

Security in a multiethnic Russia: Is the ‘melting pot’ boiling over?

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The issues of nationalism and interethnic relations were noisily foisted onto the Russian political agenda on 11 December 2010, when thousands of young people, mainly football fans and members of ultranationalist groups, converged on Moscow’s Manezh Square, causing what became one of Russia’s worst race riots in recent history and setting off a chain of violence in other Russian cities.² Following the December events, Russia’s media buzzed with discussions about the state of interethnic relations in Russia and the problem of extreme nationalism; political leaders and other public figures spoke about the existence of interethnic tensions and the need for greater efforts to address xenophobia.

The Manezh events were striking in the sheer numbers of people who came out on the streets and added their voices to those shouting nationalistic slogans — some experts have suggested that the number exceeded 10,000, although most estimates are closer to 5,000 — and the quickness with which violence escalated. Since the ‘Manezhki’, nationalist groups have made monthly attempts to stage rallies. The December events demonstrated that violent, radical nationalism remains a potent security issue in Russia and that interethnic tensions can be quick to ignite. The apparent contract killing of former army colonel Yuri Budanov, who was convicted in relation to the death of a young Chechen woman in 2003, on a Moscow street in June 2011 did not lead to a new round of mass violence as was initially feared, but the possibility of future Manezh-like events can certainly not be ruled out.

Russians have received a potent reminder that extreme nationalism in Russia finds its followers, and that authorities’ efforts to promote a strong Russian national identity through a moderate form of nationalism may have led to the growth of extreme nationalism to an extent that the Kremlin now finds difficult to control. Even if extreme nationalist sentiments are not widespread in society, xenophobia and interethnic tensions may be increasingly prevalent and

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² An estimated 5,000 football fans and ultra-right activists gathered on Manezh Square near the Kremlin to memorialize the death of football fan Yegor Sviridov in a December 6 street fight, and to protest at what they saw as the weak police response to his killing. The crowd grew out of control and clashed with riot police and attacked ‘non-Slavic’ persons, including in the Moscow subway; the violence left at least 40 people injured and one dead. Criminal proceedings have been initiated against five people in connection with the Manezh Square disturbance. Six young men from the North Caucasus are on trial for alleged involvement in Sviridov’s death.

volatile, particularly among young people. Survey results reported in April 2011 indicated that more than 75% of young Russians in six of the country's large cities sympathized to some extent with the participants in the Manezh Square disturbances; almost 40% said they have a negative reaction to people from the Caucasus.³ The SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, which tracks racism and extremism, reported that 2010 saw a clear rise in incidents of grassroots xenophobic violence.

Politicians and commentators continue to invoke the Manezh events and to discuss their impact on the future of interethnic relations in Russia. Human rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin said a few weeks after the events that intolerance was growing in Russian society and increased the propensity for conflict. Apparently taken off guard by the events, Russian authorities appear keen to avoid future flare-ups of tensions. It is not clear, however, whether the increased level of public discussion and official rhetoric will succeed in reversing current trends. Despite various new government initiatives, contradictory policies and ambiguous political messages about national identity, extremism and interethnic harmony run the risk of leaving ethnic tensions to simmer without addressing their root causes or, worse, potentially aggravating them further.

Checking the rise of nationalism — too little, too late?

Russian authorities have made more active efforts to address nationalist violence in recent years. The year 2011 saw several high-profile convictions and tough sentences of extreme nationalists, such as the May 2011 conviction and sentencing to life imprisonment of neo-Nazi leader Nikita Tikhonov for the 2009 murder of human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova. Tikhonov's accomplice was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment. In St Petersburg in June 2011, two leaders of a neo-Nazi gang received life sentences for a rash of hate killings targeted at non-Slavs; another 10 gang members were sentenced to up to 18 years in jail. The following month a Moscow military court sentenced five members of the now-banned National Socialist Society to life imprisonment for murder, attempted murder and an attempt to commit terrorism. Other members of the organization received 10- to 20-year prison sentences.

Still, the incidence of xenophobic violence in Russia remains alarmingly high. According to the SOVA Center, as of July 2011, 15 people had been killed during the year while 70 were wounded in racist and neo-Nazi attacks.⁴ Criminal prosecutions for hate crimes have risen, but an increasing proportion of such cases end in suspended sentences. The tougher approach to ultranationalists appears to be insufficient to stamp out extreme nationalist groups or to counter the spread of xenophobia that allows such groups to find supporters. Authorities have banned only a small percentage of nationalist groups and allowed some to continue operating under different names. Nationalist groups have in some cases

³ Survey by the Politekh Agency for Social Technologies with support from the Russian Academy of Sciences, reported in *kommersant.ru*, 21 April 2011.

⁴ <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/news-releases/2011/08/d22311/>.

joined forces and formed new movements, apparently with the aim to be a moving target for authorities and likely also with the goal of consolidating their influence.⁵

Meanwhile, new threats continue to emerge. The SOVA Center in its report on radical nationalism in 2010 noted that established nationalist organizations are losing influence over the young, who are instead turning to small underground groups which may be more difficult for the authorities to control. Scholar Emil Pain notes that Russian youth have become the main proponents of traditionalism and xenophobia, attributing this tendency to the creation of a 'victimized nation' psychology under the Putin presidency, which intensified feelings about the Russian ethnic identity versus the identities of ethnic minorities.⁶ Another disturbing trend is a tendency for ultranationalist groups to target authorities and non-governmental actors seen as working against the nationalist cause. The Molotov-cocktail attack on a Moscow synagogue on 11 July 2011, and a bomb at the Moscow investigator's office on the same day, may have been linked to the sentencing of National Socialist Society members. According to SOVA Center's monitoring, besides persons from the Caucasus and Central Asia, youth and leftist activists are also frequent targets of nationalist attacks. Some Russian ultranationalists were quick to praise the horrific crimes of Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik, who targeted his July 2011 terror attacks at those he associated with promoting liberal immigration and multiculturalism policies.

Russian authorities express concern about the ongoing threat posed by extreme nationalists. Minister of the Interior Rashid Nurgaliyev said in mid-July 2011 that extremists may try to exploit the December 2011 parliamentary election campaign for their own purposes and warned of the possibility of ethnic tensions and terrorist acts. At the end of July 2011, President Medvedev tasked Nurgaliyev to head a government commission to coordinate the activities of governmental bodies involved in the fight against extremism. While it is certainly possible that nationalist groups will use the elections as an opportunity to raise their political profile, the potential also exists for authorities to use the threat of extreme nationalism to justify restrictions on potential opposition or protest activity, or even to try to exploit nationalist sentiments themselves. The gradual stiffening of anti-extremism provisions since legislation was first passed in 2002, the broad definition of extremism in the legislation, and the rather frequent misuse of the law raise the question whether a new coordinating body is needed and what its aims may be.

⁵ In May 2011 three Russian radical nationalist groups — the Movement against Illegal Immigration, Slavic Strength, and Russian March — announced that they were unifying as a new movement called 'Russians', apparently with the aim to make it more difficult for authorities to ban the organization. In April 2011 a Moscow city court banned as extremist the Movement against Illegal Immigration, which was linked to the violence on Moscow's Manezh Square in December. On 21 June 2011, the same groups reportedly joined other nationalist groups in establishing the 'Russian Committee'.

⁶ Emil Pain, 'Events in Moscow 11th December 2010: Political Crisis', Russian Analytical Digest, March 2011.

In statements in early August 2011, Nurgaliyev criticized journalists for aggravating ethnic tensions in their coverage of interethnic conflicts, and suggested increased controls over the Internet to limit the influence of extremism on young people. Certainly the media have an important role to play in situations of ethnic tensions. Ultrationalists, including banned groups, maintain an active online presence, and online social networks can facilitate the rapid organization of large numbers of people. But there does not appear to be a clear need to further strengthen anti-extremism legislation, and Nurgaliyev's comments raise concerns about freedom of expression in a country where criticism of the government flows more freely in blogs and other online sources than in the traditional media.

Official responses to ethnic tensions: a mix of messages

Since the Manezh Square events, Russian authorities have acknowledged the need to address the broader situation concerning interethnic relations in Russia and have undertaken to make the issue more visible. The Public Chamber announced its intention in late December 2010 to establish a task force to discuss the causes of the events. President Medvedev changed the agenda of the December 27, 2010 meeting of the State Council to focus on the topic of interethnic relations. Then at a special State Council meeting dedicated to the topic in Ufa in February 2011, Medvedev called on regional leaders to make strengthening 'interethnic harmony' a priority and proposed measures such as improving the teaching of tolerance in schools, encouraging media productions that promote interethnic and interfaith harmony, cultural exchanges between regions, training for civil servants, and the establishment of regional working groups made up of religious leaders. In April 2011, Medvedev told a gathering of NGOs that one of their main priorities should be to help harmonize interethnic relations, and in July 2011 at a meeting of the presidential Civil Society and Human Rights Council, held in the republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, he repeated his call for comprehensive measures to improve interethnic relations. Some of the specific measures Medvedev has mentioned, however, including improving access to municipal government positions for ethnic minorities and prohibiting persons known to have been involved in inciting interethnic hostility from being hired as teachers, seem rather piecemeal compared to the scale of the challenges facing Russia and appear to lack an overarching strategic framework.

Some regional and ethnic minority leaders called for the reinstatement of a ministry on nationalities following the Manezh Square events (the previous ministry was disbanded in 2001; at present the Ministry of Regional Development primarily handles ethnic issues), but Medvedev has said he does not see a need for the creation of new bureaucratic structures. In March 2011, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak was assigned the task of supervising state policies in the area of interethnic relations as head of a Commission on Inter-Ethnic and Inter-religious Relations. However, Kozak is already tasked with supervising preparations for the 2014 Sochi Olympics, among other

responsibilities, raising some doubt as to whether he will be able to devote significant attention to the topic of interethnic relations. Other public initiatives include the Moscow mayor's launch in June 2011 of a \$4 million campaign to address xenophobia and interethnic tensions through an advertising campaign, roundtables and documentary films, the best-funded such effort in Moscow to date.

Prime Minister Putin has also raised the issue of interethnic relations, saying in mid-July 2011 that he would establish a regular forum for discussions between the Russian leadership and representatives of religious and ethnic organizations. Reportedly the forum will be led by a special unit formed within an existing ministry. Putin has put a particular emphasis on interfaith and interethnic relations in meetings of the All-Russia People's Front, the new political movement he established in May 2011.

Despite the heightened profile of the issue of interethnic relations in Russia, and the expressed desire to address the potential security threats posed by extreme nationalism and xenophobia, a consistent and comprehensive approach appears to be lacking. Worryingly, mixed political messages may fail to adequately discourage nationalists from future action, to offer those susceptible to nationalist messages an attractive alternative, or to reassure Russians of all ethnicities of their security. For example, the Kremlin has supported political youth groups that espouse Russia's greatness and reject Western policies and influence. Nationalists' involvement in 'voluntary militias' that operate with the support of local authorities in some regions are understandably a cause of concern to ethnic minorities in those areas and could be difficult to rein in. Even as the authorities warn of the dangers of extreme nationalism, there are indications that they may still seek to capitalize politically on nationalist sentiments. An investigative report by *Newsweek* published in August 2011 describes the Kremlin's 'dangerous game', alleging that many of the organizers of extreme nationalist groups got their start as members of Kremlin-supported youth groups, and noting that in March the authorities extended an offer of cooperation to an ultranationalist party, the National Democrats.⁷

On the important question of national identity in a multiethnic Russia, political leaders seem to skirt around providing a clear vision. In his remarks in Ufa in February, President Medvedev said that recent critiques of multiculturalism in Europe create too simplistic a picture when applied to Russia. He suggested that he does not agree with the idea that it would be better for all other cultures to develop in line with the dominant ethnic group's traditions and values 'despite the huge part Russian culture has played'.⁸ In remarks the previous month before members of the Russian Federal Assembly, Medvedev said that the values that unite Russians into one nation should be primarily based

⁷ Owen Matthews and Anna Nemtsova, 'Fascist Russia?', August 7, 2011, (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/08/07/why-the-kremlin-aids-the-rise-of-russia-s-far-right-hate-groups.html>).

⁸ <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/1765>.

on values from Russian culture as the predominant culture in the country. He said that ethnic Russians, as the largest ethnic group, should take responsibility for improving interethnic relations. Journalist and member of the Public Chamber Nikolay Svanidze (who also chairs the Public Chamber's commission on interethnic relations) warned in a column for *RT Politics*, 'This is a very risky idea. It's just one step away from declaring Russians the Big Brother and all the other ethnicities being little brothers. Such an approach was one of the main causes for the collapse of the Soviet Union: everybody likes to be the Big Brother but no one likes being a little brother'.⁹

Prime Minister Putin has also straddled the fence; he has described Russia as a 'rainbow nation' and, in a meeting with North Caucasus youths in early August 2011, emphasized Russia's long history as a multi-ethnic state. Yet after the Manezh Square incident, he suggested that tighter restrictions were needed on internal migrants in Russia; on several occasions he has said that migrants should adapt to the norms of the region to which they move, raising the question of how tolerance and multiculturalism are defined in the Russian context. Survey results indicate that young Russians, including those that participated in the Manezh Square events, feel resentment toward people from the North Caucasus for what they perceive as their different or 'bad' behavior. In spring 2011 the Levada Center surveyed participants in the Manezh Square events as well as young football fans, who explained the Manezh events as a result of accumulated resentment at the behavior of 'Caucasians' and anger over the Sviridov killing.¹⁰ Such views are echoed by politicians: commenting on the August 2011 riots in England, State Duma deputy Gennadiy Gudkov was quoted in the press as saying that differences in languages and cultures can lead to tensions when migrants misinterpret tolerance as allowing a free-for-all.

Sources of social discontent dim the rainbow

The challenge of ensuring security in a multiethnic Russia requires more than a patchwork of new policies, the creation of more coordinating bodies, or selectively emphasizing a narrow aspect of interethnic relations such as culture. Other systemic factors inevitably influence the growth of nationalism and interethnic tensions, such as the problem of corruption. Aleksandra Samarina wrote in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in July 2011, 'The problem is that the epidemic of corruption prevents us from solving the nationality question'. Corruption and weak rule of law fuel social discontent, which can find an outlet in the scapegoating of minorities. Results of a survey of youth in Russia's large cities by the Russian Academy of Sciences, released in April 2011, showed that most considered the Manezh Square events to be a protest against corrupt law enforcement and 'ethnic criminality'. Sixty-six percent of respondents said they thought migrants lived better because of their ability to adapt to corruption more

⁹ <http://rt.com/politics/columns/lines/russia-ethnic-president-parliament/>.

¹⁰ www.levada.ru/press/2011071407.html.

rapidly.¹¹ Lack of confidence in the police and judicial system increases the likelihood that citizens, regardless of ethnicity, will increasingly rely on informal networks or vigilante justice rather than legal mechanisms to resolve conflicts. In a growing number of cases, Russian citizens have sought to take their security into their own hands, such as in the village of Sagra in early July 2011. The socio-economic situation in Russia, in particular the problems of unemployment, poverty and income discrepancies, also plays a role in fostering the conditions for nationalism and interethnic tensions. Demographic challenges are likely to increase Russia's reliance on migrant and immigrant workers. The lingering effects of the global financial crisis continue to dampen growth worldwide, and a drop in oil prices would have far-reaching impacts on the Russian economy.

Russian policies in the North Caucasus also have an important impact on interethnic relations, both in that region and in other parts of Russia. Instability in the North Caucasus feeds into perceptions of a segment of society that the North Caucasus and its inhabitants are a dangerous burden on the rest of Russia — a view encouraged by nationalists. In April 2011 an officially sanctioned rally in Moscow by the nationalist group the Russian Civil Union called on federal authorities to 'stop feeding the Caucasus', criticizing federal budget policies which subsidize the North Caucasus. The economic and security situation in the North Caucasus republics drives migration to other parts of Russia, where migrants encounter xenophobia and resentment. Riots and mass brawls involving ethnic Russian and Caucasian youths broke out in September 2010 in Stavropol, a region traditionally occupied by ethnic Russians, where the migration of ethnic Caucasians has put pressure on resources and on interethnic relations. Socio-economic development plans for the North Caucasus, including proposals to encourage non-Caucasians to migrate there, appear out of touch with realities on the ground and designed without adequate regard for the potential impact on relations among the region's different ethnic groups.

More broadly, expanding access to legitimate outlets for the channelling of social and political discontent and diverse views in Russia could help relieve some of the pressures leading to conflicts that have — or risk taking on — an interethnic aspect. More inclusive political participation at national and local levels, greater government transparency and accountability, and enhanced respect for human rights, including minority rights, could contribute to providing conditions in which Russians of all ethnicities are assured of their security and feel proud of a Russian civic identity.

Conclusion

Writing in *Pravda.ru*, Dmitry Lukin commented that the August 2011 riots in Britain proved that 'the European ideology of multiculturalism has gone down in flames' and asserted that such events could never happen in Russia with its

¹¹ Survey by the Politekh Agency for Social Technologies with support from the Russian Academy of Sciences, reported in *kommersant.ru*, 21 April 2011.

‘melting pot’ ideology.¹² Given current trends, however, such optimism may be misplaced. Despite Prime Minister Putin’s August 2011 comments that building a tolerant multiethnic society in Russia is easier than in Europe,¹³ it is clear that the challenges facing Russia in terms of addressing violent nationalism and improving interethnic relations are formidable. Such a task will require a clear vision, consistent policies in a range of areas, concrete and well-funded programs, legitimate consultative and representative bodies, and an honest dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders. Rather than emphasizing Russia’s uniqueness against the backdrop of debates in Europe about the future of multiculturalism, Russia might benefit from jointly exploring solutions to shared concerns about far-right movements, labor migration, and integration. Isolation may further deepen Russia’s problems and detract from the difficult but necessary task of addressing the complex issues that lead to violent nationalism and interethnic tensions in Russia.

¹² <http://english.pravda.ru/russia/politics/11-08-2011/118722-riots-0/>.

¹³ Putin statements during his August 3, 2011 visit to Kislovodsk. See <http://premier.gov.ru/eng/visits/ru/16102/events/16108/>.