The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Kremlin's Pogrom Mentality

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

October 21, 2013



There is no doubt that the current wave of Russian nationalism will eventually spark reactionary movements from this country's other ethnic groups. The real question is: Will nationalist sentiment soon overwhelm Russia? The ethnic clashes in Pugachyov several months ago and the recent rioting in Biryulyovo have pushed these issues to the fore.

Twice in its history, a surge in ethnic nationalism combined with other systemic problems has led to this country's collapse: once in 1917 and again in 1991. Both times, huge territories either broke away from Russia by restoring their national status or by becoming nation states for the first time. Both times there was blood, ethnic cleansing and large number of refugees. Will this tragic scenario now play out for a third time in Russia?

Elevating
xenophobia
and Russian
nationalism
to the rank

of official policy could result in the collapse of Russia, much like what happened to the Soviet Union in 1991.

Throughout the post-Soviet period and up until the spring of this year, nationalism and xenophobia were considered taboo in mainstream politics. For the most part, only marginalized ultra-nationalists and openly Nazi groups exploited anti-Caucasus and anti-immigration rhetoric. With the exception of Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party, the country's main political parties rarely resorted to such tactics.

In the 1990s, former Mayor Yury Luzhkov became the first high-ranking member of the Russian establishment to occasionally make anti-immigrant statements, earning unanimous condemnation from the intelligentsia and journalists.

The Kremlin's priority was aimed at expanding Moscow's influence. It tried to integrate the former Soviet republics, maintaining open borders with them. At the same time, Moscow strongly condemned and suppressed any domestic expression of nationalism because it understood that in a multiethnic state such as Russia, ethnic nationalism had the potential to tear the country apart.

What's more, in recent years President Vladimir Putin has sharply intensified projects aimed at integrating the Commonwealth of Independent States. A Customs Union was formed and the process of building up the Eurasian Economic Community continues. These measures suggest that Moscow intends to foster economic and cultural cooperation among the former Soviet republics. Like the European Union, Russia guarantees four freedoms throughout these territories: the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. It is therefore no surprise that Putin recently spoke out yet again in opposition to the introduction of a visa regime with CIS states. That would close off the path to integration and put an end to all of Russia's initiatives in the region.

But mainstream Russian politics suddenly did an about-face this year and, contrary to its usual integrative approach, began inciting xenophobia and nationalism. Even the most respected politicians began making the same types of statements for which Zhirinovsky and the far-right had gained notoriety.

Now, everyone is rushing to join in. Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill has warned of the threat of ethnic crimes. The State Duma, with United Russia at the lead, is considering measures to combat "illegal immigration." Interior Ministry head Vladimir Kolokoltsev has made the fight against ethnic crime a top priority. For example, last week he took personal control over the arrest of Orkhan Zeinalov, an ethnic Azeri, who is suspected of murdering Yegor Shcherbakov, an ethnic Russian. Federation Council speaker Valentina Matviyenko proposed tightening procedures for allocating quotas for migrant workers. Not surprisingly, chief sanitary inspector Gennady Onishchenko suddenly "exposed" unsanitary conditions

at the vegetable market where Zeinalov worked and linked it to the influx of migrants. Late last year, Putin himself instructed law enforcement bodies to battle against "ethnic crime." Two years ago in his interview with NTV, Putin divided Russians into "natives" and "non-natives," sparking a big scandal. Now such ideas and statements are considered normal.

The recent Moscow mayoral campaign focused almost exclusively on the fight against illegal migrants. The city authorities even organized a public crackdown on Vietnamese migrants and a temporary detention camp in Golyanovo. Opposition leader and mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny placed the fight against illegal immigration at the center of his campaign platform and called for introducing a visa regime for citizens of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Not surprisingly, Liberal Democratic Party candidate Mikhail Degtyaryov enthusiastically made similar xenophobic statements, but the surprise came when Sergei Mitrokhin, the candidate from the typically more progressive Yabloko party, even toyed with the idea.

In the past, xenophobia was limited to the hatred and distrust some individual Russians felt toward all outsiders — whether non-Russian citizens from Central Asia and the Caucasus or simply any non-Slavic-looking person. Such sentiments were not a part of politics and remained marginalized. But as of this year, xenophobia, nationalism and outright racism have entered national politics thanks to the thoughtless statements and actions of many leading Russian politicians who have no idea of the damage they are doing to themselves and their country.

Opinion polls have identified a widespread xenophobic mood in the country, and politicians cater to these sentiments in an attempt to ensure their own political futures. But in so doing, they are only ensuring the ultimate destruction of the country. Once ethnic nationalism is elevated to the rank of official policy, it cannot be kept under control. The rise of Russian nationalism will likely trigger a corresponding nationalism among all of the other ethnic groups in Russia. That, in turn, could lead to the demand for "ethnically pure" nation states separate from Russia. Russian nationalists are effectively making an open call for the end of the modern Russian state by demanding that the authorities "drive all Caucasians out of Russia."

Russian politicians are fond of speaking about the dangers of "illegal immigration" and describing migration as a dangerous influx of foreign cultures, while they do not utter a word about the many positive aspects of migration and its vital necessity to Russia's well-being. In this way, Russian politicians essentially legalize the pogrom mentality of the mobs and provide it with a legitimate political foundation.

I hope I am mistaken, but I fear that the xenophobic populism of all these politicians has already begun to write the closing chapters in the book of Russia's long history. This would not be the first time that the 13th year of the new century had marked the eve of upheaval and destruction in Russia.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvy radio and is a co-founder of the opposition Party of People's Freedom.

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

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/10/21/the-kremlins-pogrom-mentality-a28779