

Putin Says Nationalism a Danger to the State

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin lashed out Monday at nationalists who call for cutting off government funding to the North Caucasus as well as those who want to create regional separatist parties, saying their positions could lead to the collapse of Russia.

While arguing for a return to the Soviet notion of “people’s friendship,” Putin also called for tougher rules on internal migration as part of his position on nationalist and ethnic problems as presented in an article published on both his website and in the liberal-leaning *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.

Listing the nationalist riots at Manezh Square in 2010 alongside other ethnic conflict zones around the country, Putin said the underlying problem for everyone remains “directly linked” to “unresolved social and economic problems, ineffective governance, corruption and multiethnic tension.”

“Nationalism, religious intolerance are becoming a base for radical groups and movements,” he said.

The article is the second in a series prepared by Putin as part of his presidential campaign, but some analysts said his arguments appear contradictory alongside other parts of his agenda.

Putin has long tread warily around the issue of nationalism — an area that remains one of the most polarizing in Russia today. A 2011 Levada Center poll found that 43 percent of Russians support the notion of “Russia for Russians” and that a xenophobic sentiment is on the rise.

Opposition groups from both the left and the right have blamed Putin’s government for allowing uncontrolled migration from the republics of the Northern Caucasus and countries in Central Asia.

In the article, Putin suggested that migrants wanting to work in Russia should have to pass exams on Russian language and culture. He also suggested harsher punishments for internal migrants who commit crimes in other parts of the country.

But independent political expert Stanislav Belkovsky said such a hardening of rules only for internal migrants who “show disrespect toward traditions of ethnic Russians” couldn’t possibly be legal.

“I think it is unconstitutional to make regulations regarding one particular group,” he said. “It looks like this text was written by people with a particular point of view.”

Leading Russian migration specialist Vladimir Mukomel said the suggested policy harkened back to tsarist-era legislation that prohibited Russians Jews from settling in large cities.

“Is this a new policy for settlement?” he wondered.

He also said the article fails to distinguish between migrant laborers who only desire to work and those migrants seeking to integrate in the society.

In his article, Putin calls for the reopening of a state ministry regulating national ethnic policy, a body that Mukomel points out was closed in 2001 under Putin’s earlier tenure as president.

Putin also raised a red flag on the matter of regional separatism. Having once called the collapse of the Soviet Union the “biggest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century, Putin said Russia might follow suit if separatism is allowed to take root.

Putin earlier threw his support behind liberalizing the registration process for political parties, but said allowing regional or nationalist parties based on the notion of separatism would set a dangerous precedent.

“Those who would try to rely upon nationalists, separatists or similar forces or circles ... should be immediately excluded from the election process, using democratic and legal procedures,” Putin wrote.

Some experts saw the remark as a reference to Boris Yeltsin who is blamed by opponents for

allowing ethnic republics such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan to gain relative independence from Moscow.

During the 1990s, Sverdlovsk's powerful Governor Eduard Rossel also threatened to create a Urals republic.

Putin has stated previously that he saw the notion of "Soviet nationality" and the uniting of different republics under one umbrella as a positive model for modern Russia.

In 2010, he even publicly clashed with President Dmitry Medvedev who said the peaceful coexistence during Soviet times was only maintained through "tough" methods.

But opposition leader and political columnist Mark Feigin said the Soviet model could not be repeated in modern Russia, as the core population is now ethnically Russian, unlike in Soviet times.

"Putin is trying to create U.S.S.R. 2.0, which will have a place for all the nationalities, but Russia is no longer an empire," Feigin said.

Putin's own record on national policy is somewhat mixed. While he has always distanced himself from hard-line groups, he once called himself and Medvedev, "nationalists in a good sense of the word."

During a recent conversation with a group of Russian editors, Putin criticized writer Boris Akunin — pen name of Georgian-born author Georgy Chkhartishvili — of opposing the Russian-Georgian war because of his ethnic roots.

Akunin has played a vocal role in the recent wave of protests spurred by allegations of fraud in December's State Duma vote. A year before the rallies, Russian authorities faced demonstrations by thousands of nationalists and football fans who rallied on Manezh Square after police released several North Caucasus nationals, suspected in killing an ethnic Russian fan.

Opponents of various political stripes have long expressed outrage at the problems in the Northern Caucasus, where Kremlin-supported authorities are viewed by many as corrupt.

Ramzan Kadyrov, president of Chechnya and a former warlord accused of human rights violations, has lavishly rebuilt the once war-ravaged republic using large subsidies from Moscow, which many critics say have been largely wasted.

The Caucasus issue, once a banner of hard-line anti-immigrant groups has recently been embraced by other Putin critics, such as prominent opposition politician Alexei Navalny, who coined the phrase "Stop feeding the Caucasus" and has joined in several nationalist rallies.

While not mentioning Navalny by name, Putin wrote in his article that such calls might lead other regions to repeat the similar slogans like, "Stop feeding Siberia, the Far East, or the Moscow region."

"Those kind of slogans were used by those who led the Soviet Union toward collapse," Putin said.

Belkovsky said Putin was guilty of “contradicting” himself with such a position.

“On one side he says he is against the slogan “Stop feeding Caucasus,” but on the other hand he is supporting Kadyrov,” he said.

But Putin’s proposals received a warm response from Vsevolod Chaplin, senior cleric of the Russian Orthodox church, who called them “bright.”

“I think that those measures would be supported by an absolute majority of people and in the near future, they will become legal statutes,” Chaplin told Interfax on Monday.

Chaplin’s comments were in response to a statement from Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin who said Monday that some of Putin’s proposals will be turned into laws, RIA-Novosti reported.

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