

Western Perceptions of Russian Nationalism

Astrid Tuminez

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In the past decade, Russian nationalism has become a popular topic among Western scholars, journalists, and commentators. Although not an entirely new theme among Russia-watchers, nationalism achieved a level of prominence in the 1990s that was not true during decades of more traditional Soviet and Russian studies. For the most part, those who have written about Russian nationalism in the post-Soviet period warn that it is a dangerous ideology that is likely to have negative effects on Russian domestic politics and foreign policy. Specifically, they argue that nationalism promotes authoritarian politics at home and fuels aggressive and imperialist Russian policies abroad. What follows is an overview of Western perceptions of Russian nationalism and some comments on their implications for Russian policymakers. For the purposes of this memo, nationalism is treated as a neutral concept--i.e., it does not hold the generally more negative connotations attached in Russia to the word *natsionalizm*. As a concept, nationalism refers to an ideology that identifies the members of a purported nation, defines what makes that nation distinct from outsiders, and articulates the highest values and aspirations for which members of a nation should strive.

A Persistent and Unchanging Threat

In a 1994 review of major works published in the West on Russian nationalism, David G. Rowley notes that, reminiscent of Cold War attitudes towards the Soviet Union, scholars and analysts writing on Russian nationalism fall into either "hardline" or "softline" camps. Hardliners, in Rowley's words, postulate that Russian nationalism is "a malignant and monolithic force that is unreformable and tends inexorably toward extreme forms of racism and authoritarianism." This perspective echoes a view of nationalism in general among some scholars, who argue that nationalist ideology in any form tends to deteriorate toward militarism, imperialism, and fascism.

Among Russia specialists and commentators, those who see nationalism as a malevolent force follow a tradition of belief in an unchanging "national culture" in Russia--a culture that has persisted from the days of tsarism to the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. This essentialist reasoning, according to the historian Martin Malia, is what has led Westerners during the Soviet period to declare that Communism was "little more than the new face of eternal Russia." In the post-Soviet period, the viewpoint that Russian culture is unchanging persists. This culture, according to Liah Greenfeld, for example, has bred an

"ethnic, collectivist, and authoritarian" nationalism that is infused with anti-Westernism, exaggerated claims of uniqueness, and an apocalyptic sense of mission. It deems conquest as its highest goal, and its inevitable behavioral manifestations are aggression and imperialism. In Richard Pipes' words, even after the Soviet Union's collapse, the hankering for empire remains: "To feel truly and proudly Russian, Russians...instinctively strive toward expansion and...militarism." In enthusiastic assent, George Will declares, while arguing in support of NATO expansion in 1996, that "[E]xpansionism is in Russia's national DNA."

An Antidote to Soviet Communism

Unlike the hardliners, advocates of a "soft line" see Russian nationalism as a positive force. This perspective began in the days of the Soviet Union, when some scholars and analysts writing in the West presented nationalism as a progressive force that opposed (and was a potentially viable alternative to) Soviet Communist ideology. In the 1970s and 80s, scholars such as John Dunlop, Nicolai Petro, Darrell Hammer, and others highlighted individual figures, literary publications, underground or dissident movements, and religious, historical, and environmental organizations in Russia that, in their view, represented Russian nationalism. They portrayed this nationalism as an ideology that was antithetical to Soviet Communism because it differentiated Russia from the Soviet state. Russian nationalists, they noted, cared about stopping ecological degradation, preserving Russia's pre-revolutionary architecture and heritage, and embracing traditional Russian peasant values and culture. While some Western voices within this camp noted that Russian nationalism was not wholly compatible with democratic tenets (this became apparent, for example, in the rhetoric of prominent Russian dissidents such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn), they nonetheless concluded that nationalism was a positive force. It had the revolutionary potential of overthrowing the Soviet regime and replacing it with something more palatable to Western tastes--even if it was not entirely friendly to Western interests.

Post-Soviet Russian Nationalism: A Rising Threat or a Force for Good?

The Western "hardline" and "softline" approaches to Russian nationalism persist in the post-Soviet period, but the former is arguably more dominant than the latter. Hardliners today see nationalism as a malevolent ideology unleashed by Russian frustration and resentment after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They characterize nationalism as a threat because it feeds popular support for an authoritarian government, and inspires Russian hegemonic and imperialistic actions against newly independent neighbors. For hardliners, the political ascendance of nationalism would inexorably create a Russian state that oppresses its citizenry at home and engages in military mischief abroad--thus threatening regional and international peace and stability. Leaders of a Russian state guided by nationalism are most likely to restore military power as the primary gradient by which to measure Russian national greatness. For hardliners, Moscow's wars in Chechnya, destabilizing Russian military actions in the "near abroad," and popular

support for Vladimir Putin--a former KGB official with an authoritarian streak--are only some of the worrisome products of a rising and dangerous nationalism.

The "softline" approach in the post-Soviet period argues that nationalism is a force for good because, at a time of severe internal hardship and external humiliation, Russians must find resonant values and myths to help consolidate a new national identity. Without this identity and its attendant aspirations, it would be impossible to build and sustain the popular will needed to bind state and society, pursue economic development, and promote collective welfare. Because the path to becoming a market economy and a political democracy is long and arduous, success requires that Russians be able to draw effectively on aspects of their own national history and culture that link to visions of the new state and society they are trying to build. The mere importation of Western ideas, values, and ways will not work, and letting "Russia be Russian" (in historian James Billington's words) can only increase the likelihood that Russia's post-Soviet transition will succeed.

Prevalent perceptions of Russian nationalism as *either* a malevolent *or* benign force make for a dubious clarity, whichever camp US policymakers might prefer. This dichotomy of perception impedes American policymakers from focusing on and understanding the nuances that exist in Russia's evolving nationalism. There are nuances in terms of the gradations of malevolent or benign content among different types of nationalism in Russia, and there are nuances in terms of the internal and external factors that are likely to empower one set of nationalist ideas over others. US policymakers who become convinced that Russian nationalism is an unchanging and dangerous force may well support measures that hedge against non-existent Russian threats and that serve only to feed and justify Russian paranoia and belligerence. On the other hand, US policymakers who see Russian nationalism as chiefly benign may overlook dangerous demagogues and ideas that do inhabit portions of the Russian landscape.

Implications for Russian Policymaking

There are some implications in all this for the Russian policymaking community. First, it may be constructive for Russians to elucidate for their American counterparts the powerful role that a healthy nationalism can play in creating a more democratic and economically stable Russia. Russians should communicate as much as possible that Russian nationalism is not a homogeneous force, and that specific nationalist ideas could contribute to greater social cohesion, national pride, and a willingness to work for the public good. Domestically, Russians in the policymaking community should work to preserve open and lively debate and discourse in their country, and support free and independent media and thriving educational institutions. Without independent and effective institutions for debate and discourse, it will become easier for the worst types of nationalists in Russia to propagate their ideas and exploit Russian history and traditions to advance chauvinist or other aggressive forms of nationalism. Finally, it may be useful for Russian policymakers to work with their US counterparts to facilitate and enhance the free flow of people and ideas between Russia and developed Western democracies. A

Russia that closes itself to the outside world is more likely to develop a worrisome nationalism than a Russia that is physically, intellectually, and economically open to the outside world. Ultimately, the nationalism Russia chooses will have an important impact on the future of the state and its people. Where possible, Russian policymakers should cooperate with their American colleagues to increase the appeal of constructive forms of nationalism in Russia.

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