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How Nationalism Came to Dominate Russia's Political Mainstream

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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Eduard Limonov standing in front of a Strategy-31 banner in March 2010.

President Vladimir Putin's decision to annex Crimea and his treatment of the eastern Ukrainian insurgency have rallied nationalist support and altered Russia's political landscape, politicians and analysts told The Moscow Times.

The ongoing political crisis between Russia and the West over the armed conflict in Ukraine has pushed nationalist-leaning forces to the forefront of Russia's political agenda. Unlike the liberal opposition, the new nationalist mainstream is fundamentally anti-Western.

This situation has come at the cost of the equilibrium that Putin had masterfully controlled for the past fourteen years, according to Nikolai Petrov, a Russian political analyst with the Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

"What was previously relegated to the margins of society has become central to Russia's

political discourse," Petrov told The Moscow Times.

"Crimea has stirred up nationalist fervor in Russia ... but it has also held Putin hostage to one political force over the other. While he was able to adeptly maneuver between political streams in the past, he now faces pressure to adopt a more nationalist stance. This could rob him of his position as the pre-eminent arbiter of the country's political situation," said Petrov.

The Moscow Times spoke with prominent members of various Russian political movements to gauge Russia's changing political atmosphere.

The Other Russia's Eduard Limonov

Dating back just a year, riot police regularly outnumbered the activists present at Strategy-31 rallies staged in Moscow's city center. Strategy-31 is a series of rallies held at the end of each 31-day month. The date was chosen in honor of Article 31 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to hold peaceful public gatherings.

For years, these protests were never sanctioned by official Moscow. Led by Eduard Limonov, former head of the banned National Bolshevik Party and current leader of The Other Russia, the protests were generally dispersed, with dozens of activists detained in the process.

Limonov, a well-known and prolific writer, has developed a reputation over the years as a poster boy of Russian fringe-politics and a vicious Kremlin detractor.

However, things changed following the emergence of the Ukraine crisis last November.

Limonov toned down his criticism of the Kremlin, even referring to the Crimea annexation as "a great historic victory." Then in May, Moscow government authorities formally permitted a Strategy-31 rally to go ahead, for the first time in five years.

Speaking with The Moscow Times on Thursday, Limonov spoke enthusiastically about the authorities he once detested: "The Kremlin has done the right thing by reuniting Russia with Crimea, I have always advocated it."

"I am a skilled and constructive politician, I will not criticize the government just for the sake of it, those who do so have no political future," said Limonov.

Still, Limonov maintained that he still opposes Putin and views the Russian government as authoritarian.

At the same time, many of his loyal supporters have parted ways with the Other Russia over what they see as his new loyalist stance.

Liberal Opposition Leader Boris Nemtsov

Former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, one of the more prominent leaders of the liberal opposition, dismissed claims that the Russian political landscape has shifted in connection with the Ukraine conflict.

In Nemtsov's view, it all boils down to Putin.

"The political situation has been changed by Putin, who — I believe — has initiated a war with Ukraine," he told The Moscow Times.

Nemtsov said that, despite their claims, Limonov and most other nationalists are "Kremlin stooges."

The Left Front's Sergei Udaltsov

Leftist leader Sergei Udaltsov, a well-known dissenter and coordinator of far-left political group the Left Front, has not cozied up to the Kremlin by any means. He declared a hunger strike in protest of a 4 1/2 year prison term he was handed last month following a conviction for organizing riots during anti-Kremlin protests in 2012.

Still, Udaltsov supported the Kremlin's handling of the annexation of Crimea, and called for more active Russian involvement in the Ukraine crisis, moves that invited a great deal of criticism from his political supporters.

According to Daria Mitina, another Left Front leader, after Crimea, all of Russia's political movements have had to adopt a patriotic stance.

"The Crimea situation has given a patriotic impulse to society at large, which means that we are all in a new political situation," she said.

The Nationalists: A Burgeoning Force

The nationalists comprise the political force that has reaped the most from the public zeal surrounding Crimea's annexation, according to Petrov. What had formerly been seen as a marginal political group, largely overshadowed by the country's liberal politicians, has spiraled into an established movement.

"The liberals have lost support because of their pro-Ukrainian stance. Their demand that Russians must crawl to Ukraine and beg for forgiveness has clearly demonstrated that what they actually harbor is hatred toward Russia, rather than some kind of political position," Konstantin Krylov, a prominent nationalist activist said.

Krylov was a member of the ill-fated Opposition Coordination Council, a movement established amid a wave of anti-Kremlin protests in late 2011 and mid-2012. The movement endeavored to unite liberal, nationalist, and leftist opposition activist — forging a force to be reckoned with from an array of weaker groups.

But in Russia's present political climate, a movement such as this one is "unimaginable," Krylov told The Moscow Times. Moving forward, the opposition will have to shed its liberal, pro-Western voices, replacing them with nationalists and leftists, he said.

New Media Landscape

Russian nationalism had already begun its transition away from the fringes even prior to the events in Ukraine. Online media outlets have been launched that have already portrayed

Russian nationalism not as a peripheral refuge for eccentric intellectuals, but as political mainstream in a new, increasingly confident Russia.

"We had a very strange situation, where most of the media was occupied by liberal-leaning pro-Western journalists, who pushed an anti-government agenda. Today, the media situation is much more congruent with reality," said Yegor Prosvirnin, founder of the Sputnik & Pogrom website, the mouthpiece of the new Russian nationalism.

The website was named for the two Russian words that have the most international recognition, Prosvirnin said.

"The takeover of Crimea and Russia's stance on Ukraine has brought Russia's political discourse in line with what the majority of Russians want. They want a nationalist state, and the Kremlin will have to lean on this new majority," Prosvirnin told The Moscow Times.

Putin's Dangerous Game

According to Petrov, Putin will face pressure from this new patriotic political mainstream to create more and more reasons for national pride.

"Putin will have to side with the new patriotic majority and this will leave him little room to maneuver," Petrov said.

"Putin used to be the president of the elite, a handful of intellectuals, many of whom were pro-Western. After Crimea, Russia has turned into a European-style national democracy," said Prosvirnin.

"This is what really terrifies the West now," he said.

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Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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