



Photo: Liza Kane-Hartnett, Moscow, 2016

Putin's Russia: Constructing Nationalism & Institutionalizing Confrontation

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Historically considered a great power, Russia's global influence was greatly weakened by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Beyond the devaluation of Russian political capital, the fall of the Soviet Union also left a vacuum in ideology, national mission and identity. President Vladimir Putin has effectively filled this void, first by providing Russians with stability and improved living standards after the chaotic 1990s, and since regaining the presidency in 2012, reestablishing Russia as a global power. This is seen in the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the ongoing war in Donbass, and existing operations in the Syrian war, among others. Putin's current term has revived a sense of nationalism that focuses on reasserting Russian global interests and military might, and combating domestic and foreign 'threats' to the nation. This paper will argue that the brand of nationalism developed and promoted by President Putin has made the Kremlin dependent on a confrontational foreign policy. Using both primary research gathered through briefings, interviews in Moscow and online, and secondary evidence, the paper will first explore how current Russian nationalism has been crafted and harnessed for the use of the state, and will then discuss the relationship of reliance that has formed between nationalism and the Kremlin's foreign policy.

Constructing Nationalism

Since returning to the presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin has utilized Russia's sociopolitical traditions and all powers of the state to promote himself as both the personification and savior of Russia. While he was greatly revered and considered a patriot in his first two terms in office, his governance was less confrontational in regards to both domestic and foreign policies. The change occurred for a complex set of issues, among them Mr. Putin's belief that integration and 'playing nice' with the West was a failure, that any assimilation into the international community would be at the sacrifice of Russian interests and for the benefit of the U.S. (Dr. Dmitri Trenin). Of equal importance were the protests of December 2011 – May 2012, the largest civic demonstrations in the country since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Worried about the protests, which were against Mr. Putin's announcement that he would run for a third presidential term and allegations of fraud in parliamentary elections, the Kremlin sought consolidation of Russian society. In response, Mr. Putin passed a series of laws aimed at reducing popular movements, limiting foreign influence and freedom of civil society organizations, and tightening control over the media. These laws included increasing penalties for protesting, limiting the percentage of foreign ownership of media companies, and labeling civil society organizations that receive funding from international sources as foreign

agents and/or undesirable organizations, banning many Western NGOs and think tanks. In addition to legal pressures, media members in Moscow state that the hostile attitude toward media that could be deemed critical or foreign influenced creates an environment of self-censorship in which news editors are often reluctant to publish a story that may produce a reaction from the Kremlin (Multiple Western news correspondents). The lack of independent news media, with the exception of subscriber-driven TV Rain, which also hesitates to publish critical reports on the government in order to continue their fragile operations, facilitates a culture that, in general, only hears what President Putin wants them to (Briefing at TV Rain). A National Public Radio (NPR) news correspondent based in Moscow concurs with this point, calling the Kremlin “masters of manipulation,” and stressing that the current system is just an extension of the Soviet propaganda machine (Interview with NPR correspondent). This domination of the media coupled with the aforementioned legal measures have been used to stamp out dissent and further legitimize the regime and its policies through the perpetuation of national narratives and myths.

To reinforce his rule, President Putin exploits Russian traditions, values and historical tendencies through the propagation of narratives and myths that promote hardline nationalism. Without an apparent ideology or grand strategy, he pragmatically selects pieces of Russia’s cultural heritage, from the Russian Orthodox Church, to the tsarist era and Stalinist Soviet period, to support the Kremlin’s current interests. This is demonstrated in the Kremlin’s relationship with the Church, which is viewed as both the “bastion of true Christian and moral values,” and an extension of the State (Representative of U.S. Embassy in Moscow). Andrei Kolesnikov of the Carnegie Moscow Center argues that the Church is a partner promoting the Kremlin’s perspective, “the Russian Orthodox Church has become one of the

leading broadcasters of an isolationist,” policy track (Andrei Kolesnikov 20). This alliance bolsters the regime’s credibility as going against the State can be seen as not only a political sin but also a moral sin. The Kremlin also utilizes the traditional power structure of vertical leadership in which one man runs the show in order to bolster President Putin’s status. This is not to say that Russia is predisposed to autocratic leadership, but rather that the tradition of a strong leader is in “the DNA of the country,” and that an all-powerful tsar can be comforting in times of duress. A USA Today correspondent based in Moscow argues that this is the case in Russia, stating that absent a true national identity, the desire for traditional values such as the vertical power structure grows (Interview with USA Today correspondent). This yearning for tradition and the ‘glory days’ of Russia is not lost on Mr. Putin who places himself within the long line of Russian tsars, serving as a “reflection of the hopes and expectations of Russian society,” (Nikolay Petrov). By ruling as a tsar, Mr. Putin aligns himself with the glory of the Russian empire, places himself above day-to-day politics, and presents himself as the defender of the nation.

Foremost among the narratives propagated by the state is the concept of an ongoing external threat that must be defended against. The fear of an external enemy is common throughout Russia’s history, and is drawn upon once again to create support for the state. Today’s threat stems from the West, and more specifically the United States. The U.S. is viewed as having abandoned Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union, encroached upon their borders through NATO expansion, and infringed upon their sphere of interests. These charges are well supported and since Mr. Putin has been president have become a key irritant to Russia as it seeks to return to the status of a global power. Mr. Putin has used the presidency and his dominance of the media to promote the narrative of U.S. infringement of Rus-

sian sovereignty and assert that Russian interests cannot be violated. This is a dominant aspect of the Kremlin's rhetoric and can be seen in statements regarding NATO, flybys of U.S. military vessels and media coverage of both the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Donbass. An Australian diplomat based in Moscow spoke to the Russian notion that Crimea would become a U.S. naval base and a part of NATO without Russian support (Australian diplomat). Additionally, an editor from The Moscow Times described how prior to the invasion of Donbass, Russian propaganda in Ukraine fomented discontent by playing on the historical importance of the region and the treatment of Russians within the country (Interview with editor of The Moscow Times). While the West criticizes Mr. Putin's actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, it often overlooks the Russian perspective—the historical and ethnic ties between the territories. This viewpoint, while obviously not unanimous, is seen in public opinion polls and was witnessed throughout the interviews held in Moscow. Political analyst Vladimir Frolov reasoned that everybody likes to feel good about his or her country and most believe that Crimea is part of the greater Russian world (Vladimir Frolov).

this statement, most Russian believe the current borders are sufficient, with Crimea part of the nation, and do not desire more territory. However, Russian ties to the region and the state-dominated media coverage on the issue make the U.S. look like an aggressor and Western sanctions on Russia look unjustified, just another example of U.S. intrusion. This external threat, whether real or perceived, is fed to the Russian people constantly and is key to fostering a 'us against them' sense of nationalism.

The product of the Kremlin's propaganda and Mr. Putin's pragmatic use of nationalism and traditionalism is a stable and secure state. A state that's populace is happy with the leader – as of June 2016, Putin's approval rating was 81 percent, but not the party –the United Russia Party's popularity rating in July 2016 was 39 percent. The dichotomy between the adoration of Mr. Putin and distrust of actual governance institutions has encouraged a sense of general apathy toward politics; however, the public is still excitable by national events such as the 'reunification' of Crimea (Levada-Center). Though trouble may be simmering underneath due to a poor economy and slowly declining living standards – albeit not dramatically – on the surface one can get a sense

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A USA Today correspondent followed a similar line while speaking about Ukraine, explaining that Russians look to the people in Donbass and see relatives and brothers, people who are part of the Russian world, despite being beyond their borders (Interview with USA Today correspondent). Despite

of the exceptionalism that the Kremlin is trying to promote. Nevertheless, the construction of Russia's current strand of nationalism has far reaching implications as it corresponds to foreign policy. Given his control of Russia's politics and society, President Putin has been able to foster a sense of nationalism that not only supports his confrontational foreign

policy, but also perpetuates it.

Institutionalizing Confrontation

Despite high approval ratings and the sense of nationalism that has been cultivated among everyday Russians, President Putin is afraid of his people. His fears stem not only from the protests of 2011-2012, but also from a stagnating economy, a rise in labor unrest, the upcoming Duma elections, a deep seated mistrust of the West, and a realist view of international relations that assumes the U.S. is always meddling (Mark Galeotti, "The Kremlin's Theatre"). Mr. Putin channels this fear to consolidate his power by appearing as the savior of Russia through the use of a confrontational foreign policy against the external threat hurled from the West. The use of aggressive foreign policy to distract from domestic circumstances and demonize critics as knowing or unknowing agents of the West has created a feedback loop in which the Kremlin relies on conflict. Though in general Russians do not prioritize foreign policy and are mostly apathetic, an editor at The Moscow Times, highlights that foreign policy is returning to the forefront of national discussion and prestige (Interview with editor of The Moscow Times). This dichotomy is central to Mr. Putin's bal-

failures. Frolov speaks to this point and discusses a "reluctance to abandon," the adventurist foreign policy as it is a useful tool, both domestically and internationally (Vladimir Frolov). This relationship has led to an institutionalization of confrontation by Mr. Putin that has acted as a force of political mobilization.

In the domestic realm, a confrontational foreign policy has a number of uses. Foremost among them is that it reestablishes the need for Putin's authority. Given that President Putin sourced his initial legitimacy from providing security and stability in the face of chaos, it is believed that he continues to be a strong leader in times of turmoil. By depicting Russia as isolated in a conflicted world, the Kremlin mobilizes nationalist sentiment that calls for a singular leader that personifies Russia, such as Mr. Putin. The Australian diplomat speaks to this reinforcing cycle and its impact on the Russia opposition by conveying the widespread belief among Russians that there will be a time for political opposition, but not now, not when President Putin is acting in our interests against outside threats (Australian diplomat). Further, the presence of an external threat and lack of desire among a critical mass for true opposition works to justify the restrictive domestic

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ancing act of utilizing foreign policy to mobilize domestic support, while keeping the populous people apathetic enough to provide distance from any

policies against media, civil society organizations, and demonstrations that Mr. Putin has put forward since his 2012 return to the presidency. This relationship has turned into a "vicious cycle" in which

Mr. Putin builds a sense of nationalism founded on fear and harvests it with the support of the people (Mark Galeotti briefing). With no sustainable political institutions, organic national ideology, or appetite to withstand comprehensive economic reform, Putin's only real tool to mobilize the people behind him is an aggressive foreign policy that places Russian interests at the forefront; the foreign policy that he has groomed the people to expect from a strong and capable leader.

While President Putin's confrontational foreign policy successfully mobilizes support for his rule and policies domestically, it also helps him achieve one of his main goals on the international stage – Russia's return to prominence. Mr. Putin is a realist when it comes to international relations; he seems "to have internalized a Manichean, zero-sum sense of his relationship with the West," and through his foreign policy has tried to use every opportunity to serve as a spoiler to Western ambitions in pursuit of Russian interests (Mark Galeotti, "No, Russia"). This has in some ways changed the calculus in international relations, as Russia's actions are often a departure from the traditional rulebook (Interview with editor of The Moscow Times). In the short-term this has been successful in helping Mr. Putin reach his targets, as it has been able to punch above its weight in international affairs, particularly in forcing Russia to the negotiation table on issues concerning both Iran and Syria. Russian actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine have, on the other hand, resulted in negative consequences such as Western sanctions and being suspended from G8. However, given Mr. Putin's control over Russian media and parts of society, the repercussions are often viewed as an extension of Western aggression rather than as a result of Russian actions. The constant state of confrontation between Russia and the West creates a dangerous precedent with Mr. Putin encouraged to continue his aggression by the nationalism he helped to foster.

While Mr. Putin has found utility in the rally around the flag effect, it also raises the question of what to do to drive support in absence of military victories. For instance, withdrawal from Eastern Ukraine is difficult, as the Kremlin has used much energy to justify the excursion under the flag of nationalism and great lengths to hide the casualties that a retreat now would appear weak, and diminish the expectations that Mr. Putin has built both at home and abroad. An editor at BNE concurs with this assessment, stating, "he can't back down on Ukraine," it would make him appear a "junior player in geopolitics," (BNE editor). This general outlook has encouraged actions such as those in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, and has further motivated the Kremlin to embrace the outsider role and continue a policy of confrontation against its perceived threats.

Conclusion

President Putin is encouraged to continue his policies of confrontation by his own personal interests, which he aligns with Russian national interests, as well as the sense of nationalism among the people. This has led the Kremlin to "focus on propaganda and adventurism abroad," opposed to the necessary institutional reforms that could benefit Russians at home (Michael Rochlitz). This tactic appears to be working so far as nationalism is successfully "used to facilitate, justify, and perpetuate all of the aggressive foreign policy moves," (U.S. Embassy representative) Using a confrontational foreign policy as a main source of legitimacy is a precarious arrangement as it sets an expectation for conflict and discourages the signs of weakness that stem from retreat. This is a cycle that is not expected to break for the remainder of President Putin's term; however, it would be the most beneficial for all if Russia was able to withdraw from its conflict while saving face and return to a business as usual relationship with the West.