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Kremlin Doesn't Have Monopoly on Patriotism

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Today, a Russian patriot is anyone who supports the annexation of Crimea and who believes that a "fascist junta" rules in Kiev, that the separatist forces fighting in the Donbass are composed exclusively of local volunteers, that President Vladimir Putin has gotten Russia up off its knees, that the West dreams of destroying Russia, that it is therefore necessary to isolate the country and start an arms race and that only Putin can save Russia from destruction.

As for those who consider the annexation of Crimea illegal, who accuse the Kremlin of sending Russian troops and weapons to eastern Ukraine, who criticize Putin for his authoritarianism, who demand the peaceful transition of power through truly democratic elections, who openly discuss the corruption among members of Putin's inner circle, who advocates friendly relations with the West and who insist that Russia leave Ukraine alone and immediately stop the war there — those are labeled national traitors and members of the "fifth column."

As presidential administration deputy head Vyacheslav Volodin said at the last Valdai forum, modern Russia cannot exist without Putin. He said that "Russians are well aware that attacks on Putin are attacks against Russia," and moreover, that "Putin is Russia. Without Putin, there is no Russia."

Criticism of Putin in any form is a blow to Russia aimed at undermining its very existence. And further, any critic of Putin is necessarily an enemy of Russia.

Putin sees the world in the same light. At the Valdai forum in 2013, he demanded patriotism "in the purest sense of the word" from everyone in the domestic political debate. After all, he said, "all too often in national history, in place of opposition to the authorities, we encounter opposition to Russia itself."

And despite the deepening economic problems, surveys indicate that more than 80 percent of the population agrees with the Kremlin that patriotism should involve complete support for the authorities' policies and all of their decisions, and that the people should rally around the head of state in the spirit of "autocracy, Orthodoxy and nationality" — as statesman Count Sergei Uvarov described it in the mid-19th century.

Does such widespread popular support mean that this particular brand of autocratic, militaristic, traditionalist, anti-liberal, creative freedom- and innovation-hating version of patriotism is the only legitimate form of patriotism in the eyes of the people and the only historically correct one?

Not at all. There are many types of patriotism, just like there are of everything else. History might one day show that those now in the minority hold a more accurate understanding of patriotism than those in the far larger majority.

The attempt by the authorities to present themselves as the embodiment of all Russia and their policies as the only ones correctly and properly representing Russia's interests is nothing new for this country, but Russian history has repeatedly shown that the dominant version of patriotism can lead to the collapse of the state.

It happened in the mid-19th century when Tsar Nicholas I reached the end of his reign, and again in both 1917 and 1991. In all three cases, only the official version of patriotism was considered acceptable, while all other interpretations were declared hostile and even treacherous. And all three times, it was the dominant official version that failed.

The dictionary of Vladimir Dal defines a patriot as "a lover of the fatherland, one who zealously yearns for its well-being." That is a very precise definition — as Dal's definitions always are. Both types of patriots — those who support the authorities and those who sharply criticize them — sincerely love Russia and are earnestly concerned for its welfare. However, they are deeply divided over what they consider best for Russia.

For today's self-styled Russian patriots, patriotism means authoritarian power centered in a single individual, the monopoly of state capitalism in which the ruling bureaucracy pockets the lion's share of the country's wealth and the choicest pieces of the pie go to the defense industry and siloviki officials with close ties to the president to the detriment of the civil sector and the development of human capital.

It means the suppression of dissent and creative freedom, isolation from the West, holding the authorities up as sacred and giving them total domination over society and the economy. According to their critics, the liberal patriots, the good of Russia derives first of all from its economic and social prosperity, from the wealth and well-being of its people.

In their opinion, achieving that prosperity requires a peaceful foreign policy, reliable laws protecting private property, low taxes, favorable conditions for business and competition, the rule of law, a reduction in outlays for the military and siloviki, greater investment in health care, education and science, a democratic transition of power, the accountability of the executive authorities before the people, decentralization and cultural tolerance.

Their ideal is a "free" Russia, in the highest and noblest sense of that word. A different coalition of interests stands behind each competing version of patriotism. Those advocating the superpower, authoritarian version include the ruling bureaucracy, siloviki, defense industry brass, state monopolies and those whose incomes depend on the state.

The coalition advocating liberal patriotism is much weaker and includes small and medium-sized businesses, the intelligentsia, nongovernmental organizations and independent professionals.

That explains why they number only 20 percent of the population, while the majority of 80 percent is supported by the hard-hitting propaganda of official patriotism and selective repression.

The "Great Russia" coalition is set on devouring Russia's seemingly endless natural resources and enriching themselves in the process.

In order to keep the general population silent and obedient, they have created a "perpetually besieged fortress" ideology that simultaneously condemns the Western consumer culture while itself consuming everything Russia has to offer. The historian Vasily Klyuchevsky aptly described this phenomenon as "plump state — sickly populace."

The "free Russia" coalition calls for restricting and reducing the appetite of the state and focusing instead on fostering the entrepreneurial and creative potential of the people, thereby raising their standard of living and personal satisfaction.

The first form of patriotism glories in the ruling bureaucracy — the second in the freedom and progress of the people.

The coalition of official patriots is perfectly happy with the current state of affairs, whereas the liberal patriots advocate change and genuine development.

The late-19th century Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov described this dilemma well. He wrote, "There are profound differences between the demands of true patriotism that wants Russia to be as good as possible, and the false claims of nationalism that claims Russia is already better than every other country."

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