



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Putin Goes Nationalist

Nationalism has recently become more salient in Russian foreign policy debates, especially after the annexation of Crimea last year. How does this resurgence of nationalism affect Russia's foreign policy and its relationship with the United States and Europe? Should we expect to see a more assertive Russia in the coming years?

There are three broad schools of thought in Russian foreign policy discourse: 1) liberal westernizers; 2) great power balancers; and 3) Russian nationalists. President Vladimir Putin came into power as a great power balancer who at times tacked toward the liberal westernizer camp and at times toward the Russian nationalist camp. But with his decision to annex Crimea one year ago and later in the spring and summer of 2014 to directly support an insurgency in Eastern Ukraine, Putin has firmly placed himself in the camp of Russian nationalists, in fact, quite a chauvinistic strain of Russian nationalism at that.

The question one year later remains why Vladimir Putin took this dramatic and dangerous step. It appears he did so to more firmly consolidate domestic political support for his leadership. Over the course of more than twelve years of his two terms of de jure leadership as President and one term of de facto leadership as Prime Minister, Mr. Putin's high popularity ratings were principally buttressed by robust economic growth and a sense of growing prosperity among the Russian people.

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However, when he returned to the Presidency in May 2012, Russia's economic performance began to plummet. In 2013, growth stagnated to a meager 1.3%, and on the eve of the military occupation of Crimea at the end of February, growth was close to zero, the ruble was losing value, and capital flight was at an all-time high rate.

Putin faced a serious dilemma of a deeply stagnant economy despite the fact that oil prices remained at over \$100/barrel. This situation hearkens back

to that of the Soviet Union more than thirty years ago in the early 1980s, when despite massive amounts of petro-dollars flooding the Soviet economy, overall Soviet economic growth was stagnant and close to zero. The reason then, like the reason now, is deep structural inefficiencies in the economy coupled with endemic corruption. The answer then, like the answer now, would be deep structural reforms coupled with an anti-corruption campaign. But soon after his re-election as President in 2012, it came as little surprise that Putin, like his Soviet predecessors, would avoid taking those measures and hope for the best.

But if economic growth and prosperity were no longer going to be the foundation for Putin's popular support, what would be? It is clear now that Putin would appeal to Russian nationalism. There were signs of this from 2012-2013 as Putin began to increasingly talk about Russian civilization as different from that of Europe and the West. He cleverly manipulated the Pussy Riot case and embraced homophobia as indicators that Russia rejected certain decadent Western values. Always coupled with this rhetoric was talk about Russia's status as a global great power with a special role that appealed to more messianic aspects of Russian nationalism. Much more emphasis was placed on the "Russian World" and Moscow's responsibility to defend the rights of ethnic Russians, Russian speakers, and even loosely defined "compatriots" abroad. This all added up to what can be referred to as the "larger Russia project." The emergent Eurasian Economic Union was a key institutional piece of this project.

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Turning to Ukraine, former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's flight from Kiev after the collapse of the February 21 agreement marked the total failure of Putin's Ukrainian policy and a major blow for his aspirations to expand the newly-formed Eurasian Economic Union. Putin's response was to seize Crimea and cast its annexation in virtually religious terms of returning Russia's birth-place, its holy land back to its rightful owner. And in doing so, Putin's political instincts, as they so often have been over his now 15-year tenure in power, were right on target as his popularity ratings immediately jumped about 25 points putting him into the high 80s, where they have remained as the war in Eastern Ukraine expanded with not-so-covert support from Moscow.

Russian nationalism is usually historically defined in anti-Western terms, and so it is the case again. In fact, Putin casts the Ukrainian conflict not as Russians vs. Ukrainians, but rather as "true" Ukrainians versus misguided Ukrainians who have fallen under the evil spell of the United States. He dismisses Europeans supporting anti-Russian sanctions simply as lackeys of Washington. In effect, what this conflict boils down to in Putin's narrative for the Russian people is that he and Russia are defending Ukraine against the United States. Once again, as in the Cold War, the United States is being branded by the Kremlin as the enemy. Similar to the early days of the Cold War, there is a very tight relationship between Russian foreign and domestic policy. Now with Russia's economy tanking, Putin's foreign policy IS his domestic policy. Some contemporary strains of Russian nationalism are coupled with a domestic political economy that is state-directed, and in times of war can become a mobilization economy like the Soviet economy was for decades.

It is, however, doubtful that Putin's system is sustainable for decades, especially now that we appear to be in a relatively lower oil price environment for some time to come. But it remains concerning that Putin's system while it lasts can be far more dangerous and unpredictable than the Soviet Union, which avoided using nationalism as its rallying principle.

By Andrew C. Kuchins, Director and Senior Fellow of Russia and Eurasia Program, the Center for Strategic and International Studies

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This Policy Brief takes off from a Rising Powers Initiative conference on “Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: A Resurgence of Nationalism?” held November 18, 2014 at GWU. The conference reconvened authors to update their findings in the book *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan, and Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2012). For additional discussion on Russia, see the chapter by Andrew C. Kuchins and Igor Zevelev, “Russia’s Contested National Identity and Foreign Policy” in *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan, and Russia*.

About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies

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Sigur Center for Asian Studies
Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University
1957 E St. NW, Suite 503
Washington, DC 20052

TEL 202.994.5886
EMAIL gsigur@gwu.edu
<http://www.gwu.edu/~sigur>
<http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org>