgents was not sufficient for them to prevail, but allowed them to withstand attacks from the Ukrainian regular army. Moscow's obvious goal is not to annex eastern Ukraine but to maintain leverage over Kiev by creating a new frozen conflict. The Kremlin has permitted Russian nationalist movements to get involved in the conflict by occupying a gray area in which the authorities neither approve nor disapprove of their activities. They have invested in the conflict in every sense, sending brigades of volunteers trained in paramilitary action, and distributing humanitarian aid. They are extremely active in the media. Even if the Donbas adventure should end soon, it will have given these nationalists a much stronger symbolic arsenal—including martyrs.

### CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

The reason for the double standard in Russia's positions on Crimea and eastern Ukraine is that, in the eyes of Moscow, Kiev has committed two crimes. First, it violated an implicit agreement, according to which Russia accepted an independent Ukraine provided that it did not lead to an anti-Russian policy or Western encroachment. Independence was accepted, but the price to be paid was Ukraine's Finlandization. In preparing to sign a free trade agreement with the European Union that would symbolically pave the way for Ukraine's slow integration into Europe's economic and military spaces, Ukraine violated this understanding. The idea that the Crimean port of Sevastopol, which has an important place in Russian and Soviet history, serving as the base of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, could one day end up in NATO territory or coexist with NATO bases (much as US and Russian bases coexisted in Kyrgyzstan until July of this year) was unacceptable to Moscow. Its reaction was the outright annexation of Crimea, masterfully carried out without any military blunders.

Ukraine's second "crime" was to be badly governed and to regularly experience Maidans—that is, regime changes driven from the streets, which, depending on one's point of view, can be defined as democratic revolutions or coups. For the Kremlin, political instability in the name of

democratization, inspired by Western values and funded by Western money, is a direct route to domestic chaos and lost sovereignty. Its response was to foment a secessionist movement in the most fragile part of Ukraine's territory. Regardless of any eventual solution to the conflict, it will weaken the power of Kiev and Ukraine in general, and it will probably take years for the humanitarian drama currently under way, with hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians, to fade in the collective memory.

What then is the place of nationalism in Russia's two diverging positions on Crimea and eastern Ukraine? It is primarily instrumental. Putin stirred historical memory and aspirations to great power status by claiming Crimea, recalling the glorious feats of the Russian army on the peninsula—during the Ottoman wars up until the Crimean War (1853–56) and during World War II—and stressing the importance of Sevastopol in Russia's assertion of its strategic autonomy. In eastern Ukraine, Putin emphasized above all Russia's relationship to Russian-speaking people and ethnic Russians abroad, which is a more emotional rhetoric because it plays on a more potent identity-based nationalism.

However, to say that Putin has become a frenzied ethnonationalist since the onset of the Ukrainian crisis would be a mistake. If he were driven by ideological goals, he would have occupied eastern Ukraine just as he did with Crimea. It is true that with the crisis in Ukraine, Putin enlarged his repertoire of arguments. Until then, the Kremlin was trying to avoid overly open references to ethnonationalist themes; instead, it stressed Russia's multinational character, and cultivated a patriotism that remained directly oriented toward Soviet nostalgia and the quest for great power status. Yet the issue of "compatriots" (meaning the ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking population outside of Russia that identifies with Russia) already had become one of the regime's themes of choice in the 2000s, and allusions to Russian culture and history as the country's driving forces were commonplace.

What is interpreted as "nationalist" is thus the gap between Russia's territorial body and its cultural body. As is the case with many former empires, Russia's cultural body—that is, its self-representation as a nation—is larger than its

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territory, which melted away with the old Soviet borders. Many Russians see the annexation of Crimea and support for pro-Russian insurgents in eastern Ukraine as a moral duty toward those who feel orphaned by the Soviet Union's demise.

## SPIRITUAL SOVEREIGNTY

Since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the general context has changed. There has been an observable shift in Russia's ideological atmosphere, including the crafting of new claims: Anti-Western, and especially anti-American, views have grown more visible, but the Kremlin's narrative is multifaceted. It dissociates the West's liberal values from Europe as a philosophical and historical principle. This dual discourse criticizes contemporary Western liberal politics and decadent mores, NATO's eastward enlargement, and human rights as components of an ideology of interference and domination, while emphasizing Russia's role in preserving "authentic" European values.

Putin's speech at Valdai on September 20, 2013, is a bold demonstration of the addition of conservatism to the Kremlin's toolkit. He said, "Today we need new strategies to preserve our identity in a rapidly changing world, a world that has become more open, transparent, and interdependent. . . . For us, questions about who we are and who we want to be are increasingly prominent in our society. . . . It is evident that it is impossible to move forward without spiritual, cultural, and national self-determination. . . . We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious, and even sexual."

Although the focus on identity is not new for Russia, the conservative lexicon is. It can be interpreted as Putin's response to domestic changes. Maria Lipman of the Carnegie Moscow Center explained that the implicit "no-intrusion pact" that governed state-society relations during the 2000s (the state does not intervene in the private lives of citizens, and in exchange they do not participate in managing the state) was broken by the demonstrations against Putin in the winter of 2011–12. The system in response has attempted to impose more ideological coercion in order to

maintain the status quo. For this, it relies increasingly on the conservative—and silent—majority of the electorate to marginalize the active minority that has more liberal values.

This conservative agenda does not develop only in a domestic context; it also has become a brand for Russia's reassertion on the international stage. The nation's self-presentation as a champion of a multipolar world order took shape in the second half of the 1990s with its stance on the Yugoslav wars, when it opposed NATO intervention. The Kremlin views its major role in the current crisis in Syria as a crowning achievement. Russia defends itself and its allies against US domination by providing them with legal support at the UN Security Council, as well as financial, military, and political aid. It also advances an increasingly structured storyline based on the notion of sovereignty—sovereignty of the state over its citizens, sovereignty of the state against international laws and institutions, but also sovereignty in identity and value choices.

That is probably why the topic of "spiritual sovereignty" invaded the nationalist-minded media and intellectual spaces in Russia. This sovereignty narrative represents a new stage of Russia's international branding that de-Russifies the "voice of Russia" and brings it up to date with at least one part of the international scene. For the first time since the failure of Marxism, Russia is offering the world a narrative that goes beyond its national specificities, has universal value, and thus can be accepted, integrated, and reinterpreted in other contexts. According to this narrative, each state should be able to refuse changes imposed from outside (but also from inside, since the "internal enemy" is often supposedly funded by "external forces") in the name of its inviolable and atemporal sovereignty. It should be able to reject rules of the game that contradict what it claims as its values. Russia's sovereignty is marked by the gap between its territorial body and its cultural body, hence its "moral duty" to protect the latter and to attempt, in certain conditions, to make them overlap.

Transforming Russia into the "savior of Christian values" runs in the same vein. It creates connective dialogue with other religions and faiths that share the same conservative values and denounce decadent European mores. And it

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reinforces the idea of seeing Russia as the “other Europe,” calling not for its exclusion from Europe or the West, but rather for its inclusion as the embodiment of those “real” values that have been lost in the West.

### PANDORA’S BOX

Three conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing observations. First, no single Russian nationalism exists. There actually are multiple nationalisms that can overlap or compete in their narratives and their networks depending on the circumstances. The Kremlin tries to keep a firm stranglehold on them and prevent them from contributing to the potential for anti-regime mobilization, but now it is unsure whether it is able to control the Pandora’s box it helped to open. In the months to come, if the Donbas insurgency collapses, Putin will face nationalist movements left unrestrained after months of ideological struggle, crowned with dead martyrs for their cause, and supported by a few thousand newly battle-hardened men. To force them into compliance will be difficult and will require measures either of authoritarian repression or co-optation in one form or another. If the insurgency succeeds, Russia will be able to limit Ukraine’s room for maneuver and to slow down its Western integration. A third solution, not the one Putin would prefer, is to annex eastern Ukraine. That would leave not only Ukraine, but also Russia, more fragile.

Second, during the Ukrainian crisis the Kremlin officially recognized that Russia’s self-

representation as a cultural body was inadequately endowed with the territory inherited from the collapse of the Soviet Union. But this does not mean that every country with a Russian minority should prepare for a Ukrainian scenario. The Kremlin’s relationship to the Russian cultural body abroad is contextualized. This cultural body can stay abroad if the countries that host it accept being partly Finlandized. Ukraine refused to play according to these rules, and therefore it is paying Moscow’s hefty price of both annexation and destabilization. As seen from the Kremlin’s perspective, the chain of events makes sense: It was because of the Maidan uprising that Ukraine lost Crimea and faced civil war in the Donbas, not because it hosts part of the Russian cultural body.

Finally, Russia is not the only country to use cultural arguments about its distinctiveness to legitimize a foreign or domestic policy, nor is it the first to breach an international law it committed to respect—but it may be alone in linking the two. Russia has openly questioned the legitimacy of the international system, claiming the right to a distinctive sovereignty that makes the protection of its cultural body abroad a moral duty. This is why Russia’s actions in Ukraine have profoundly shaken up the post-Cold War system. Formerly a conservative and status quo-oriented head of state, Putin has changed the course of history—and probably his own future—by following a sudden impulse, unleashing new dynamics over which he could have little control. ■

#### From *Current History*’s archives...

“The Russian launching of two earth satellites in October and November, 1957. . . was a dramatic demonstration of the decline of American power, a decline which started in September, 1949 [with the Soviets’ explosion of an atomic bomb] and proceeded at an ever accelerated speed, unbeknown to ourselves but not to our friends and enemies.”

Hans J. Morgenthau “Russian Technology and American Policy,” March 1958

