The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Nationalism Just a Tool in Putin's Hands

By Marlene Laruelle

September 17, 2014

In August, radio station Ekho Moskvy organized a sociological survey asking Russians who they would vote for at the next presidential elections of 2018. Only two names were offered: Vladimir Putin or Igor Strelkov, the living icon of the Donbass insurgency.

Strelkov took the lead over Putin, by 29 percent to 20 percent as the preferred candidate. What does this reveal about public opinion in Russia, and does it confirm the — rather obsessive — Western storyline about Russia becoming "nationalist?"

A close look at sociological surveys conducted in Russia since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis and at the official, Kremlin-backed narrative, shows that they accord in terms of perceptions of the conflict.

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Putin's March 18 speech on the annexation of Crimea into the Russian Federation set the tone: historical and cultural arguments were used to justify the fact that Crimea belonged to Russia and were juxtaposed with long paragraphs about the West's double standards in international affairs. These crimes included the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and then of Serbia, its support for Kosovo's independence, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and NATO action in Libya.

To this should be added NATO's regular ambiguities, at least at the discursive level, about integrating Ukraine and Georgia into its structures, and therefore also Russia's consistent discontent at seeing NATO moving further east and encircling it.

But "nationalism," understood as the defense of Russians abroad, occupies a relatively narrow band in the array of arguments Putin has mustered.

It has grown with the Ukrainian crisis, but has certainly never been the driving engine of Russia's foreign policy, which remains focused on securing the country's geopolitical sovereignty. In the Russian perspective, Ukraine's independence is acceptable only if the country remains "Finlandized" and does not advocate a pro-Western stance.

In this context, Moscow's support of the Donbass insurgency does not point to another Crimea-type situation — conquer eastern Ukraine and integrate it — but to a strategy of maintaining its leverages of influence over the Ukrainian government. The government no doubt hopes to stop violence on the ground and enshrine the birth of a new "frozen" conflict.

Russia is thus using a nationalist motive, but does not have a nationalist agenda. The Kremlin's relationship to Russian minorities abroad is in fact context specific. As seen from the Kremlin's perspective, the existential threat of Maidan was what lost Ukraine the Crimean peninsula, not the stated fear of violence against ethnic Russians in Crimea. Kazakhstan also hosts a large Russian minority, but so long as the Kazakh regime plays according to Moscow's rules, the nationalist argument will not be applied to it.

A close look at the chronology confirms this analysis. The Russian presidential administration was reluctant to send weapons and soldiers to Donbass insurgents during the first months of the conflict. It only became involved, probably against its will, during the summer, when it appeared clear that insurgents wouldn't be able to withstand the advances of the Ukrainian regular army without Russia's material and human aid.

This does not, of course, rule out Russia moving decisively to annex Donbass or at the very least strengthening its position there. While annexing Donbass was obviously never part of Putin's plan, it could make it onto the agenda in coming weeks. This is particularity likely if negotiations on the ground fail and if NATO or independent nations decide to provide Kiev with open military support.

A similarly ambiguous perception of the Ukraine crisis can be observed among the broader

Russian population. Support for Crimea's reintegration was almost unanimous at the beginning of the conflict. By contrast, however, the situation in eastern Ukraine has raised concerns about the long-term relationship between Moscow and Kiev, and engendered the queasy feeling of being at war with a brother country.

Indeed, while the separatists have many Russians among their ranks, only a few hundred actual nationalists were ready to throw in their lot with the Donbass insurgency. The population's support is mostly oriented around a narrative of humanitarian catastrophe and the need to secure Russia's interests. Bellicose postures calling for war with Ukraine or the West are in the minority.

A firmer hold over the insurgency has been visible since the summer, when the Kremlin decided to step down radical figures linked to the Izborsky Club and increased the number of regular army troops fighting in Donbass. It also has quietly organized Strelkov's removal from his pedestal, cautious to avoid any uncontrolled "heroization" of the insurgents and of the fallen soldiers.

The process of "normalization" of Donbass as a second Transnistria is under way. But the main boomerang effect may not be felt by the insurgents, but by the ideological "nurturers" of Novorossiya. Both the Izborsky Club and the political Orthodox lobbyists have consolidated their visibility in public space and cultivated networks of influence rising high in the state hierarchy with the hope of making nationalism, whatever its doctrinal contents, a new state ideology for Russia.

The Kremlin has been successful so far in keeping nationalist forces in check, but rising nationalism of various strains has been an undeniable trend for many years. As the regime needs more mobilizing narratives, it could have to unleash some of the most popular nationalists, without being sure its cooptation tool will continue to function.

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