The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin's Nationality Dilemma

By Peter Rutland

January 29, 2012



In Prague, tourists line up to visit the "New-Old" synagogue, which was new when it was built, in 1270. On Jan. 23, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin published an essay on the "national question" in Nezavisimaya Gazeta. Like the Prague synagogue, Putin's article is something that is called new, but in fact, it is quite old.

The good news was that there is no sign of Putin playing the nationalism card. Such fears were triggered by his reaction to the December 2010 clashes in Moscow between Russian and North Caucasian youth when he met with soccer fans. While calling for tighter controls on migrant workers in his article, Putin recognizes that they are here to stay, and he defends the country's federal and multiethnic structure.

As political analyst Andrei Makarkin has noted, one important development this past year has been that many ultra- nationalist leaders have given up on trying to work with the Kremlin. Many of them have now formed an alliance with democrats and Communists in opposition to the rigged Dec. 4 elections. Several leading nationalists were given the right to speak from the tribune at the protest demonstrations. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny has often

deployed nationalist rhetoric and promotes the "Stop Feeding the Caucasus!" slogan, something that Putin's article specifically targets as dangerous for the Russian state.

Although Putin is rejecting an alliance with ultranationalists, the bad news is that his approach is a thinly disguised recycling of Soviet nationality policy. Writer Alexander Morozov has suggested that the core ideas in Putin's article were taken from a 2010 Education Ministry proposal for promoting "polycultural" education. But they are rooted in a much deeper-rooted discomfort with recognizing the force of minority national identity. Putin's model is a Russia-centric view that glosses over the fears and aspirations of the nonethnic Russians who make up 20 percent of the country, a statistic that was nowhere to be found in Putin's article.

Putin argues that the traditional European nation-state is based on a closed model of national culture. This meant that the Europeans were reluctant to integrate Muslim immigrant populations. Instead they opted for a "multicultural project," which Putin now deems a failure.

Russia, in contrast, is a "multiethnic civilization with Russian culture at its core," a tradition, which Putin says is rooted in the "expansive Russia" of tsarist times. "Russia's state development is unique," writes Putin. "It is neither an ethnic state nor an American melting pot."

Russian identity, rather, is that of a "civic nation" — one that is rooted in loyalty to the state. Putin argues that this is why Russians living in other countries fail to organize themselves as a cohesive diaspora. Putin does not use the term "Rossiisky," which former President Boris Yeltsin was fond of using to denote civic as opposed to ethnic identity. This kind of statist nationalism is unacceptable to ultranationalists who are driven by hatred of the West as an external enemy and Muslims from the North Caucasus and Central Asia as an internal enemy.

But Putin goes on to say, "This kind of civilizational identity is based on preserving the dominance of Russian culture." He calls upon Russian intellectuals to preserve the country's "unified cultural code." This can only be alarming to Russia's minorities who have seen their autonomy steadily eroded over the past decade. For example, they have objected to the unified state exam for university entrants, which was introduced two years ago, which can only be taken in Russian.

In fact there is nothing particularly unique about Russia's approach to national identity. All modern states try to guarantee civic rights while also resting on some common ethnic and linguistic foundation. Putin praises Russian identity for achieving "unity in diversity" — perhaps not realizing that is the official motto of the European Union since 2000 and is almost identical in meaning to "e pluribus unum" — or "many united into one" — which the United States adopted as its seal in 1782.

The problem is that Russia faces ethnic and religious insurgencies in the North Caucasus that have no equivalent in Europe or the United States. Moscow needs to come up with some new ideas to tackle these problems. But after 12 years in power, it would be unrealistic to expect any new thinking from Putin.

Peter Rutland is a professor of government at Wesleyan University in Middletown Connecticut. He blogs about nationalism at Nationalismwatch.com

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/01/29/putins-nationality-dilemma-a12220