

Nationalism and the Logic of Russian Actions in Ukraine

Henry E. Hale, George Washington University, August 2014

| PUTIN | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY | UKRAINE |



It is not very productive to interpret the current international situation as a new Cold War or to see Russia's Vladimir Putin as a Russian Hitler bent on reconstituting the USSR at all costs.

The Cold War was driven in substantial part by competing ideologies of world scope. Putin does not aim to take over Europe, much less the world, and has no

ideology like communism that portends to global dominance.

Commentators often now refer to Putin as a “nationalist” leader and, to be sure, he is currently riding high on a surge of nationalist sentiment following the annexation of Crimea. These interpretations, however, are often overly simplistic and misunderstand major features of Russian nationalism.

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Perhaps most importantly, there are different types of Russian nationalism and these types do not always fit together comfortably.

One type defines “Russian” very broadly to include all of the peoples and religious groups that have traditionally lived in the territory of the former USSR or before that, the Russian Empire. The key call of these nationalists is to reintegrate the territory of the former USSR.

A second type of nationalism is a much more exclusive and even racist ethnic Russian nationalism, one committed to a pure Russia free of “polluting” peoples of other ethnicities, or at least those who are not Slavic. The key call of these nationalists is to prevent immigration of unwanted groups and, for some, to bring Russians or Slavs “stranded” abroad back into the Russian state’s domain.

Both forms of nationalism have substantial support in Russia, but they are in deep tension with each other. The nationalism of restoring the USSR would mean bringing into Russia and its major cities many of the very people whom the ethnic nationalists want to kick out, especially Islamic non-Slavs from former Soviet countries like Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Moreover, some of the ethnic nationalists would even prefer a smaller, purer Russia to a larger

more diverse one—for example, a Russia without the Islamic parts of the troubled North Caucasus region—a vision once famously articulated by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

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Crimea hits the “sweet spot” for Russian nationalism: a territory with an ethnic Russian majority that would not integrate many unwanted non-Russians into the Russian Federation. Beyond this, territorial expansion starts to become more complicated politically for Putin, potentially inflaming ethnically exclusive Russian nationalists. Unrest in recent years has shown the latter can take to the streets in substantial numbers, often violently.

While Putin has not advocated reconquering former Soviet territory and in fact has said that anyone who wants to restore the USSR “has no brain,” he has generally been closer to the first, more inclusive brand of nationalism than the second, ethnically exclusive sort.

Some have examined Putin’s language (especially in his speech after the Crimea annexation in March 2014) and concluded that he has switched to the more ethnically exclusive variety, noting his calls to serve Russians by using the term *russkie* instead of the more inclusive term *rossiiskie* to refer to them. This shift in rhetoric should not be overblown. Even the term *russkie* can be used in an inclusive sense. A March 2013 survey organized by the University of Oslo’s NEORUSS project thus found that when people used the term *russkie* (as in “Russia for the Russians”), only 39 percent actually meant just ethnic Russians. Another 30 percent had in mind certain other groups when using the term and 25 percent interpreted it to refer to all citizens of the Russian Federation regardless of ethnicity. Putin is trying to walk the tightrope between Russia’s two forms of nationalism, hoping he does not have to pick a side.

Mainstream Russian nationalism is also often misunderstood as being anti-European. Marlene Laruelle's research, among that of others, has shown that this is simply not the case. Putin reflects major strains of nationalism in which Russians see themselves as being part of Europe, just having a different vision as to what Europe is and represents, and what place Russia has in it.

In light of all this, Putin's actions in Ukraine are best understood through the lens of his domestic political considerations. Russia is not a simple dictatorship in which whatever he says goes, no matter what. Stability there depends heavily on public support for the leadership. (My new book, *Patronal Politics*, will make this case in detail when it appears in early October.) The USSR and eastern Central Europe show that control over media cannot by itself generate support for a regime.

This is why events in Ukraine posed such a danger to Putin. With his regime's popular support dropping since the 2008-09 global financial crisis, massive protests erupted in Moscow in late 2011 that he and his associates clearly perceived as a major threat to their political survival. They regrouped, found new bases of support, and went on the offensive against protest leaders. The protests faded. But suddenly, demonstrators in next-door Ukraine succeeded in toppling a leader openly backed by Putin, opening up the possibility that Russia's own protest movement could be revived. And there was also the possibility that Putin could lose the faith of his current supporters by appearing helpless to protect his ally, not to mention Russian-oriented populations in Ukraine's East who feared the revolution would not serve their interests. All this could have served as fodder for challenges from both the liberal and nationalist segments of society.

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game with different rules.

Putin's move in Crimea and the subsequent efforts to destabilize eastern Ukraine can be seen as an attempt to overturn the chessboard when the arrangement of pieces is no longer favorable, forcing a new game with different rules. By hitting the nationalist sweet spot described above with Crimea, and being fortunate in that it was pulled off largely without bloodshed, Putin benefited from a powerful rally-around-the-flag effect. That, and the destabilization of the rest of Ukraine, also nicely fit a narrative Putin has long been weaving that revolutions—and protests that might develop into them—are fraught with the danger of state failure and territorial dismemberment. These are messages that serve him well at home, at least, for now.

Nationalist surges and rally-around-the-flag effects do not last forever. Putin is currently in a very dangerous situation that could lead him in any number of directions. Failure to move further in expanding Russian territory will disappoint some nationalists who now offer him their full-throated support. But actually attempting to bring unwilling populations under Russian control by force will cause other problems, including unrest within newly occupied territories and dissatisfaction at home among those who want an ethnically purer Russia. Even in Russia's North Caucasus, it cannot fully control its own territory and stamp out a stubborn insurgency.

None of this provides a clear recipe for what the international community should do moving forward. The annexation of the territory of an unwilling state does threaten to create a troubling new precedent that must be resisted and that cannot be allowed to pass without cost to the violator. But we must understand how Russian politics and Russian nationalism actually work before we can confidently recommend courses of action that impose appropriate costs yet create incentives for future cooperation.

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Jack Matlock · Duke University

A very important explanation of the two types of Russian nationalism. Along with that, Professor Hale rightly debunks the idea that President Putin is out to recreate the Soviet Union (as if that were possible). Reading intentions is dubious, but assessing real possibilities, considering all the conflicting and often self-limiting forces, is a more reliable. Assuming the majority of people in Crimea actually prefer to be in Russia (a plausible but unproven assumption), Crimea can be an asset to Russia and a liability to Ukraine. This is not true of the easternmost provinces of Ukraine where, at least until the recent fighting, the great majority of the people did not want to be In the Russian Federation even though they wanted their native Russian language to be respected along with Ukrainian..

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Alex Saveliev · Top Commenter · Московский финансовый институт

Majority of Donbass people want to be with Russia. You may believe it or not, but this is the reality. The Donbass people have enough experience of living in nationalist Ukraine. The only meaning of Ukrainian nationalist - not to be like Russian. To be anti-Russian. It is unacceptable for Russian people in Donbass. And in Ukraine as a whole.

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John Haskell · Top Commenter · West New York, New Jersey

No poll ever taken confirms the statement that "Majority of Donbass people want to be with Russia."

Furthermore, the DNR's leadership was a restaurateur from Moscow and some guy named Girkin whom the Muscovites dragged up because the Donbass people didn't actually want to fight a war of secession. You may believe it or not, but this is the reality.

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Alex Saveliev · Top Commenter · Московский финансовый институт

John Haskell

Don't tell me tales about Donbass. I've met enough people from Ukraine and Donbass. Refugees whose homes were destroyed by Ukrainian troops and paramilitary nazis.

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Roger Wee · Chaminade University of Honolulu, HI

No, he will not force former nations of USSR to join back Russia. He will seduce them economic pact, the military alliance. Putin has his mind set Euroasia, this will consist of all former nations of USSR and some of the nations in Central Asia. The End Game will Russia, Euroasia, China, Pakistan, Brics, South East Asia these regions will the SUPERPOWER of TOMORROW. This is also the nightmare that AMERICA is facing.

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Mariya Doncheva · Top Commenter · Numerologist at Self employed · 106 followers

Exactly ! Totally agree with this point of view and by all means Vladimir PUTIN is has PUT-in long term non-aggressive goals in economical co-operation and new renewable energy technologies.... protection of environment and wildlife !

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