The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Nationalists Will Rue Their Scare Tactics

By Ivan Sukhov

August 13, 2014



Aug. 9 marked the 15th anniversary of Vladimir Putin's rise to a position of power, dating back to when he was appointed prime minister in 1999. Despite his long term in office, the Russian president's domestic approval rating recently hit a record high. And the harsher his foreign policy, the greater support he enjoys at home. The only question is, how long will this equation hold true?

It is clear that federal television broadcasts help sustain the quasi-patriotic, aggressive and isolationist euphoria that feeds Putin's popularity. But it is also obvious that the public response to the ideological seeds planted by the Kremlin is, for the first time in the 24 years of post-Soviet history, truly nationwide, active and sincere.

After a long period of fruitless attempts, Russian leadership has found or remembered the doctrine that draws the best response from their countrymen: "Russia is surrounded by enemies." This mobilizes the public as it has in the past, even though this time the list of enemies includes Ukraine, a post-Soviet country close to Russia in every way despite

the current propaganda.

The fervent search for enemies is not a new pastime for Russia. What is new is the surprise it evokes in certain people in Russia, those who wanted their country to throw down the weapons of the Cold War, become free and strive for prosperity. They didn't expect such a large number of their countrymen to respond so readily to the familiar words about mobilization under enemy siege.

This really is a revolutionary discovery for them. These people, perhaps an average of one out of 10 Russians, have been sure for a long time that they represented the country: intelligent, educated, more or less successful, and accustomed to a world without borders. They thought that slogans about enemies at the gates were only of interest to a few dozen retirees, forever stuck in the early '90s protests against Yeltsin's reforms.

Now these people, once naively certain of their place in the world, feel that the communists who stormed the Ostankino television tower in 1993 under the slogan of imperial revenge are now back on top. It even appears that this time they have succeeded in taking over federal television broadcasting. The response to ideas voiced by today's opinion makers is reminiscent of parading soldiers on the Red Square roaring in answer to a greeting from their commanding officer.

Suddenly, it turns out that Russia is not at all our small Moscow circle of friends from university, an expat buddy, and one acquaintance who lowers himself to work on state television while at the same time spending Friday nights denouncing the regime over a beer and telling stories from his latest trip to America. No, the country is ecstatic over the confrontation and the demonstration of power; the public has missed this search for enemies, and it will not be long before they start seeing enemies in people like you and me.

Under these conditions, complaints about pressure and falsification during elections at every level, gripes that brought tens of thousands out into the streets of Moscow three years ago, seem less important. It turns out that the balance of power in the Russian government's representative bodies is perfectly organized.

There are the majority longing to battle with Russia's enemies and the few who, watching the waves of insanity pass over the surface of their daily life, spin their fingers around their temples and begin thinking seriously about visas and tickets. With this balance of power, visas and tickets are the only route to safety.

But this victory of the majority is illusory. If those in power believe that they have finally found the right button to press for rallying the majority's support, they risk making a serious mistake.

First, there will be representatives of this triumphant majority who will discover that they live in a country where, apart from French Camembert for breakfast and vacations to Nice, there are, for example, former members of the military deprived of status and prosperity. The inhabitants of regions outside the major cities have entered into an irreversible decline. There are people who look at life differently than you and are prepared to kill for their point of view.

Our government has found certain pressure points that most of the Russian body politic will react to. But this doesn't mean that the masseuse manipulating those pressure points will automatically be taken for a friend if the client jumps off the table to rub legs that have fallen asleep.

Second, in a world filled with the administration's ideology and controlled by the editors of federal television channels, there is nothing real. There is no reliable data about just how deeply this new, aggressively sown seed has taken root. The planters themselves may be surprised at the harvest.

It seems likely that the ideological change toward the direction of the mainstream occurred within a relatively small, politically active class. It is simply that those who read liberals like Gaidar, Keynes and Brubaker have been replaced by readers of Dugin and Haushofer. The unexpectedness of this shift speaks to the fact that the liberals did not get much of value from their clever books, if that knowledge did not give them the ability to prevent their own disposal onto the trash heap of Russian history.

But euphoric readers of Dugin and Haushofer also risk becoming trapped in an illusion that they have a clear picture of the country and are capable of politically representing the huge Russian majority.

This vast majority has always been passive and primarily occupied with physical survival, not the search for a national doctrine. Those who did manage to rouse that majority to take an active position after all — like during the Civil War of 1917 to 1921 — often come to regret it bitterly.

Now a huge stratum of the Russian population is not only prepared, but happy, to support restrictions on imported goods; American beef and French cheese never did appear on the tables in tens of millions of apartments anyway. They couldn't care less about Western sanctions, they didn't have any money in Bank Rossiya, and they didn't travel abroad on vacation.

But there will soon come a time when the consequences of Russia's worsening relationship with the outside world will have a real impact on their shopping carts and their wallets. And they will be extremely displeased. I don't envy the ones who will end up bearing the brunt of that displeasure.

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