

## RUSSIAN NATIONALISTS FIGHT UKRAINIAN WAR

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In this article, I am going to focus on how the radical nationalist movement in Russia fares in the current situation, given the political consolidation of the current regime, and the war in Ukraine<sup>1</sup> and the government's reaction to it. The article describes the situation as it stood at the end of 2014, which makes it predictably incomprehensive because new updates on the conflict still arrive every day, and there has also been more news about Russian ultra-right forces over the past few months.

### 1. Nationalism as underlying basis for new official political consolidation

The political consolidation of Putin's regime rose to new heights in 2014, and not only due to his 85% popularity rating (LevadaCentre 2013) – the important part is *what* exactly these people support.

This unparalleled political support rallied by the Kremlin is not entirely the result of the propaganda campaign against the 'Kiev Junta' or 'Bandera followers.' Unlike in previous years, the regime has now worked out its own ideology – a nationalist one.

But the question is what kind of nationalism did they opt for? Of course the racial or ethnic chauvinism that prevails 'in the streets' could not be adopted as the government's official policy. It was therefore replaced by a milder version – an odd mixture of political nationalism (although without the civil or democratic component) and the so-called 'civilisational' nationalism, a concept based on the uniqueness of the Russian civilisation as opposed to the West. Yet, ethnic chauvinism cannot be entirely excluded from nationalism as the official policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The article was written in October 2014 when fighting was in full swing and therefore does not cover any further developments of this war.

This much is obvious from what is happening in Ukraine today. They are fighting for ‘the Russian world,’ or for ‘Russians,’ which suggests that the national unity concept, understood as the Russian civilisation-based unity, still involves some ethnic bias.

## **2. Prior attempts at national consolidation. Federal program ‘On Strengthening the Unity of the Russian Nation and Ethnic and Cultural Development of the Peoples of Russia’**

Some of the moves made by the federal government in the previous years demonstrated a similar attitude. In 2011, the Regional Development Ministry worked out the Strategy of State Ethnic Policy of the Russian Federation until 2025, while in August 2013, the federal program ‘On Strengthening the Unity of the Russian Nation and Ethnic and Cultural Development of the Peoples of Russia in 2014-2020,’ was approved (Verkhovsky 2014a), listing actions aimed at ‘a greater unity of the Russian nation’ as opposed to ethnic or culture-based rallying (including Russian ethnic chauvinism).

The program said the key problems were ‘weak Russian civil identity combined with the growing significance of ethnic and religious self-identification,’ ‘the lack of public accord on basic values of Russian society’ and the increase in radical nationalist sentiments and religious trends, massive immigration and the subversive activities of various forces, of course – but that was not a hint meaning the West for this once. The document also pointed out the ‘poor sociocultural state of the Russian people’ and ‘negligible role of traditional values.’

The main goal of the program was to justify the need for a series of steps to consolidate national unity to counterbalance ethnic and religious mobilisations, including Russian ethnic nationalism. The unity was supposed to be based on civil nation principles combined with ‘civilizational nationalism.’

The goals of the government’s ethnic policy made sense; however, no efforts that could achieve the desired result even theoretically, were made. On the other hand, this was hardly one of the Kremlin’s priorities right then, which is why the ruling elites failed to overcome their

disagreements and combine efforts to work out any feasible policy line. Instead, the government made a series of clearly populist moves of the ethnic nationalist nature.

### 3. Anti-immigrant campaign in 2013

The year 2013 brought a really unexpected turn in the development of nationalism in Russia. While in 2012, the Kremlin launched various propaganda campaigns against the opposition that relied on many Russians' xenophobic sentiments, its ethnic policy targets remained unchanged.

Things began changing in early 2013 – or at least from spring 2013. An unexpected anti-immigrant campaign was launched by the governments of several Russian regions, including Moscow and St. Petersburg, and continued for months. In Moscow, this policy change could be explained by the mayoral elections; but no elections were held in St. Petersburg that year. What's more, the campaign was eagerly supported by federal TV channels.

The campaign led to an unprecedented growth of ethnic xenophobia in Russia, according to Yury Levada's public opinion centre (Levada Center). In 2013, 70-80% of Russians shared xenophobic sentiments at least to some extent. The overall support of the '*Russia for Russians*' slogan (at least to some extent) had grown from 56% to 66%. Negative attitudes toward 'southerners' were expressed by a total of 61%, which topped even the figures during the second Chechen war. Moreover, that total did not even include hateful statements motivated by other negative sentiments (such as economic issues) in regard to immigrants. The support of another racist slogan, '*Stop feeding the Caucasus*,' exceeded 70% – this many respondents supported immigration control and deportation of 'illegal' immigrants (who had mostly failed to obtain the right papers on time). Commenting on the survey results, head of the Levada Center and editor-in-chief of *The Russian Public Opinion Herald* journal Lev Gudkov confirmed that 2013 saw the record level of xenophobia in Russia. 'This was the highest level registered yet, and a very uneven wave, too,' he said.

Yet, that could be considered a breakdown because it was short-lived: it began in spring and ended around October or November. Still, radical nationalists immediately responded to the government's call with a series of moves of their own, from political rallies to so-called 'raids.' Incidentally, even the pro-Kremlin Rodina party then staged similar raids (and continues doing so). In fact, raids as a moderately violent but safe form of activity had long been used by ultra-right groups. They intensified in 2012. Soccer fan Alexei Khudyakov who leads Shield of Moscow – the best known immigrant-hunting group in 2012 – had earlier participated in equally violent raids of the Youth Anti-Drug Special Forces (Molodezhny Antinarkotichesky Spetsnaz, MAS), associated with the Young Russia group.

In 2013, 'Russian mop-ups' surged to an unprecedented scale, involving nationalist groups such as the Shield of Moscow, Bright Rus and others. Those raids could include – or not include – the police or the Federal Migration Service, take place with these authorities' informal approval, or without one, and involve various degrees of violence. Although they were careful not to take it too far, the raiders still used non-lethal weapons, clubs, sledgehammers and other objects, also in cases where the police were part of the action. Videos of those raids were posted online deliberately popularising the idea– the target audiences were predictably drawn to participate in the public (albeit safe) violence against 'aliens' (Verkhovsky 2014b).

The anti-immigrant campaign also worked as a supporting background for advertising radical nationalist groups in the media. However, most importantly, it actually compromised the earlier proclaimed goal of supra-ethnic political consolidation and shook the foundations for fighting radical nationalists.

Our observations also showed a disruption of the 2009-2012 downward trend in racist violence. In 2013, 23 people were killed and 203 wounded or beaten, while 10 more were threatened to be killed<sup>2</sup>(Alperovich & Yudina 2014a). These alterations in statistics were mainly brought about by the long-term changes in the law-enforcement practices of the past

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<sup>2</sup> As of February 4, 2015

three years at the least, and therefore cannot be viewed as the result of the anti-immigrant campaign.

All of this has definitely increased the importance of the violence aspect in the discussion of Russian nationalism. Radical nationalist groups gained popularity due to the media attention they were getting as part of the anti-immigrant campaign; the authorities even had to slow down some of the most ardent volunteers helping them ‘fight illegal immigration.’ (Alperovich and Yudina 2014a). The Russian nationalist movement entered a period of optimistic expectations.

Admittedly, few of those ‘helpers’ actually became associated with any official political activity. Although many ultra-right movements tried to register their own political parties, only a few of them actually succeeded: Sergei Baburin’s Russian National Union and Dmitry Rogozin’s Rodina Party. However, even these two oldest parties have not been entrusted with the authority to communicate the government’s ideas to the public; the ‘Russian world’ ideas are being conveyed by pro-government agencies. Other nationalists failed to register their parties.

#### **4. How Ukrainian events affected Russian nationalists**

In the first half of 2014, the attention of all active Russian citizens was riveted on Ukraine. The fight against ‘fascists’ and ‘Bandera followers’ then partly ousted nationalist ideas and even made them taboo. For the first time in months, opinion polls showed lowering levels of xenophobia (LevadaCenter, 2014a), while the general ‘anti-Bandera’ sentiment entered into conflict with the essential content of the ultra-right groups’ main activities. The anti-immigrant sentiment that the nationalists of the 2000s entirely relied on, and which was high in 2013, faded.

##### **4.1 Ideological battles**

One important and unexpected outcome of the Ukrainian events was the reconfiguration of the nationalist movement. (Alperovich, 2014)The Ukrainian crisis, which began with clashes in Grushevskogo Street, revived nationalists’ hopes for the ‘white revolution’ success in Russia:

the Maidan riots were seen as a positive example, especially if one overstated the Right Sector's role. The transition from the 'government vs. opposition' conflict to a different phase that can be described as 'ethnic Ukrainians vs. ethnic Russians' made Russian nationalists face a difficult choice. While the opposition-minded part of nationalists initially supported the Maidan protesters, serious disagreements emerged among them later.

The leaders of publicly active organisations have been the most outspoken. As expected, most nationalist organisations approve of the annexation of Crimea and the so-called 'Russian Spring.' These include the opposition-minded Konstantin Krylov from the National Democratic Party, the highly loyal Alexei Zhuravlyov (the Rodina (*Motherland*) Party), the belligerent Stalinist and nationalist Vladimir Kvachkov (People's Militia in the Name of Minin and Pozharsky (NOMP)) and the long-standing Nazis such as Dmitry Bobrov (National-Socialist Initiative) and others. They all view the conflict in Ukraine as a battle that pits ethnic Russians against ethnic Ukrainians and the West. Thus, even groups that view the Moscow regime as anti-Russian support 'our own people' in the Donbass in eastern Ukraine.

There are significantly fewer opponents of the 'Russian Spring.' They include some of the leaders of the Russkiye (*Russians*) association – Dmitry Dyomushkin, Vladimir Basmanov, possibly also Alexander Belov; Natsionalnye Demokraty (*National Democrats*) leader Semyon Pikhtev (this group is also part of Russkiye); leader of the Russian Right-Wing Party Vladimir Istarkhov; leaders of the National Democratic Alliance Alexei Shiropayev and Ilya Lazarenko; Maxim Kalinichenko, one of the organisers of the 'Russkaya probezhka' (*Russian jogging*) public event in St. Petersburg, former member the 'Restruct' movement political council Roman Zhelezov; the leader of the Slavic Force in St. Petersburg Dmitry Yevtushenko, and others.

Ironically, their statements closely resemble those made by their sworn enemies in the liberal opposition. These nationalists contend that both the Russians and Ukrainians in Ukraine would do better to live under the hated authorities in Kiev, or better still, independently, than under what they see as President Vladimir Putin's 'anti-Russian regime.'

Unlike the supporters of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, their opponents showed no haste in forming any alliances, as they sensed they were more than just in opposition to the official political rhetoric (which is something totally to be expected with radical nationalists) – they also found themselves in clear minority even among other nationalist groups. There are a lot of ultra-right nationalist communities on social networks for those who do not share the general enthusiasm about ‘Novorossiya’ or even openly support the Right Sector, but there haven’t been any open attempts so far to use these communities as bases to build any movements or organisations, at least not that we know of.

The majority of Russian nationalists are autonomous militants that do not belong to any formal political organisations, and who are also in disagreement over Ukraine. Apart from the two viewpoints described above, there is a third group which sees the conflict in Ukraine as the result of a Zionist conspiracy against the Slavs. They see Novorossiya as resistance to Kiev-imposed oligarchy. Still others see eastern Ukrainians as ‘*Vatniks*’ (a modern term describing Russian patriotic rednecks – Ed.) or ‘*Sovoks*’ (the term carries the same connotations, only for Soviet patriots – Ed.) and would rather take Kiev’s side in this conflict. The possibility of eastern Ukraine’s accession to Russia is perceived highly negatively, because the newcomers are expected to automatically join the Putin regime admirers and ‘*vegetables*.’

Some of these autonomous nationalists believe that the units fighting for the *Vatniks* are mainly manned with Chechens sent in from Russia, with Russia more than willing to have them killed.

Incidentally, most nationalists are not satisfied with just political debates. Some radical nationalist groups send ‘humanitarian aid’ which, in addition to the traditional load of food, cigarettes and clothes, includes military equipment and obviously weapons. These ‘humanitarian’ packages come from a lot of different sources these days, and some nationalist activists even have official agencies join the effort (like Shield of Moscow leader Alexei Khudyakov).

## 4.2 Russian nationalists involved in fighting

With the conflict growing into a full-fledged war, it is important to note that there are supporters of different viewpoints on both sides of the frontline in eastern Ukraine (Yudina, 2014).

However, it is important to note that ultra-right activists do not even account for the biggest share among Russians fighting in Ukraine. For the most part they are not even (or not so much of) nationalists, but all kinds of different people, even antifascists. Many of those fighting there now have never been spotted involved in any political activity before.

Unfortunately, our information is fragmentary, which prevents us from giving even a rough estimate of their numbers. There are probably several hundreds of nationalists fighting for Novorossiia, not including non-Registry Cossacks.<sup>3</sup>

The Russian nationalists fighting in Ukraine have a certain ideology but do not associate themselves with any political party. Some of them are veterans of recent wars (the Chechen war and even the Afghan war), or just retired servicemen, which means that they have had some experience of military action. Some of them are affiliated with Cossack organisations, especially those active in Ukraine or adjacent regions, the most well-known of them the Great Host of Don Cossacks led by ataman Nikolai Kozitsyn that now controls the area between the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics and the VolchyaSotnya (*Wolves' Hundred*) Cossack battalion from Belorechenskaya in the Krasnodar Territory (closed down in late 2014).

Less known organisations are more active in sending fighters to the conflict area, such as Alexander Barkashov's Russian National Unity, RNE (or rather a fragment thereof which somehow remained loyal to the leader), which had thousands of young people as its members in the 1990s. The group is currently engaged in an intensive recruiting campaign

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<sup>3</sup> Marlene Laruelle estimates the number of fighters sent to Donbas by nationalist groups at 100-200 (Laruelle 2014). Alexander Tarasov, director of the Phoenix Center for New Sociology and Research in Applied Politics, said only around 90 nationalists fought for DPR/LPR at the end of 2014.

online. Images can be found on the internet showing groups of 15-20 armed people amid the conflict area, wearing RNE insignia. One of them even pictures Barkashov's son, Pyotr, and another, Alexander Kildishov, the leader of the group's Volgograd Branch.

The National Liberation Movement (NOD) led by United Russia deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov<sup>4</sup> is busy forming volunteer units and transporting them to Ukraine. Last summer, the group's Samara Branch sent volunteers from Samara to join the defenders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, bearing the *'Motherland! Freedom! Putin!'* slogans and portraits of Tsar Nicholas II.

Other Russian volunteers spotted in Ukraine included activists of the Eurasian Youth Union (the youth branch of Alexander Dugin's party), the Russian Imperial Movement led by Stanislav Vorobyov, and the National Democratic Party. 'Other Russia' members have been seen at the frontline, too.

The well-known ultranationalist website Sputnik & Pogrom (its team also split up over the Ukraine issue) as well as several soccer fan websites had been calling on the audience to join a group of St. Petersburg nationalists (Alexei "Fritz" Milchakov, Dmitry Deineko and others) heading for Ukraine, which was later transformed into the Batman Special Task Unit and joined the Luhansk People's Republic forces.

Still fewer facts are known about those fighting on the other side – even quantitative estimates vary from 20 to 200 people.<sup>5</sup> Most of them, if not all, are neo-Nazis, but there are different types among them, even supporters of General Kvachkov.

On December 5, 2014, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko met with the fighters who defended Donetsk Airport, presenting one of them with a Ukrainian passport and citizenship: Sergei "Malyuta" Korotkikh, one

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<sup>4</sup>NOD is as yet little studied, but this movement is undoubtedly nationalist. Judging by its current activities NOD may be seen as part of the radical wing, although it may not in any way part of the opposition (Strukova 2014).

<sup>5</sup> 60 people as of the end of 2014, according to Tarasov – mainly in the Azov, Aidar, Donbass1 and Donbass2 battalions, and two Right Sector battalions.

of the former leaders of the National-Socialist Society and a former RNE member, has been fighting with the Azov Battalion<sup>6</sup> from the start and heads the intelligence service.

Roman “Zukhel” Zheleznov, a well-known associate of neo-Nazi activist Maxim “Tesak” Martsinkevich, also arrived in Kiev in July. Mikhail Oreshnikov, a representative of the Misanthropic Division transnational neo-Nazi group, also fled to Ukraine. About 10 other group members are now fighting with Azov, while prior to that, Misanthropic Division fighters actively participated in clashes in Kharkiv and other Ukrainian cities.

Several Russian ultra-nationalists have lost their lives in this war. Some of those who died fighting on the separatists’ side include Sergei Yefremov (RIM), Sergei Markov (People's Militia in the Name of Minin and Pozharsky (NOMP), Petrozavodsk), Alexander Proselkov (Eurasian Youth Union, Rostov Branch leader), Sergei Vorobyov (Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), Korolyov branch), Cossack Nikolai Leonov, and Ilya Guryev (Other Russia, Togliatti branch). On the other side, for example, there is Sergei “Balagan” Grek, who fought with Azov.

## 5. Conclusion.

New splits between nationalists alone could not have weakened the movement that is used to disagreement. But this new schism is of a different nature. The ‘Russian Spring’ supporters are actually parroting the federal channels’ statements because they have no policy of their own. The opponents feel vulnerable, not only due to the concentrated pressure from the police, but also because, while being used to considering themselves at ‘the forefront of the majority of the nation,’ they have now found themselves in the minority.

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has overshadowed many other problems. While the opposing leaders are still capable of reaching some agreement, common nationalists – especially militant nationalists – are

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<sup>6</sup> Many ultra-right-wing supporters chose the Azov Battalion for a reason – its core is made up of Ukrainian neo-Nazis.

reluctant to compromise on this sensitive issue and prefer avoiding any contact with political leaders. This much has become obvious from the record low number of participants in the Russian March event in November 2014.<sup>7</sup>The march obviously was the biggest failure of the past few years, not only in Moscow but across Russia, just like most of the traditional nationalist rallies lately. (Sova centre 2014)

It is important to note that, although existing Russian nationalist organisations are growing weaker, new and stronger ones have not been established or inspired from the top.

The Kremlin has not established any special organisations to air its new policy, apart from the aforementioned National Liberation Movement, which is rather insignificant. The policy is being implemented by the Kremlin itself, its United Russia party and affiliated groups. Even the 'official nationalist' Rodina party is playing quite a small role. This means that supporting the presidential policy requires no subtleties.

On the other hand, we can see that the number of racist attacks is not going down. According to our preliminary estimates, at least 114 people have suffered from violence motivated by xenophobia or neo-Nazism this year; 19 of them died. These figures are bound to increase even more.

Many of those now fighting in Donbas will soon return to Russia, with their dream of a 'Russian riot' or 'white revolution' that no longer seems so fantastic. Moreover, the 'enhance fighting capacity' rhetoric used by the Russian government during the Ukrainian crisis clearly legitimises violence. Therefore, radical right wing forces may sharply intensify their activity here in Russia in yet another aftermath of this war.

Although we cannot predict the nature or mechanisms of that activity at this stage, it remains a very realistic possibility.

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<sup>7</sup> The November 4 National Unity Day as marked by two competing rallies conducted in Moscow, both traditional 'Russian Marches,' one in Lyublino and the other from the Oktyabrskoye Pole to Shchukinskaya metro stations. The Lyublino event gathered around 1,800 people, and the other one, around 1,200, according to the SOVA Center estimates.

In conclusion I would like to note that the political consolidation of Russian society around the Kremlin, on a scale that is surprising event for Putin's regime, is a fact now. This consolidation is fraught with social quakes that are impossible to avoid or even predict.

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