

FIIA 19/2015

COMMENT

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No more marching > The Kremlin suppresses nationalist movements in order to achieve a like-minded society

The radical nationalists in Russia have become internally divided after the Ukraine crisis, while support for their causes among the wider public has diminished. At the same time, the regime is tightening its grip on the nationalists, indicating that it no longer tolerates political contention.

In Russia, the 4th of November marked the Day of National Unity, when extreme nationalists once again gathered in the suburbs of Moscow in a demonstration called Russian march. The event is a platform for the xenophobic, anti-establishment nationalist groups to vent their feelings. Traditionally, the marchers have chanted slogans mainly against the government and migrants, often with an explicit xenophobic and racist tone.

A year ago, there were almost 2,000 participants, which was already significantly less than in earlier years. This time the event had shrunk into a meeting of only 500-1,000 demonstrators. At the same time, the official celebration of the Day of National Unity in the centre of the city drew 85,000 participants.

Russian nationalists have never been a unified movement, and the Ukraine crisis only served to create new dividing lines between the groups. Some of the nationalists supported the Maidan demonstrations in Kiev, whereas others were sympathetic towards the “Russian spring” taking place in eastern Ukraine. The Russian media has reported on Russian nationalists who have left to fight in Ukraine, on both sides of the front. This year, the Russian march

tried to avoid references to the situation in Ukraine.

All in all, the developments in the international arena have shifted the nationalists’ attention away from their earlier key claims related to ethnicity issues, and migration in particular.

This also holds true for the wider public: Levada surveys conducted in August 2015 reveal that the xenophobic attitudes towards migrants have decreased from previous years. Whereas in late 2013, 62 per cent of respondents held negative feelings towards migrants coming from Central Asian countries to their region, this autumn the proportion was 37 per cent. It should be noted, however, that this is largely a result of growing indifference towards the whole issue, and not so much about an increase in more positive sentiments.

Moreover, because of the legislative restrictions on the registration of migrant workers, as well as the weakening rouble, many Central Asian migrants had already left Russia, and especially its big cities, by the end of 2014 and early 2015 – a phenomenon that the media labelled the “exodus” of migrant workers. Due to the return of the migrants, it seems that the political slogans of the nationalists – such

as “returning Russia to Russians” or “Stop feeding Caucasus” – have lost their significance.

In short, not only have the nationalists become internally weaker, but the Russians no longer find their political demands that interesting. It seems that the threat posed by nationalists to the stability of society has thus diminished.

Yet the state is increasing its control over the anti-establishment nationalists. One of the key figures of the Russian march, Aleksandr Belov, was arrested over a year ago and remains in custody at least until his court hearing in January 2016. He is charged with embezzlement and inciting ethnic hatred, among other things.

Dmitri Demushkin, another leader of the march, has also been detained several times during the course of this year – the latest arrest took place on November 3rd, on the eve of the Russian march. Also the “Russians” (Russkie) movement was banned a week before this year’s Russian march by the Moscow city court for being extremist. These measures clearly seem to be pre-emptive ones conducted by the regime.

It is not the measures as such that are surprising here but rather their timing: why would the state want to

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use resources to fight a threat that seems limited in the first place? Until this year, the nationalists had been able to function rather freely, even if there had already been grounds to interpret their actions as extremist.

One of the reasons for the tightened state control is that the state itself has been using the nationalist argument increasingly actively. The regime has been promoting the idea of a unified Russian nation that shares the traditional, righteous values. The state is protecting the people against an external threat. So it is not nationalism that is being controlled, but those nationalists that are critical of the current leadership.

At the same time, more compliant nationalist actors and movements have emerged in the societal space. For instance, a National Liberation Movement with a connection to the state Duma has been set up and is actively organising events to support the official interpretation of Russian nationalism. What is more, the conservative and pro-government party, Rodina, has become more visible in the public space lately. Both movements were also represented yesterday at the official Day of National Unity celebration.

The strategy might work from the point of view of the regime.

However, it will only function as long as the new nationalist actors remain loyal and accept the regime's framing of nationalism.

The other, perhaps more significant reason for the increased repression of the nationalists is that the regime is tightening its grip over the whole societal space. Tolerance towards any political contention, even disagreement, is decreasing. Non-governmental organisations have been struggling with the regime's suspicions for a long time, but now the uncertainty has become more widespread – it is no longer only the “foreign agents” that are repressed, but also marginal and fragmented groups representing any sort of discontent. One important feature of the strategy is that the restricting laws are vaguely formulated, which makes selective and politically intentional judicial measures possible.

Previously, the controlling measures had been targeted mainly at the oppositional figures. Growing repression towards extreme – but marginal – nationalists shows that the state has its sights set on a like-minded society.