



The Moscow riots, Russian nationalism and the Eurasian Union

by Nicu Popescu

It is a sad but quintessentially European story. A rich capital attracts migrants, in turn creating tensions between the local population and the newly arrived immigrants. At some point, a trigger – in this case, the killing of a local man – causes these social and ethnic tensions to escalate into violence, with looted shops and burned cars. Such a scenario has unfolded before in Paris, London and Stockholm. But a few weeks ago Moscow joined the ranks when, in the district of Biryulyovo, hundreds of people rampaged through shops and the city's biggest wholesale fruit and vegetable market.

The recent Moscow riots highlight several parallels between Russia and the rest of Europe in terms of societal politics, starting with social tensions in large urban centres and the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment. The riots are just one manifestation of a significant mutation in Russian nationalism – which has evolved from an expansionist, imperialistic and ethnically inclusive type towards an ethnically exclusive one. The Biryulyovo riots – alas, neither the first nor the last of their kind – constitute a serious challenge for a Kremlin in search of a new *modus operandi* in domestic politics as well as foreign policy.

A more demanding public

The Biryulyovo riots and the anti-Putin protests of last year are part of the same trend whereby Russians are demanding a greater say in how the country is run – a trend with both positive and negative consequences. The demonstrations by tens of thousands of people in Moscow against electoral fraud and Putin's style of governance back in 2012 were a sign of the emergence of a rising middle class tired of authoritarian rule. This year, the anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny took a significant share of the vote (27%) in the Moscow mayoral race and mobilised an unprecedented army of volunteers to campaign on his behalf. The mayoralty of Ekaterinburg, Russia's fourth biggest city and the capital of the industrialised and relatively prosperous Ural region, recently went to another opposition campaigner, Yevgeny Roizman, an anti-drug campaigner-turned-politician. This may not (yet) be considered as a democratic awakening – but a societal pushback against the *status quo* is clearly discernible.

The public's demands for a greater say in political decision-making are far from confined to the desire for fair elections or traditional middle-class aspirations. Much more widespread are



concerns over immigration. Russia is one of the world's major poles of immigration – second only to the US in absolute terms, though ranks well below the 30th place in *per capita* terms. The post-Soviet states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus are the main sources of such flows. A recent poll showed that over half of Muscovites identify immigration as the single most important issue today, and over 80% support the idea of introducing visas for Central Asian countries. A telling factor is that negative attitudes apply not just to migrants from other countries, but also to Russians from the North Caucasus (who are mostly Muslim and a highly-visible minority), even though – as full Russian citizens – they are not officially migrants. Another significant factor is that tolerance *vis-à-vis* non-Russian but Slavic-speaking and Christian Orthodox Ukrainians or Belarusians is much higher than *vis-à-vis* Muslims – regardless whether they come from inside or outside Russia.

Such sentiments are now putting pressure on the political system. In the Moscow mayoral race this summer, every single candidate – from the candidate fielded by the nominally liberal Yabloko party to the Kremlin-supported incumbent, Sergei Sobyenin – made openly anti-immigrant statements. The discourse of Alexei Navalny, the most popular opposition politician, also contained a strong nationalist strain. Such rhetoric goes down well not only with the city's working class (the traditional target for anti-immigration platforms) but also with the emerging urban middle class.

Although only a small minority of Muscovites participated in the recent disturbances, it is arguable that the majority sympathised with their motives. Yet the riots, not unlike the peaceful anti-Putin protests of last year, were just another expression of an increasingly politically demanding public. All this creates a number of problems for the Russian authorities – on all fronts.

A typically European riot?

While the Russian trend of a societal backlash against migrants is to some extent mirrored in

Europe, there are also significant differences. In Moscow, it was the Russians who rioted against migrants, whereas in Europe it has mostly been the other way around. The riots in Moscow are thus more akin to those that took place in London in 1958 – when white working class 'Teddy Boys' rampaged through the streets of Notting Hill for almost a week – than those that occurred in London in 2011, when societal grievances, not racial or ethnic tensions, caused a disgruntled minority to rebel against the state order.

Compared to most of contemporary Europe, where riots are often the result of a rift between the disaffected and the state, the Moscow riots revealed a three-way split between anti-immigrant Muscovites, the (mostly Muslim) migrants, and the state authorities who found themselves squeezed in-between. Such cleavages are all the more difficult to handle, since the authorities are increasingly accused of tolerating and even creating demand for irregular workers. Thus, although the riots may have been characterised by anti-migrant slogans, certain state authorities often attract as much ire as the migrants themselves. The police and immigration officials are blamed for not detaining or deporting illegal migrants in return for bribes, and the city authorities are accused of attracting migrants by offering them public sector jobs in municipal construction or as street cleaners. Furthermore, there is

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also the additional allegation that corrupt municipal officials are hiring irregular migrants, only to retain up to half of their salaries for themselves, with the willing migrants happy to go along with the scheme simply in order to earn any wage they can.

Whereas in most of Europe disaffection with levels of immigration is mostly channelled through populist parties, Russia's tightly controlled political system often excludes such groups. Parliamentary politics in Russia is often off limits for any party – regardless which end of the political spectrum – that is not approved by the Kremlin. The upshot is that, whilst such dissatisfaction in Europe is increasingly translated into parliamentary seats for populist parties, in Russia such sentiment is much more likely to lead to street violence.

The inability to influence migration policy through democratic means leads to attempts to influence it through acts of vigilantism by semi-organised nationalist groups. In the Russian internet sphere, there is no shortage of videos of nationalist vigilantes organising raids to intimidate migrant workers, or even gory videos of skinheads murdering powerless migrants on suburban trains.

Nationalism and Putin's support base

The Russian authorities cannot be too tough in their response to such outbursts of nationalism – but neither can they afford to stand idly by. Civil unrest is by definition bad for a president that has built his political career on promises of stability, order and territorial integrity (e.g. during the war in Chechnya). But Putin cannot crack down on nationalist rioters as easily as he does on liberals – there are more of them, and nationalism is fairly widespread among Putin's core constituencies. Furthermore, the authorities themselves often fuel nationalism as a way to shore up support for the state and tarnish opponents with allegations of being unpatriotic.

A serious clampdown on nationalist groups is therefore almost impossible. It is one thing to detain Greenpeace activists, a female punk band, or some Moscow upper-middle class liberals supported by a handful of white-collar Muscovites loathed beyond *Sadovoe Koltso* (the ring road separating the centre from the rest of Moscow and the equivalent of Paris's *boulevard périphérique*); and quite another to unleash police forces on your average Russian blue-collar worker with nationalist views living in a depressed suburb or small town, who is much more representative of society at large and, more often than not, a Putin supporter.

At the same time, the Kremlin cannot afford to ignore or take too lenient an approach to such breakdowns in public order, since any future escalation would undermine what is believed to be one of Putin's main achievements: a stable Russia. Equally problematic is the fact that any angry crowd which began rioting against

migrants can turn on the police and then the government quite rapidly.

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So the authorities do not know how to respond – either practically or ideologically – to this growing xenophobia. In technical terms, the Biryulyovo riots were dealt with in a rather competent manner overall, with moderate police interventions and subsequent arrests in the

following days. Nobody was killed. Sadly, it is probably just a matter of when, not if, Moscow will experience further unrest. And the dilemmas facing the public authorities next time around will be much more acute. Too soft a response could embolden the rioters, while too tough a clampdown could turn even more people (not least those from Putin's core support groups) against the authorities.

Russian nationalism vs. Eurasian Union

The resulting foreign policy dilemmas are equally problematic. A key element of Putin's public appeal is his achievement of bringing Russia back ‘up from its knees’ (as it is described in official propaganda). With weaker economy (economic growth was 3.4% in 2012 and is expected to be 1.8% this year), oil prices stagnating and gas revenues falling (partly due to declining consumption of Russian gas in the EU), there is little chance for the Russian authorities to deliver rapid and palpable economic benefits. Although Russia has weathered the storm of the financial and economic crisis relatively well, the government is nevertheless no longer in a position to improve living standards at the same pace that people came to expect during Putin's first two presidencies in the 2000s.

Against this background, great power grandstanding is a much easier way to instil a sense of national pride and positivity in Russian citizens. The Kremlin has always pursued some form of post-Soviet integration. What is different now is that Russia has more economic resources than in the 1990s – and a greater political need than in the 2000s – to do so. Post-Soviet integration, therefore, is not just a pillar of Putin's foreign policy but, most likely, of his claim to bequeath a historical legacy. His hope is to create – on the basis of the existing Customs Union (flanked by

a collective security organisation) – a Eurasian Union that could constitute not just a trade bloc but a new political and security entity.

Yet it is precisely such an objective that clashes with the changing profile and tenor of Russian nationalism. This has long vacillated between an inclusive, imperialistic, multi-cultural, and expansionist version, and an ethnically exclusive, anti-Muslim, and ultimately, post-imperial one. Now the second, post-imperial type is becoming increasingly popular, with the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment a clear by-product of its rise.

Yet again, this trend mirrors what is happening in many former colonial powers in Europe, whose publics were willing to pay (and even fight) to retain an empire well into the early 1960s but are now adamantly opposed to keeping their doors open to former imperial subjects. To cite just one example, far-right French politician Jean-Marie Le Pen started out as a volunteer fighting to keep the French in Algeria, but ended his political career trying to keep Algerians out of France.

Needless to say, the new Russian nationalists also want Russia to be a great power with influence in world affairs. But they are much less willing to pay for it with an open door policy, particularly with regards to the populations of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Many would even prefer the North Caucasus to secede from Russia. Putin's plans to create a Eurasian Union which aims to maintain visa-free regimes with Central Asian states - and even open the Russian labour market to some of them - therefore now rest on a time bomb in the form of rising Russian nationalism.

Putin's dilemmas

Just a few days before the Biryulyovo riots, Putin stated that he is against introducing visas for former Soviet states as it would 'push them away' at a time when Russia should 'draw them closer' – yet it is precisely this notion that the public is turning against. The Kremlin is also becoming trapped in its own foreign policy rhetoric: as part of the pressure on Ukraine not to sign an association agreement with the EU, an advisor to the Russian president floated the idea of the possible introduction of visas for Ukrainian citizens, while Putin was extolling the virtues of visa-free travel for Central Asians. Paradoxically, this is the exact opposite

of what most Russians would prefer to see right now – to draw Ukraine ever closer and keep Central Asia at arm's length.

At any rate, Putin's opponents are trying to capitalise on the growing tide of post-imperial, ethnic nationalism by outflanking and outbidding the Kremlin on the right. It is in this context that opposition leader Alexei Navalny started a campaign to collect signatures demanding the introduction of visas for foreigners from Central Asia, a decision, which if implemented, would be a huge blow to the idea of Eurasian integration. For the first time in Russia's recent history, post-Soviet integration is being seriously contested from inside the country. For many among the new brand of Russian nationalists, a Moscow with fewer migrants is more important than maintaining Russian influence in parts of the post-Soviet space, and these people are likely to push for policies that undermine some of Russia's foreign policy goals.

The end result is that Putin's biggest foreign policy project seems to run counter to two major domestic trends – growing anti-immigrant sentiment, and a greater expectation that the government become more responsive. On both fronts, the Kremlin is likely to be on the defensive, unsure as to which course to take. The Eurasian Union may be Putin's attempt to build a lasting historical legacy, but it is running up against ever-more constraints domestically, with the public in urban centres (and elsewhere) preferring to keep its former imperial subjects beyond Russia's borders rather than draw them in under Moscow's influence.

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