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Why Russia Wants To Be An Empire Again

In July 2019, mass demonstrations of citizens for fair elections were held in Moscow. According to various estimates, from 15 to 50 thousand people attended a rally on August 10 at A. Sakharov Square in the Russian Capital. They walked under the banner of liberal parties, communist and anarchist movements, as well as LGBT people. The protesters were united by disagreement with the refusal of the Moscow authorities to register opposition candidates in the local elections. Typically, this affected mainly liberal representatives, the Communists and the other representatives of the left movement, in general, received registration without any problems.

The protest posed several questions for observers, namely:

- Why the Russian nationalists didn't take part in the rally?
- If the Russian opposition is sufficiently politicized and ideologized, then what kind of ideological views do those more than 70 percent of the population who support Putin have? In other words, what is the ideological platform of the pro-government regime?

In order to answer these questions, we need to delve deeper into the history.

Russia differs from other countries of the former Soviet Union not only by the size and population, but also by the level of multi-ethnicity.

More than 100 ethnic groups live in Russia but, at the same time, 80% of the population identify themselves as ethnic Russians. Back in the 90s, this contributed to the fact that two types of right-wing movements appeared there:

1. The movement of Russian nationalists, which acted under different slogans, but always pursued one goal – Russia for Russians. These included the [“Pamjat” Society](#), [Russian National Unity](#), [Movement against illegal immigration](#), [Russian National-Democratic Party \(NDP\)](#), [opposition movement of Alexey Navalny](#), etc. Some of them hold aggressive nationalist, anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant positions. Others stand for the European position of building an ethno cultural nation-state in Russia, which implies the assimilation of national minorities. There are still other groups, for example NDP, who are ready

to [separate](#) the Russian Islamic territories in the North Caucasus from Russia itself for the sake of homogeneity of the society.

2. Many separatist organizations and movements of national minorities on the Ethnic Periphery of the country, including Islamist ones. Chechnya is the most well known of these, but there is also [Dagestan](#), [Tatarstan](#), even [Yakutia](#), and [others](#). Interestingly, weak separatist tendencies in the early 1990s were also observed in the Urals, the traditional Russian region, and the leaders of the separatist movement were ethnic Russians who called themselves Urals. They declared the goal of their Movement – to separate Ural from Russia because of the difference in the identification. They even declared the “[Ural Republic](#)”. Often these movements were supported by the local political elite, which wanted just additional preferences from the federal Center.

In the Soviet period, these tendencies were suppressed by a totalitarian regime, as well as by a strong ideology that proclaimed the unity of all peoples based on communism and internationalism, which certainly played a unifying role. In the Soviet Union, there was a supra-ethnic, ideological model of the Nation-state, where the Nation was created on the basis of the communist ideology. Russia abandoned the old unifying idea, but did not come to any other such as, for example, the European, ethnocultural model of the Nation-state. These attempts were undertaken by Russian nationalists. If these ideas were accepted by the Russian political elite, then Russia would have been beset by more than two Chechen wars and a possible full disintegration in the 1990s.

The Nation-State is a State protecting the interests of the Nation. A Nation can form as an Association of the people based on traditions and culture of the ethnic majority, like it is in the most European countries, but it can also form like an Association based on supra-ethnic ideology, such as in the USA, Switzerland, the former Soviet Union, etc. It is very important to understand that the Nation-State has an important function – it is a mechanism for ensuring the unity of the Society. If the State does not have this mechanism, then it is doomed to the emergence of various kinds of nationalist and separatist movements that seek to fill this vacuum and create their own mechanism to ensure the unity of Society, even through interethnic conflict and the separation of territories.

Perhaps Boris Yeltsin, the first Russian president, sincerely hoped that the new idea of Democracy would be unifying for millions of Russians, but most of the people living in Russia are [indifferent](#) to the idea of Democracy. There was simply no national idea, except the idea of nationalism, chauvinism and separatism, which radical organizations readily sold.

That is why the 90s in Russia became the time of the heyday of [separatism on the outskirts of the country](#), as well as the period of active development of the [Russian nationalist movements](#), which sometimes turned into important players in the political arena.

During [the attempted coup in October 1993](#), the [nationalists led the assault](#) on the Moscow mayor's office and Moscow TV&Radio Center. The Coup attempt

was prevented, but a few months later the Parliamentary elections to the State Duma, or lower legislative assembly, were won by the Party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, a famous Russian nationalist.

Nationalist groups and small parties threw their support behind this politician, but he was completely under the control of the central Government and was useful in helping them to “let off steam” of the nationalist protest. This made it possible to prevent the possible election victory of the real extreme – [right-wing radicals](#) who called for Jewish pogroms and ethno-proportional representation in the power’s [institutions](#).

Realizing the popularity of nationalist ideas in Russia, Russian communists began to use it in their own propaganda. As a result, they managed to attract a part of the nationalist electorate. Thus, some Russian nationalists voted for Zhirinovskiy and his “Liberal democratic party”, and some of them voted for the Russian Communist Party in 1993. This made possible to avoid the arrival of the most dangerous radical nationalist factions in the State Duma.

Nevertheless, the most radical groups felt completely at ease on the streets of Russian cities. During this time, the traditional Russian nationalist parties and groups that existed just in Soviet time began to give way to the more traditional for the West skin-head groups that copied their ideology with [White Power](#). In practice, however, any hooligan could easily become a skinhead especially if he shared racist views. The skinhead movement grew unusually fast, because it was not so much a new ideological trend, as much as a new youth subculture. In the absence of any other unifying ideas for young people, this idea of the «purity of the Russian race» was gaining popularity.

These groups are responsible for outbreaks of massive hate violence during this [period](#). The late 1990s-early 2000s. was the time of the beginning of the collapse of Russia in the [Caucasus](#), the so-called parade of sovereignties in Russian regions, etc. All this together led to a sharp increase in hate crimes throughout the country. Russia became the leader in the number of hate killings and kept this leadership until [2012](#). The number of hate killings, for example, in 2004 was [46 people, and cases of serious bodily injury – 258 cases](#).

Moreover, many crimes, such as those connected with vandalism, were practically not investigated. As vice-president of the Jewish community of Russia in 2004, I wrote letters to the General Prosecutor’s office every week about the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and almost always received an answer that this was just domestic hooliganism. Radical organizations and parties were not persecuted, because nobody wanted to deal with it.

All of this was the result of the disunity of Russian society, the result of the absence of a model of a Nation-state that could unite Russians into a Nation and give them some common goals and guidelines. If a State does not have a social unification mechanism, then such a State goes very quickly into decay. That is what we observed in Russia in the 1990s. In this case, the state has only one

way to keep the unity – to turn into the “Universal State” controlling all spheres of society.

Enter Vladimir Putin

President Putin, having come to power in 2000, got the country in the situation of a civil war and caused growing interethnic and interreligious tensions. The Russian people, who were tired of this, as well as of the growth of crime, poverty, etc., wanted to have a strong leader who could stop it. People were tired of Nationalism and Separatism, which had split a previously single society. They needed a strong leader who would help to restore national unity of the multi-ethnic Society, to unite the country and to return Russia to its former greatness in the international arena. And they brought such a leader.

This leader did offer the new unifying Idea – Russian Patriotism. But this idea does not hold water because it is not concrete – all politicians call themselves “patriots” – liberals, communists and just Radical Rights. Therefore, he had only one option: to stop the collapse of the country by the transformation of Russia into an authoritarian state, which is what we see today.

There is simply no other way to ensure public consensus in the conditions of a not fully formed Nation-state. Radicalism and nationalism were simply crushed and brought under control by force – together with all other political movements in Russia. Yes, the authorities understand that radicalism is a global danger for the multiethnic society, but they do not see any other ideological remedy to stop it.

As a result, in recent years, Russia has [destroyed](#) both – underground Islamist organizations and the Russian nationalist movement. By 2016, almost all notable organizations of right-wing radicals were banned, and their leaders forced into emigration or arrested. Thus, in 2016, [Alexander Belov \(Potkin\)](#), the leader of the largest nationalist organization of the 2000s, “The Movement Against Illegal Immigration”, and the Head of the “Russian Movement” that replaced it, was sentenced, and [Dmitry Demushkin](#), the second Co-Chairman of this Movement was arrested at the end of the year. These two were the last real independent leaders of the Russian nationalists who remained at large.

A number of Islamist groups in Moscow and the surrounding region, St. Petersburg and Samara were liquidated in 2016-17. The activities of certain Wahhabi communities, ideologically and organizationally connected with the Islamic State and Hizb ut-Tahrir (both of which are banned in Russia), were suspended. Many activists of banned Islamist organizations were forced to emigrate. For example, in the Novy Urengoy, the big city in Siberia, all the activists of the local Islamic Wahhabi Community had to [be moved abroad](#). Many activists of Radical Islamists organizations even left Russia to participate in the hostilities in Syria and Iraq on the side of the terrorists (more than 5,000 people overall.)

The big part of the Russian Right-wing nationalists, meanwhile, left Russia to participate in the civil war in Ukraine, where they joined both sides of the civil conflict. A certain part of the so-called “true nationalists” supported the Ukrainian government authorities, while others supported the pro-Russian separatists.

I need to mention also the split of the unnatural, but long-term union between Russian nationalists and liberals. This emerged in 2011 on the wave of the [formation](#) of the anti-Putin opposition. As a result of this union, the process of demarginalization of right-wing radicals was initiated by the liberals, who provided these radicals a platform in the form of the so-called “Opposition Coordination Council”, etc. This split also weakened the position of nationalists.

For the fifth consecutive year in Russia, violent hate crimes have been falling. In 2017, the total number of violent attacks [decreased](#), according to the General Prosecutor’s Office of the Russian Federation, to 52 episodes. This is 32.5% less than the [figure for 2016](#), when the authorities recorded 77 cases of violence. At the same time, the [total number of hate crimes](#) increased by 4.9% compared with 2016 and amounted to 1521 episodes compared to 1450 incidents in 2016. This growth was due to non-violent hate crimes that is due to the incitement of hatred, especially on the Internet.

Any repost of a racists, neo-Nazi’s or nationalist’s article, etc. up to 2019 led to criminal prosecution. Since 2019, a criminal case is brought up only after a first administrative fine. Russian police proceed from the assumption that before the radical takes up arms, he will try to spread his views on the Internet, look for friends who are close to him by the views in the social networks, etc. The authorities believe that if they will stop him at this stage, he will not commit violent crimes. At the same time, the Russian authorities are not embarrassed that they may violate the human right to freedom of speech, since they are guided by Art. 4 of the [International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#).

This Article declare that “all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred, incitement to racial discrimination, as well as all acts of violence or incitement to such acts against any race or group of persons of another colour or ethnic origin, and also the provision of any assistance to racist activities, including the financing thereof” must be punished by the law. Most of all Western states did not recognize this paragraph of the convention, but Russia strictly adheres to it and thus justifies its tough policy regarding the spread of hatred on the Internet. All this leads to a reduction in hatred on the Internet and even to a reduction in xenophobic attitudes in the society.

If we look at [the ratio of violent hate crimes to the total number of such crimes](#), we see an inverse proportionality. Violent crimes are reduced, because of the increase in the number of criminal cases initiated for hate speech. The government was able to control violent hate crimes only through tougher repression in the dissemination of information. The stronger the pressure in this area, the less people commit violent attacks.

In this way, the reduction of the Hate Crime and the inter-ethnic clashes in the modern Russia is not the result of unity and consent in Russian society. It is the result of the high level control and pressure in the area of freedom of speech and self-expression of a Human. Russia has suppressed these tendencies much like in during the Soviet era. Nevertheless, Russian society maintains a high level of [migrant-phobia](#) and [homophobia](#) in the country. All of this makes us think that this situation is not stable and less control, more freedom of expression, can lead to a dramatic change. This is confirmed by the recent [inter-ethnic clashes in Yakutia](#) (March 2019).

Thus, we can state that Radical rights in Russia are under the total control and pressure of the government. For Mr. Putin it is today the only one possible way to keep the unity of the international Russian society. He does not have any unifying ideology, any factors, traditionally uniting the inhabitants of the country into a single Nation. In other words, the State has nothing to oppose the Radicals' simple, but attractive for a part of society, ideology.

What we can expect after Putin? The process of creating a Nation-state in Russia has not been completed. In these conditions, the liberalization of the Regime, when all political forces will be able to act freely, will lead us again to an increase in both right-wing radicalism and Islamism. In this case, we will again witness the growth of separatist sentiments and inter-ethnic tensions. The authoritarian dictatorship remains the only way to preserve the unity of Russian society. This does not mean that the dictatorship in Russia is predetermined. Events can evolve in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons. But this means that we have only one Alternative to Dictatorship in Russia – the growth of Separatism and Right-wing Radicalism.