



Russia's Nationalists: Putin's Critical Children

By Mark Galeotti and Anna Arutunyan

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¹ When Igor Strelkov, the former military commander of the Donetsk People's Republic, returned to Moscow from Donbass in late summer 2014, he steadfastly maintained the symbol of statist loyalty typical of security officers in today's Russia: a portrait of Putin above his desk. Yet within a year, his colleagues say, something snapped in him, and the portrait was gone.

Today, the former FSB officer is heading up an opposition movement.

Russia is seeing a potential challenge emerging to Putinism, but it is coming from the unlikeliest of places: instead of pro-Western liberals, it is the nationalists, ones whom the Kremlin tried, but failed, to court, who are offering an alternative political vision.

To a large extent, this is Vladimir Putin's own fault. He has created a toxic and dangerous dichotomy in emerging Russian politics, one that has been thrown into sharp relief by the renewed drive for the creation of a nationalist opposition movement. Any wellsprings of genuine liberalism as understood in the West have been systematically poisoned or dammed by the Kremlin. Meanwhile, the dominant domestic model of economically liberal politics is championed by kleptocrats who are invested in better relations with the West but, for all their talk of rule of law at home, want to retain their freedom to steal.

Much as the West may approve of such figures as former finance minister Alexei Kudrin, former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov, and current first deputy prime minister Igor Shuvalov, seeing in their pragmatic reform-minded figures, their stock inside Russia is rather lower. Kudrin is associated with extreme fiscally conservatism, and an almost neo-conservative "tough love" that would see ordinary Russians suffer in the name of economic theory. Opposition leader Kasyanov is still in the popular imagination "Misha Two Percent" for the cut he was meant to take from major deals while he was in office. As for Shuvalov, while a well-educated, cosmopolitan and business-friendly figure, he is doing conspicuously well out of the current system, reportedly even using a private business jet to ferry his pet dogs around. Rightly or wrongly, whatever the virtues of individual figures, there is a widespread belief that the liberal elite are self-interested and downright corrupt, eager to uphold Western values so long as it benefits them.

In the words of one senior Moscow police officer, a self-described "nationalist convert," the country has an elite which "is divided between those who cross themselves and steal while praising Mother Russia, and those who speak English and steal while praising the West. But they all steal, and they are none of them patriots."

There are, of course, exceptions, but ironically, as a result it is figures within a broad nationalist spectrum, who are amongst those talking most loudly about the need for rule of law, an independent judiciary, transparent ownership of assets, and a fight against corruption. On one end they are best represented by Alexei Navalny, but on the other are figures such as Igor Girkin, better known by his nom de guerre Strelkov, outsiders in a Russia that would seem in many ways to reflect their values.

¹ This paper was written for the Russian Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. It can be accessed at, Galeotti, M., and Artunyan, A. 'Kovarnye detki Kremlya,' *Svoboda.org*, 29 October 2016, available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/a/28081207.html>

This paradox reflects an ideological void, or at least uncertainty at the heart of 'Putinism.' There can be no doubt that Putin is a nationalist: he is a Russian exceptionalist who believes there is something precious, unique and glorious about his country's culture, history and civilization. As such, it is likely genuine belief and not just Realpolitik that lies behind his efforts to assert Russia's voice in the world and fight back what he considers to be Western efforts to export its values and, in the process, undermine Russia's distinctiveness. As he put in in the run-up to the last presidential election: "We are fortifying our state-civilization..., binding this unique civilization together is the great mission of the Russian people."

But what does this mean? There lies the problem. Putin's nationalism continues to be protean, unclear, for all his evident passion. This is not just the basic division between ethnic-Russian and state-Russian models of nationalism, it is about what truly serves Russia best. In the absence of such a clear vision – and so long as the state over which Putin presides continues largely to be staffed by kleptocrats and opportunists who mouth the words to the national anthem while abusing its laws and skimming its budget – then the only real space for nationalism to be explored properly is in opposition. The irony is thus that while the Kremlin periodically has sought to co-opt and control various nationalist movements, it may also be contributing to the emergence of forces which, while they may never bring down the current regime, may get to define its successor.

The "Patriotic Opposition"

Russia has always been an empire, but never a nation. As a result, according to one apt metaphor posited by Russian nationalist Konstantin Krylov, the breakup of the Soviet Union was like the privatization of a communal apartment: separate rooms came into the ownership of various ethnic republics or nations, but Russia itself was stuck with the corridor. This historical paradox underscores the diversity, breadth, and incoherence of its nationalist movements: one of the most poorly-understood political phenomena in the country. If Russia is de facto a state, then from whom should the nationalists seek to gain independence? If they are opposed to casting away any of the 21 ethnic republics within the federation, which would lead to further loss of territory, but have no coherent idea for integrating ethnic minorities who are Russian citizens, then what are they other than drinking clubs for rabid xenophobes? While racism and xenophobia often erupt in headlines after a spate of violent riots or when the Kremlin openly courts nationalism in its rhetoric, what has been largely ignored is just how virulently opposed to the Kremlin most nationalist groups have been, and how, in turn, the Kremlin has played a dangerous cat and mouse game in a bid to dampen the threat it sensed from these groups.

Nationalist groups emerged in the 1990s and nationalist sentiment played an important role in the opposition to President Boris Yeltsin in his government's violent 1993 standoff with parliament. Those taking a stroll around Moscow's White House today can still find a makeshift memorial to the 187 defenders of the building who died in the crisis. The memorial is clearly representative of a group or a side that sees itself as the loser in the conflict, either treacherously betrayed or simply outnumbered: newspaper clippings and pamphlets whose nationalist, often anti-Semitic rhetoric echoes statements made by the likes of Igor Strelkov and other nationalist heroes from the security services, such as former Spetsnaz colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, jailed in 2009 for plotting a coup. Cloaked with different demands and tactics, the message is largely the same: the country is being

run by traitors who sold out either to the West or to some other interest that is not nationally Russian. Look closer, however, and it is nearly impossible to define what even their “Russianness” is.

Given their scope, the prevalence of nationalist sentiment among security services and, as 1993 showed, the potential for a revanchist threat, it was both wise and inevitable that the Kremlin would seek to absorb, co-opt and channel nationalism to safer and better use.

In 2003, the Kremlin helped create a faction uniting patriotic, nationalist and left-leaning forces under the Rodina (Fatherland) party, headed by moderate Kremlin-affiliated nationalists Dmitry Rogozin and Sergei Glazyev. By 2006, the party, facing pressure from the Kremlin following widespread allegations of racism, was disbanded. Both Rogozin and Glazyev would see their careers reboot when the Kremlin once again found use for an assortment of nationalist politicians and thinkers in order to justify its domestic and foreign policy.

The Nationalist Philosophers

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there has been a persistent strain of nationalist and imperialist thought among writers and thinkers associated with the military and security community, evidenced by philosophers like Alexander Dugin and Alexander Prokhanov.

Dugin first saw his star rise following perestroika, when reactionary thinking became in vogue among the clientele that would go on to oppose Boris Yeltsin in 1993. During that decade, Dugin lectured at the General Staff Academy and was close to General Igor Rodionov, who was Defense Minister in 1996-1997 and who, despite pro-western attitudes in Yeltsin's government, tended to maintain a Cold War outlook that pitted Russia against the West.

Perhaps because of Dugin's persistent connections with the security community, he has mistakenly become seen as a philosopher who influenced Putin's thinking during his turn to a more aggressive foreign policy in 2014. But this is misleading: thinkers like Dugin have seen their popularity ebb and flow depending on the Kremlin ideological line. In other words, it is not Dugin's thinking that goes into Putin's ear, but Putin's thinking that brought the views of those like Dugin into favor and, hence, temporarily popular.

Likewise the career of Prokhanov, who gained the nickname “the nightingale of the General Staff” for his lyrical panegyrics to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, has been more a reflection than a cause of the regime's flirtation with ultra-nationalism. In the 1990s, he became something of a pariah because of his support for the 1991 August Coup (for which he had written a manifesto) and the anti-Yeltsin forces in 1993. Under Putin, though, he has been at once much more able to express his views, but also periodically a bitter critic of the regime, not least alleging its involvement in the 1999 apartment bombings that laid the foundations for the second Chechen War. A militarist, something of a self-professed imperialist, he has exalted the prowess of Russian soldiers from Chechnya, through Georgia, to today's Ukraine, even while decrying the Kremlin that sent them into these wars.

From House-Trained to Feral

The same process has repeated itself throughout the Putin years, with nationalist “projects” initially created or supported by the Kremlin, in due course biting the hand that fed them, almost invariably because of a dawning sense of the regime’s hypocrisy.

A case in point was the Kremlin’s handling of DPNI, the Movement Against Illegal Immigration, which had initially been friendly to the Kremlin.

It was one of the main organizers of the yearly nationalist Russian March, which started in 2005. “[Kremlin deputy chief of staff] Vladislav Surkov was one of the godfathers of the 2005 Russian March,” said Yegor Kholmogorov, a pro-Kremlin analyst with connections to nationalist groups. “Everyone understood that this rally could not have taken place without the blessing of the presidential administration.”

But DPNI and other groups behind the March such as the Slavyansky Soyuz (Slavic Union) soon proved too radical, and, what was more, too unwieldy for the Kremlin.

“There was a proposal to form a public council consisting of nationalist groups like DPNI and Slavyansky Soyuz that would work with Moscow police,” former DPNI leader Alexander Belov told us in 2011. “But it was prevented, I believe on orders from the presidential administration.”

After all, both Moscow authorities and the Kremlin were caught unaware when the shooting of Spartak fan Yegor Sviridov by suspects who were not ethnically Russian sparked a violent riot of 15,000 people on Moscow’s Manezh Square December 11, 2010. Suddenly, members of DPNI who had friendly ties with local police and who did not take part in the riots, found themselves being rounded up summarily. Vladimir Kvachkov, who had been freed on earlier charges for a bizarre attempted murder of liberal Anatoly Chubais, was imprisoned again shortly after the riots, charged with trying to organize an armed coup – with a crossbow, at that.

Former Spetsnaz who had served with Kvachkov, previously on the fringes of the DPNI, told us then that this is what convinced them that the Kremlin was using the nationalist movement for purely cynical reasons. “It is as it always is: they use us when they want soldiers, then throw us in the garbage when we become a problem.”

The Kremlin would later go on to lean on nationalists in a far more important and dangerous way: by goading them on to fight a proxy war on its behalf in East Ukraine. But by then, around the turn of the decade, it had recognized that the cat and mouse game it had been playing was proving too dangerous, or the nationalist mouse too big and the Kremlin cat too lazy.

A White-Brown Alliance?

The nationalist groups themselves, meanwhile flooded into the anti-Kremlin street opposition of 2011-2012 that became known as the Bolotnaya protest movement, and which took a white ribbon as its symbol. The extent to which this ostensibly liberal, cosmopolitan constituency, which opposed Putin’s return for a third presidential term and which was protesting a rigged election, had absorbed

or was compatible with nationalist ideas was evidenced by both in the ultimately-doomed Opposition Coordination Council (of which Krylov was a member), which tried to unite nationalist, liberal and leftists activists, and the emergence of the protest movement's de facto leader, Alexei Navalny.

With one foot in the liberal camp, Navalny immediately raised questions about his political sympathies due to an unabashed alliance with nationalists. Navalny had attended the Russian March since 2007, and stopped doing so only in 2013 when this earned him the ire of more liberal groups in the opposition. Espousing a firm stance against illegal immigration and federal subsidies to the Caucasus republics, Navalny seemed to stand for a kind of modern, Western European nationalism: rabid xenophobia was out, rule of law and democracy for one's own culture coupled with exclusion of others, was in.

Navalny is not the only example of nationalist threads seeping into the liberal mainstream. For example, the top candidates of the liberal PARNAS party in the parliamentary elections are the monarchist professor Andrei Zubov and the nationalist blogger Vyacheslav Maltsev.

Nationalists were skeptical of Navalny when he emerged in 2011, but there is an indication that, from the start, one of their main converging points was fighting corruption – something that other liberal opposition figures had neglected.

“If [Navalny] gets into the real problem of corruption... he will have authority,” Alexander Bosykh, a member of the nationalist Congress of Russian Communities, said in 2011. But just as nationalists would see a rival in Navalny later on, even then Bosykh was skeptical that his anti-corruption crusade was anything more than political PR. The sense that corruption was both a crime against the state and the narod, the people, but also selling out to interests other than those officials and politicians were mandated to represent, emerged as a nationalist priority, one that the right wing camp was eager to keep for themselves. This is easy to understand when one looks at the genesis of many of the inter-ethnic riots that nationalist groups would latch onto: a corrupt police force failing to rein in an ethnic mafia while Russians were left disenfranchised. Such was the narrative behind the 2010 Sviridov riots, and the 2013 Biryulyovo riots in suburban Moscow, when, a Russian man was stabbed to death by a Central Asian market vendor.

Opposition to corruption meshed well not just with anti-Putinism, but with what nationalists saw as Russian interests.

A Study in Brown

In 2016, a virulent challenge to Vladimir Putin emerged from the unlikeliest of places: Strelkov, a former FSB (Federal Security Service) officer and a commander of the pro-rebel forces in Ukraine whom the Kremlin yanked from the front lines for his insubordination, had created his own opposition group, the All-Russian National Movement (OND).

Strelkov did not agree to an interview, but his ally, Konstantin Krylov, who penned the movement's manifesto, recalled a gradual transformation from a Putin loyalist to what can be best termed as a patriot dissident: once there was a picture of Putin above Strelkov's desk, and suddenly there wasn't.

“Igor Ivanovich tried to be loyal for a long time. He is by character a typical patriot,” Krylov said. “And it’s not just that he wants to love his country. He believes, for instance, that it has a good government. Taking into account where he worked in the past, all this is compounded by a typical Soviet security complex. These people believe they know better than others, that they have a right to hold in contempt the average person’s views. And at the same time he is used to thinking that the bosses know better, that certain sacrifices in the name of the government are inevitable. But everything has its limits. When those same bosses start acting in a way that cannot be explained, then you have to admit that... there are traitors and thieves in the government.”

The refrain of traitors and thieves in government has been a common strand in nationalist thought. But in the case of OND, it underscored the emergence of a platform that had, up until then, been in the jurisdiction of the liberal camp: the establishment of rule of law, an independent judiciary, and the institutionalization of human rights.

“We will provide for real equality of all citizens before the law,” the manifesto reads. “To do this we will restore the independence of the judiciary, which has now been turned into an instrument of illegal verdicts. Order begins with fair and independent courts, the breakdown of the government and anarchy begin with the breakdown of the judicial system.”

This pledge shared space with calls to unify Ukraine, Russia and Belarus with “other Russian lands,” the support of Novorossiya, and the restoration of “national” control over the political system.

Much of this was so “White Ribbon” in tone that Alexey Navalny even posted passages of it on his blog, asking readers to identify which party it belonged to, thus suggesting that platforms typical of the liberal camp had been absorbed by nationalists.

There has been no love lost between Strelkov and Navalny. “The Kremlin is very scared of nationalists, because they use the same imperial rhetoric as Putin does but they can do it much better than him,” Navalny told *The Guardian* in June. “That’s why there are nationalists in prison, even those who supported Putin. They went to kiss his feet, and he kicked them away.”

Strelkov, for his part, maintained the skepticism but acknowledged the affinity. Interviewed for *Znak*, he said “I do not argue with Navalny: the whole system runs on corruption, a drive ‘to steal and sell, to send abroad.’”

In Krylov’s eyes, though, there has never been anything inconsistent about nationalist views, a seemingly liberal agenda, and opposition to Putin: “The movement was initially envisioned as a union of groups who were unhappy both with the government and with the liberal [opposition],” he said, likening it to European National Democrats.

“Nationalism in European countries was liberal. The question is different: why are our liberals not nationalists? Or nationalists of other nationalities?”

The Future Belongs to Me

What is striking is that while Strelkov sees himself as a challenge to Putin, the movement is really just a preparation for what comes after.

“Imagine a wounded predator in the corner,” Krylov said of Putin. “He is still dangerous and can maul you to death. But you can wait until he simply bleeds to death. That is how everyone is understanding the government right now.”

The OND, Krylov says, just as the rest of the opposition, is merely developing mechanisms that can be applied in the aftermath of whatever events remove Putin from the Kremlin. For these nationalists or their next iteration to make any headway in a post-Putin scenario, they need a constituency amongst both the masses and the elites, as well as a compelling narrative of the future.

The latter is emerging, and it is unexpectedly inclusive, combining a commitment to institutions and laws – as their absence has, to them, facilitated the imposition of alien values and the plunder of the state – with a belief in a great nation that builds upon but is not exclusively confined to Russia's culture.

In an interview with Nationalist Bolshevik writer Zakhar Prilepin, for example, Prokhanov painted a picture of a coming “Fifth Russian Empire” that was strikingly ecumenical: “There will be a place for everyone in it: the left and the right, Orthodox Christians and Muslim fundamentalists, synagogues and big business... like the Bolsheviks used the potential of the Romanov Empire, the Fifth Empire is to be composed of all kinds of disparate elements.” While this cannot be taken as a mission statement for the nationalists as a whole – not least the inclusion of Moslem “fundamentalists” – this does indicate the degree to which this is already a movement looking to inclusion and alliances in the coming years.

It is not a great reach to see these ideas, especially when infused with hostility to corruption and a comfortable elite regarded as having sold out the country to get those comforts, having some wider appeal. Considering that, again according to polls conducted by the Levada Center, only 33 per cent of Russians feel the country moved in the right direction after the failure of the hard-liners' 1991 coup – and 40 per cent think the opposite – then it is yet possible that Prokhanov might have to dust down his old manifesto.

However, this is still a system dominated by elites, and the harder question is whether the nationalists can win any serious support there. The obvious constituency would be the security apparatus. However, it is striking how limited these connections have been so far. When the highly-decorated Kvachkov was charged with trying to murder former politician, businessman and nationalist hate-figure Anatoly Chubais in 2005, the amateurishness of his attack precisely reflected his lack of allies.

To a considerable extent, this reflects the way that – much like the regime as a whole – the so-called ‘siloviki’ of the security community could be considered nationalist in idiom, opportunistic in content. Another Levada poll found respondents clearly believing that the United Russia bloc best represented the interests of the siloviki; it is a safe assumption that they themselves likewise are more interested in maintaining the status quo than any nationalist revolution.

If the past is any guide, for the nationalists to make any connections with the siloviki, it will require bridge-builders with some status in both camps. Boris Yeltsin's bodyguard, Alexander Korzhakov, played a crucial role during the 1991 August Coup in both persuading his former KGB colleagues not to side with the hard liners and establishing longer-term links that meant the agency was able

largely smoothly to transition into the post-Soviet era. According to security community insiders Strelkov retains a few connections into both the FSB and GRU (military intelligence), although his level of traction is minimal. However, Korzhakov's strength was not so much his personal social capital so much as that he appeared to be an emissary from the soon-to-be-winning side.

This is not something the nationalists in their current form can arrange, nor do they seem eager to do so. Instead, their policy is simply to wait for the Putin regime to fall, while building their platform, ideas and credibility in the process. With the regime increasingly coming under pressure, with even the once-docile Communists being forced into more real opposition by grass-roots pressure, and with life for most Russians likely to continue to get harder, their hope is that - like Lenin in 1917 - the regime will conveniently implode, creating a vacuum they are ready to fill.



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