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Neo-Nazis Are a Threat to Russia, Polish Analyst Says

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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and religion in the former Soviet space.

VIENNA &mdash Unlike a decade ago, today's Russian neo-Nazis are now a real threat to Russian society and the powers that be, the result both of the evolution of this group and of Moscow's unsuccessful effort to control them by drawing off some of their membership into quasi-governmental youth movements, according to a Polish commentator.

In an essay in Warsaw's Dziennik newspaper, Stanislaw Rajewski notes that Russians &mdash and by implication, many others &mdash do not appear to understand just how different the neo-Nazis of today are from those of a decade ago, and how much greater a threat they represent.

"For the majority of Russians," Rajewski continues, the neo-Nazis are viewed as "bands of skinheads sitting in courtyards, drinking beer and painting uncensored slogans on stores where Armenians or Georgians sell shashlik [kebabs]" or youngsters who "greet one another with the Nazi salute" or who occasionally beat up "a student from Liberia."

Because most Russians &mdash like the powers that be &mdash view them in this way, the neo-Nazis of the Russian Federation are seldom equated with terrorists, but that may be changing. The powers that be have declared victory over this group. However, like in the case of the Nevsky Express explosion, neo-Nazis have on occasion claimed responsibility for violent acts.

While the Russian media in the early 1990s sometimes had stories about the neo-Nazis, especially after the beginning of the first Chechen war made their attitudes less offensive to many, they did not emerge in the minds of many until 1998 when Semyon Tokmakov of the small right-radical group Russian Chain beat a black American Marine guard at the U.S. Embassy.

At his trial, Tokmakov shouted out his group's slogan: "Russia for the Russians, America for the whites, and blacks to the jungles." His victim, "fearing for his life," Rajewski says, fled the country. But despite his obvious involvement in this crime, Tokmakov was not convicted of anything.

In the following years, the Polish journalist writes, "the growing forces of neo-Nazis [in Russia] were underestimated because of the dual attitude toward the skinheads." On the one hand, he notes, some Russian officials and citizens had a "positive" view of them. And on the other, most ignored them altogether.

Two years ago, the Moscow city authorities decided to "cleanse" the capital of neo-Nazis, but it was "already too late," Rajewski argues. "Parts of the organizations, in exchange for promises of loyalty to the Kremlin, received the chance to act freely, and others [which Rajewski suggests were the majority] were able to go underground."

The precise number of neo-Nazis in Russia is unknown, but some rights activists have suggested that it may be as many as 70,000. Sova Analytic Center director Alexander Verkhovsky, told Rajewski that "a distinctive aspect of Russian ultraright groups" is the relatively small size of independent cells, many of which do not have more than 15

members.

Consequently, Verkhovsky says, "even if FSB agents try to penetrate their ranks, the task is complicated by the fact that they must track at one and the same time hundreds of groups which are not connected one with another." That, in turn, means that any victory over such groups is likely to be incomplete at best, especially since neo-Nazism in Russia is changing shape.

In the 1990s, most skinheads were between 13 and 19 and only "from time to time" interrupted their self-dramatization to "beat refugees from Tajikistan, dark-skinned people and Hindus." And the militia largely ignored them, saying the neo-Nazis "did not represent a major social danger" or arguing that the "racial motivation of such crimes" was lacking.

But about a decade ago, the neo-Nazis began to be older &mdash most are in their 20s or 30s &mdash and became interested in promoting the idea that the Russian people had fallen "into slavery" as a result of its own alcoholism and the actions of the government, especially the security agencies, and that those agencies, rather than immigrants, were what the neo-Nazis should attack.

Moreover, Russia's neo-Nazis, like other political groups, are increasingly turning to the Internet to spread their views. On one YouTube clip, for example, a neo-Nazi asks his Russian audience, "You know why we are losing the war to the aliens? Because the Caucasians are outstanding sportsmen and Russians are drunken degenerates."

"Stop drinking vodka," the neo-Nazi continues, "and go to a sports facility." Such attitudes are to be found on the Combat 18 group's website as well. That group, which claimed responsibility for blowing up the Nevsky Express, features a banner reading, "Your chief enemies are vodka and the FSB."

Alexander Cherkasov of the Memorial Human Rights Center told Rajewski that this claim may not have any foundation, but it does have consequences: Russians are now being forced to ask themselves whether the skinheads might do this. "And to the surprise of most, the answer to this question is positive," something that boosts the radical right even if it is not true.

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