

Trying to Put Nationalist Genie Back in the Bottle

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If there is a message for President Vladimir Putin from last week's "Russian March" in Moscow, it is probably this: Be careful what you wish for.

During his 2012 re-election campaign, Putin sought to appeal to what he called "the overwhelming majority" of ordinary Russians, purposefully pitting them against the elitist opposition in Moscow.

After the election, Putin continued to mobilize this majority to defend his rule against the burgeoning protest movement. With a nationalist pitch, the Kremlin chose to pander to the underside of Russian nature with its worst instincts of intolerance and hostility towards gays, migrant workers and Americans.

The unforeseen consequence of this policy has been a gradual political radicalization of Putin's majority and an erosion of the Kremlin's grip on the nationalist agenda. People

showed little interest in gay-bashing or neo-imperial dreams of Eurasian integration but focused on issues that adversely affect their daily lives.

Popular disenchantment with a stagnating economy and corrupt law enforcement are fueling demands for equal justice under the law and a more accountable government at the top. These demands are morphing into a new agenda for Russian nationalism, transforming it from an ally of the Kremlin into a broader protest force.

Despite populist rhetoric, Putin's policies remain largely elitist, focused on maintaining a tight grip on power by a small group of leaders unaccountable to the people. Most legal avenues for exerting popular pressure on their decisions have been neutered, leaving street riots as a controversially effective way to send a message to the authorities.

Ethnic Russians are disenchanted by two main factors: Massive federal subsidies to the corrupt ruling clans in the North Caucasus to buy off their loyalty and the law violations commonly committed by people from the Caucasus. Russians increasingly see themselves as disadvantaged and discriminated against.

The Kremlin tries to cast the nationalists' demands for equal justice as xenophobia and racism to forestall the merger of the nationalist and democratic agendas. But this will have only a short-term effect, turning off unpopular, marginal liberal figures.

Having awakened the silent majority with a pitch for intolerance, the Kremlin is now battling to control the nationalist agenda to prevent it from broadening the protest base and transforming it into a national democratic movement, much like in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. It is a tall order.

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