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# Putin's Amendments To Russia's Constitution Sparks Debate About Russian Nationalism

Amendments expanding Putin's power and language about the "state-forming role" of the Russian national majority, raises ethno-nationalism concerns.

On many occasions, Russian President Vladimir Putin has called for the adoption of new amendments to the Russian Constitution. Putin has usually referenced several reasons why the head of State would want to change the basic law of the country, which is only 27 years old. This is the desire to expand the powers of the Parliament (State Duma), and limit the tenure of the presidency to two terms without the fateful word "in a row", which allowed Putin to be elected 4 times, to ensure the immunity of former presidents and establish the priority of the Constitution of the Russian Federation over International Law.

The gossip behind all this activity is Putin's desire to remain at the helm of the State after 2024, moving to the Chairperson of the Parliament, and recently, his former Adviser [Vladislav Surkov](#) said that after the adoption of the amendments Putin's presidential terms must be reset and he has to get a new opportunity to run again (this statement was quickly disavowed by Kremlin, but in the end of the Campaign this Amendment appeared in the collection).

By the President's decision, a [Working Group](#) was formed to prepare proposals for amending the Constitution. This is not to say that the idea of updating the Constitution caused a stir among the population of the country. Until recently, only professional politicians, state media and individual bloggers showed interest in the amendments. The authorities doubt that it will be able to ensure a decent turnout at the referendum. In connection with that, Putin proposed to make the vote on a weekday and declare this date a Day off.

This process would continue to be quite routine, taking place within the framework of existing domestic political realities, if there had not been for the discussion on social networks about the need to fix in the text of the Constitution the "state-forming role" of the Russian national majority. This discussion quickly went beyond the Internet.

## A Debate About Russian Ethno-Nationalism

A number of authors of the very opposite political orientation took part in it. “With each passing day, discussions about the special status of (ethnic) Russians in the Constitution, the state-forming role of one people are gaining momentum. At first, this was perceived as the destiny of marginals, then it went to the first buttons of TV channels and to the Duma tribune,” – writes on his page in Facebook a well-known Russian political scientist, Associate Professor of the Department of Foreign regional studies and Foreign policy of the Russian Humanitarian University [Sergey Markedonov](#).

There are incomparably more nationalists than was thought. The Kremlin’s harsh repressions against right-wing radicals in the recent years destroyed their political and organizational structure, but did not destroy nationalist ideology, whose popularity among the intellectuals was above expectations. “We are dealing with a strange situation,” says one of the supporters of the “Russian amendments,” Doctor of History [Artem Ermakov](#), “the vast majority of the population of our country continues to identify themselves as Russians, but this is not enshrined in any legal document. Except, probably, All-Russian census, which regularly confirms this result. The majority of the population declares that it is Russian, but absolutely nothing follows from this. Even our country is called “Russia” only in brackets, because “Russian Federation” – then its more formal name “Russia” – it’s like a tribute to some traditions.”

He is echoed by the well-known pro-communist politician of the late USSR, member of the Supreme Council of the time of M. Gorbachev, and now the opposition public figure [Viktor Alksnis](#): “For the last hundred years the Russian people were remembered at the official level only in the year of trials,” he writes. “Yes, there was a famous toast of Stalin for the Russian people. Yes, films were made, books were published, songs were written in which Russian history and Russian people were present, their exploits were sung. But at the official level, the Russian people were absent, they were not there.” Alksnis, an ethnic Latvian living in Moscow, believes that “that Russia is primarily RUSSIAN RUSSIA and Russia is the RUSSIAN STATE.” He indignantly condemned well-known people in the country – Russians of Armenian descent – film director Karen Shakhnazarov and political scientist Gevorg Mirzoyan, who spoke out in a popular TV talk show against ethno-amendments. They called them “outright discrimination and dividing the peoples of Russia into first grade and second.”

Oddly enough, but he is echoed by a well-known Russian liberal, Minister of Economics in the Yeltsin government [Andrei Nechaev](#), co-chair of the opposite “Civil Initiative” Party. “Accidentally I turned on (TV) Russia 1,” he writes on his Facebook, “and there are Shakhnazarov, Kurginyan, Zhirinovskiy and Elena Yampolskaya led by Solovyov (*all ethnic Armenians or Jews – author’s note*) teaching us the Russian patriotism. ” When asked by the Author what he didn’t like the most – the ethnic origin of the speakers or the fact that they taught the audience the Patriotism, he replied – “both.”

Ordinary people are not far behind them. Someone [Denis Titov](#), referring to the Author of this article, writes: “All post-Soviet peoples received their Nation states, in many national republics of the Russian Federation the titular peoples are spelled out in local constitutions, even when they are constituting a minority. Only Russians should not be given anything. Russians should not have their own State, they will tolerate. Oh well...”

However, the idea of creating a Russian autonomous republic in the central part of the country, where most ethnic Russians live, is unpopular among supporters of ethno-amendments. Their opinion was expressed by someone [Ilya Maslyukov](#), who lives, by the way, in Estonia, but who positions himself as an ethnic Russian. “Nobody is going to create a separate Russian republic,” he writes. “It (Russia) was already created by many of land collectors, from Ermak and Dezhnev to Khabarov and Krasheninnikov, and many other people. So it turns out that all equal peoples live inside of the one big Russian republic. Many of them (equal peoples) asked themselves to protect their interests. And who didn’t ask ..... Mother History has already forgotten about them. So everyone is equal. Therefore, Russians should be mentioned (in the text of Constitution)”, he writes. True, Ilya does not know the answer to the question of whether Tatars, Chechens, and, for example, Circassians, who were conquered by Russian tsars in different periods of history, would agree with his idea.

But in any case, we see that this category of people understands that Russia is not the USSR, this is the Russian republic, but to enclose the territory within itself is the height of the absurd. Therefore, the requirement to single out an ethnic majority in the Constitution is the desire to simply affirm its leading role among other peoples of the Country. The idea is not new: “we are all Russians (French, Germans, Spaniards, etc.), just of different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds.” It lies at the heart of the European constitutional tradition, which is undergoing the serious trials today.

In Russia, the popularity of this idea indicates the disappointment of a significant part of the population in the idea of the multiethnic “Russian Nation”, which was actively promoted in the corridors of the Kremlin by Academician of the Russian Academy of Science [Valery Tishkov](#). The idea is absolutely logical, it is based on the factor of multi-ethnicity of the Russian population and the principle of soil, a common territory that brings together hundreds of peoples and ethnic groups living in Russia. But the authors did not take into account that, in addition to the common territory and historical destinies of the modern nation, common values are necessary today, on the basis of which unification occurs. In multi-ethnic countries, these can be [supra-ethnic values](#) only.

But ideologists of the modern Russian Nation-building Theory deny this, and with them, the Power denies this too. Consequently, there remains one group of values that can unite, if not the whole Nation, then at least part of it, as is happening in most European countries. It is about the language, culture, and traditions of the ethnic majority. These are simple values, attractive not only to representatives of this ethnic majority but also to a certain part of minorities. The

European model of the Nation is built on this basis. And this model is laid in the foundation of the European constitutional tradition.

The European point of view on the formation of a Nation in Russia was expressed in social networks by the well-known Defender of the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine [Stanislav Byshok](#) living in Moscow, who believes that the construction of the Russian Nation is possible only on the basis of Russian culture. At the same time, Byshok understands the limitations of his theory, since at least 20% of the population of Russia does not consider this value as unifying one within the framework of a big country. He argues that his “thought is not that Russian culture has such power that it can hold everyone and everything. The question is that there is no other holding factor. Within the framework of tough totalitarianism, it could be combined by force and ideology”, he writes. “When the Power became less, and Ideology showed its worthlessness, the design fell apart. Ideology ended, and Russian culture remained. Together with the Russians.”

Really, the politically active community was divided into two parts. One part believes that the Russian ethnic majority must be mentioned in the Constitution of Russia as the “state-forming people”. The second one does not agree with it, because they see this as a risk for a multinational country. Part of the representatives of the second group, represented by the author of the concept of the Russian nation, Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences Valery Tishkov, believes that it is necessary to mention the multiethnic [Russian People](#) in the Constitution.

Supporters of the amendments turned out to be in the lead, because, apparently, they unexpectedly received support ... in the Kremlin. What will this mean for Russia’s domestic policy?

## **The Policy Ramifications Of The Amendment**

As the political scientist [Sergei Markedonov](#), already quoted by me, rightly emphasizes in his blog, supporters of ethno-amendments find almost “a complete lack of rational motivation,” because it is not clear what practical tasks are addressed by the entry in the Basic Law on Ethnic Russian Majority. And everyone understands that this largely symbolic step is the first stage and the second should follow it. But what should be the second step so far, not even the nationalists understand. As one of them, a researcher at the Irkutsk Museum of the [Decembrists Vsevolod Naparte](#), said at a round table on the Internet, “we understand that this step should be taken because we need to start somewhere, but what will be our second step? “Regarding the second step, no one can say anything definite, although it is much more important.”

However, in order to answer this question, it is only necessary to analyze the history of post-Soviet nationalist reforms in the post-Soviet space. In many of the former Soviet republics, these reforms began in the last years of the USSR – by the emergence of social movements for the preservation and development of the native language of the titular nations, and ended 30 years later by the destruction

of the remnants of the federal structure, by the ban on education in the languages of national minorities, and by the non-citizenship for those who were called “illegal emigrants of the Soviet period”, etc. I admit that Russian constitutional nationalism will be more inventive, but the trends will still remain the same.

Moreover, no one calculates the possible consequences. “We are scolding Georgia and Ukraine (and rightly) for ethnicizing of their politics, but aren’t we preparing ourselves the same with our own ethno-amendments?”, [Sergey Markedonov](#) asks in his Facebook post. And then he continues: “What percentage of Abkhazians is in Georgia and (percentage) of Karabakh Armenians in Azerbaijan? Miserable! And they have the problems for a years! In our country, from Siberia to the Caucasus, there are a lot of autochthonous peoples who don’t know another homeland! We’ll we write about them in the list (in the Constitution ) or in a separate application? Why is the multinational people so bad? Not an ideal formula, but it is about civil and political loyalty, which is higher than the principle of blood. And it holds us together, but does not share! ”

It is impossible to say better, but we should have in mind one more thing. The definition of an ethnic Majority as state-forming people in the country’s Basic Law will mark the fact that Russia de jure will join the European constitutional tradition. Or, in other words, to the tradition of [European constitutional nationalism](#), when norms included to the constitution put ethnic minorities in an unequal position.

In this regard, it makes sense to consider the example of France, the country denies in principle the existence of ethnic, including autochthonous, minorities and even refuses because of it to join the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. For official Paris, in France live only the French people of different origin. This definition is the ideal one for many moderate Russian nationalists. Even the French secret services cannot find out the ethnic and religious origin of the people they are interested in. The maximum what they can apply is the information about where the object of observation or its ancestors came from (if they are or were immigrants) to the country. In reality, ethnic minorities make up at least 10% of the population in France, but officially they do not exist. And if not, then there is nothing to protect the rights of what does not exist, in particular, secondary schools or religious schools for minorities are not needed, programs to support their cultural identity are not needed too. Integration programs in France are accelerated assimilation programs and nothing more. As a result, the vacuum was quickly filled with radical ideas, and France still holds the first place in terms of terror in Europe. Approximately [28% of Muslim emigrants](#) living in this country in the third or fourth generation did not like the idea “we are all French”, enthusiastically accepted by local liberals at one time. They still want to maintain their identity, and the Islamists radicals, in conditions of self-elimination of the State, provide them with their own ways for this.

In Russia, the situation is even more complicated. These are not just hundreds of small autochthonous peoples, originally living in the territory of a large country. This is including the peoples living compactly on its national outskirts. And the problems that can arise on an interethnic basis can very quickly transform into the problem of maintaining the unity of the State. This had been already in the 90s and it is unlikely that any of the Russians want to repeat that situation.

Throughout the post-Soviet years, Russia has been balancing between the supra-ethnic model of the Nation State, which was adopted in the USSR and which exists today in the USA, Switzerland, Belgium and several other countries, and the [outdated European model](#), which implies the creation of a Nation based on the traditions of the ethnic majority. The fact that discussion about Russian ethno-amendments resumed today not only in social networks, but also at the level of Power is another argument in favor of the fact that the country has not made its choice in 30 years.

Does anyone have doubts that the Russian people and Russian culture are systemically important in Russia? No, just like there is no doubt about the meaning of the English language and British colonization in the USA. But there it does not occur to anyone to fix in the US Constitution the role of ethnic British as a state-forming ethnos. The role of the Russian people is noted in the [Strategy of State Inter-Ethnic Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025](#), a fundamental document reflecting the state's policy in the field of interethnic relations. It says: "Russia was created as a unity of peoples, as a State, whose backbone core has historically been the Russian people. The civilizational identity of Russia and the Russian nation, as a civil community, is based on the preservation of the Russian cultural dominance, the bearers of which are all the peoples of the Russian Federation, formed not only ethnic Russians, but also incorporating the culture of all the peoples of Russia. "

### **What Would This Really Mean?**

In a document such as the Inter-Ethnic policy Strategy, such wording is quite possible. But to declare the ethnic Russians like a state-forming people in the Constitution means to take a certain position on the model of the Nation state in Russia for many years to come, it means to announce to the whole world that the rest of the peoples historically living next to the Russians are Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechens, Ossetians etc. – are not state-forming ones. This in itself is absurd – any indigenous people of any country is state-forming. Take him out of the ethnocultural palette of the Nation and it will be another country. Is it possible to imagine Britain without the Welsh, or Italy without the Tyrolean Germans, and Germany without the Frisians and Serbs? Similarly, it is impossible to imagine Russia without Tatars or Kalmyks. Will these Russian autochthonous minorities agree with their new status? Or will they also want to become a small state-forming people on the territory of their republics with all the ensuing consequences for the ethnic Russians and other non-titular nations?

It should also be remembered that the Constitution is always oriented not to the ethnic, linguistic or religious groups, but towards citizens. It is called upon to

ensure social cohesion and unity of the political nation. Issues of blood (ethnicity), language, religion in such a situation are unifying factors only when there is full public consensus. Otherwise, this is not about unity, but about what separates the inhabitants of the same country. There are more than enough examples – from Latvia and Estonia to India / Pakistan and Israel. In Russia, there is consensus on the issue of the state language – it is owned by an absolute number of citizens. On the question of the state-forming people, there is no commonality of views. The RuNet already now, at the stage of discussion, has overflowed with accusations of each other of “dislike of the Russian people,” Russophobia, on the one hand, and chauvinism, on the other.

Fixing in the Constitution the state-forming status of ethnic Russians, Russia will follow the path of [many European nations](#) that are experiencing today not just a migration crisis only, but a crisis of a Nation State, when an outdated model of a Nation conflicts with the objective realities of modern global World and the expectations of minorities. For Russia, given the above features, that can be the path to the big problems in the inter-ethnic policy.

I will quote [Dr. Sergey Markedonov](#) once again: “Ethnicization of politics is dangerous! Yes, today amendments about the firsts among equals can easily pass! But! But! They become a “sleeping danger” in order to wake up in moments of a Crisis. Or we so believe in our monumental stability that we unlearned look at things openly and without blinkers? And lastly, Russia stood out positively against the background of other post-Soviet republics by the absence of a nation-wide ethnocracy. But to ethnicized the policy by our own hands?!”

As a result, the authorities tried to find a middle ground between the two antagonistic groups. An amendment was introduced to the State Duma on March 2, 2020, which, according to the authorities, was to be a compromise. P. 1, Art. 68 it is worded as follows: “The state language of the Russian Federation throughout its territory is the Russian language as the language of a state-forming people that is part of the multinational union of equal peoples of the Russian Federation.”

What kind of people the Amendment is speaking about, the project does not indicate. According to this wording, any people of Russia can claim this role, since, as already mentioned, the Russian language for all the peoples of the country is either native (as, for example, for Russian, Russian Ukrainians, Jews, Belarusians, etc.), or the second language of communication. Given that the Preamble of the Constitution speaks only about the multinational people of the Russian Federation, there will be no legal definition of a nation-forming Nation in the Constitution. According to the authors’ intention, the calculation was probably that everyone would think up independently what people in Russia are the first among equals.

But in fact, both sides remained dissatisfied, and this is already evident from the new ongoing discussions in social networks. Nationalists are unhappy that the Russian people are not mentioned anywhere. Proponents of the concept of a multinational people are unhappy with the mention of a certain state-forming

people, the definition of which is not given. The idea suggests a corresponding Bill, which, of course, will not add to social cohesion. In addition, both the one and the other group are unhappy with the vague wording.

The last question arises: why do the Russian authorities need these problems? Do they not delve into the essence of the problem or are they going in a fit of populism in accordance to a dangerous social trend? Do they not see the danger of a revival on this basis of the right-wing radicalism that they just destroyed as a political force just a year ago? If it is so, that is the mistake. It is worse if it was the result of a search for momentary solutions to current issues, such as ensuring a high turnout at the pan-Russian vote on new amendments to the Constitution.

A high level of the Constitutional Referendum attendance is just needed for the Russian officials and governmental functions. The turnout should be large, as required by President Putin, and the “necessary amendments” should be adopted by an [overwhelming majority](#). Meanwhile, as the [Russian newspaper “Vedomosti”](#) writes, “to ensure the attendance of more than 50% and to guarantee majority voting for the right option, it is necessary to carry out gigantic mobilization work comparable to preparations for the presidential elections, which they are beginning to prepare for in less than three months. In addition, mobilizing people for ordinary elections is much easier than leading them to the polls of some strange vote on the issue of the many amendments to the Constitution – a little-known document among the masses and therefore not very respected. ”

Under these conditions, to propose voting in the batch vote for the “ethnic amendments” is to ensure the appearance of a huge mass of overt and covert, moderate and radical nationalists, for whom the referendum will take on a completely different meaning. They do not just come by themselves only, they campaign their relatives, neighbors and just acquaintances. These can be additional millions of motivated voters, because more than 60% of the population, [according to recent polls](#), are more or less influenced by nationalist views. Even in spite of the half-hearted decision (see above) and the absence in the draft the definition of a state-forming people, this article may be attractive to many of them.

But I am afraid that because of this Amendment a new global problem in Russian interethnic relations will be created. The new people in the new leadership of the country in 5-10 years will try to solve it later. Will be this problem solved? And at what cost? This is a big question.

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