The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Putin's Nationalism Will Break Russia Apart

By Jens Siegert

July 01, 2014

Much has been said about what Ukraine's ongoing crisis will mean for this young state's journey toward nationhood. The reverse seems to hold true, however, when the conversation turns to Russia, despite it being a nation state for an equally short length of time.

The focus instead is on Russia's move away from being a nation state, a status perceived by many in Russia as "forced" or even "imposed," toward a restoration of its lost empire.

Putin has said nothing about "protecting" Tatars, Chechens or Buryats.

Depending on who is talking, the conclusions drawn in this respect are either triumphant and euphoric, or resigned and sad. But perhaps this is the wrong approach to take? Perhaps it would make more sense to look at the events in Russia as well as in Ukraine as the birthing

pains of new nation states experiencing a second and even more difficult emergence?

When looking back over the enormous volume of Facebook chatter on Ukraine, I'm struck most of all by the extent to which many believe that Russia's history as an empire means that it will only develop in this direction.

Some people see Russia's Crimea foray as stepping yet again on one of the very same booby traps which litter its history. But the sharp blow to the head it has suffered merely clouds its vision, rather than alerting it to danger.

Other people, however, think that Putin is waking the country up from this very daze. They believe that Russia has finally found its way again after losing it for the past 25 years. The viewpoints are different, but the end result is the same. Russia's fate is to be an empire.

But in my opinion, we will not see a return of the Russian Empire. Russia, like other European nations before, must embark on the sometimes bitter journey towards nation-statehood. There are no shortcuts on this journey, only a choice between more or less painful, more or less violent and more or less bloody routes.

And I'm convinced that Russia, perhaps alone in this regard, must come to terms with being a nation or else to face the threat of further disintegration.

The fundamental problem faced by every emerging nation state is that of its borders. What is included? Who is included? What has to be left out? Who belongs inside? These questions were largely ignored when the Soviet Union was dismantled, even though its collapse was hastened by the nationalist sentiments of its periphery.

This was a very wise decision, particularly in view of the events surrounding the breakup of the Yugoslavian mini-empire later. The 1993 Constitution, which is still in force today, does not mention the issue either; the preamble refers to a "multinational people," which implies that the borders are settled at any rate — or at least they were.

Attempts to find a solution to this fundamental problem were therefore postponed rather than resolved. This can be an entirely valid approach in the case of problems which cannot currently be solved or whose solution would carry too high a price. Indeed, the European Union has adopted it as a modus operandi, but it is important not to be misled into thinking that the problem has disappeared.

Other European colonial empires of modern times, including England, France, Spain, and the Netherlands, had an advantage when settling this problem. Unlike the Russian Empire and the later Soviet Union, their home countries were on a different continent to their colonies, and furthermore already existed as a nation state during their imperial rule.

Russia's colonies, however, are immediate neighbors of the motherland, to the point that there are still heated disputes over where this motherland stops and where the former colonies begin. There is no natural end point for de-imperialization.

The danger for Russian statehood, consequently, derives from a fundamental contradiction within the recent attempt to again widen the country's border. The reason given for the annexation of the Crimea peninsula, just as for possible military interventions in the

Ukrainian heartland, is to "protect our Russian countrymen."

But there has been nothing heard about "protecting" Tatars, Chechens or, for example, Buryats, many of which also live both abroad and whom at home have only limited autonomy. This is a dangerous game for a country that constitutionally defines itself as representing a "multinational people."

So, as it seems, Russia could grow in size again, using Russian nationalism to mobilize support for the government's policy abroad and within the country. For some time people will not ask persistently about the costs. But it will have to pay a price, first in unbalancing the fragile relationship between the Russians and other ethnic groups in the country and second most probably in an economic overstretch.

Therefore it is more likely that the present aggression will give rise to a fragmentation of the country, as economic suffering and Russian nationalism force many ethnic minorities to question how representative their government really is.

To return once again to the meme of the dominant reality, supposedly brought up by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel in a phone call with U.S. President Barack Obama earlier this year, we are currently living in Putin's world.

Not because Russia is right or because it is stronger than the West, but because, as political commentator Ivan Krastev has correctly adduced, Putin has taken the initiative; "Putin is 'wild' while the West is 'wary.'" But as many have already learned, Russia tends to punish initiative. Its call for empire will be no different.

Jens Siegert is director of the Moscow office of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, a German political think tank closely affiliated with the German Green Party.



Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/07/01/putins-nationalism-will-break-russia-apart-a36933