

# The Ukraine Crisis and its Impact on Transforming Russian Nationalism Landscape

Written by Marlene Laruelle

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MARLENE LARUELLE, APR 7 2015

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The Ukrainian crisis shattered the ideological status quo in Russia, the place of so-called 'Russian nationalists' in the public space, and the competition between different groups claiming to represent the authentic interests of the Russian state. In this article, I discuss the three main impacts of the Ukrainian crisis on the landscape of Russian nationalism: its division in interpreting the several crises, its successes in framing the Novorossiya narrative, and its ambivalences at debating the relationship between an imperial appeal and xenophobic feelings.

### **Three Ukrainian Crises – Three Responses by Russian Nationalists**

The first phase of the crisis in Ukraine – the Euromaidan – has created deep divisions within nationalist movements. The so-called 'national-democrats' expressed solidarity with Maidan, seeing it as an example of successful grassroots democratic revolution against a corrupt and authoritarian regime. This minority supported the Ukrainian nationalist Svoboda movement in its struggle for 'national liberation'. Some of them, often with neo-Nazi sympathies, still today fight on the side of the pro-Ukrainian Azov volunteers' battalions. On the other side of the spectrum, majority movements that can be defined as statist and/or imperialist shared the Kremlin's vision of Euromaidan as a neo-fascist coup organised with the support of the United States.

The second stage of the crisis – the annexation of Crimea – abruptly changed the stakes, creating a moment of near-unanimity around Vladimir Putin. Very few nationalist figures have had the courage to challenge the annexation. Many of pro-Maidan nationalists, for instance Konstantin Krylov, shifted toward the defence of ethnic Russians and the 'right to self-determination', while remaining critical toward Putinism. There have been a few exceptions among the national-democrats, for instance Aleksei Navalny, who saw it as a violation of international law and did not want to see a new area subjected to the Russian non-democratic and corrupt regime. For all other groups, the time had come for reconciliation with a regime some had for years denounced as leading an a-national, or even anti-Russian, policy, and to celebrate the statesmanlike stature of Vladimir Putin.

With the third stage of the conflict – the pro-Russian secessionism in the Donbas region – the nationalist circles had to elaborate a more complex positioning. They support Putin in his interpretation of the conflict – Russia has the 'right to protect' Russian minorities abroad when they are threatened by an unfriendly regime – but accuse him of having insufficient courage to defend militarily the secessionist regions. For the more radical, the correct solution was not to create a new frozen conflict against the Kyiv authorities, but to turn the Donbas into a second Crimea, a successful example of an almost blood-free annexation. The current situation of a humanitarian crisis, with several thousand dead, hundreds of thousands of displaced, a destroyed industrial fabric, and no political solution in sight, is

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apprehended more a failure for Russian great-powerness than a success. For those calling for a general 'awakening' of the Russian population – suddenly ready to fight not only for Donbas, but to export a 'national liberation' war in Russia itself – against Western presence and oligarch domination, the disillusion is even greater. Russia's population supports the Kremlin's reading of the crisis and the need to protect Donetsk and Lugansk. However, it shows a growing fatigue linked to the ongoing crisis and is mostly concerned about the impact of sanctions on standards of living; two elements that have disappointed Russian nationalist circles.

## **The Novorossiia Narrative and its Main Propagandists**

Although disappointed, Russian nationalists try to take advantage of the current patriotic atmosphere for consolidating their media reach. The fight for Donbas offers them a unique narrative. For the first time since the battle between Yeltsin's troops and the defenders of the Supreme Soviet in October 1993, Russian nationalists finally have a story that celebrates their achievements in both words and images (and in music), offering the whole array of heroic battles and martyrs. Igor Strelkov, who was transformed into a living icon before being 'recalled' by the Kremlin and slowly marginalised, embodied this narrative. One of the main successes of nationalists has been the widespread use of the term of 'Novorossiia' to define not only the Donbas, but also other potentially secessionist regions of Ukraine. With origins dating from the second half of the 18th century, the term was revived during the Ukraine crisis and gained indirect official validation when Russian President Vladimir Putin used it during a call-in show in April 2014 to evoke the situation of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine.

As I explored in other papers, the 'Novorossiia' term can be understood through a triple lens: 'red', 'white', and 'brown'. The first 'red' ideological motif nurturing Novorossiia emphasises Soviet memory. The 'red' reading of Novorossiia justifies the Donbas insurgency in the name of geopolitical arguments, Russia's destiny as a large territory, and Soviet perceptions of the Donbas as a region proud of its industrial legacy and one that shows the way to a new oligarchic-free Russia. The 'white' approach to Novorossiia sees the Donbas insurgency as a vehicle that can open the way to a renewal of political Orthodoxy. This, in turn, will confirm Russia's status as a herald of conservative values and Christianity and, for some adherents of this view, popularise the notion of a new monarchy. It sees in Orthodoxy both a civilisational principle that makes Russia a distinct country, and a political value that resonates with the regime. Novorossiia also became the engine of the so-called Russian Spring, which claims that the ongoing 'national revolution' should not only fight Kyiv, but export itself to Russia. This motif can be defined as neo-fascist and therefore 'brown'; it calls for a totalitarian national revolution that would overthrow the current regime and transform society. It combines an allegedly leftist discourse denouncing corporations and oligarchs, and a focus on the dangers threatening the survival of the nation, two features typical of fascist movements.

The most vocal and organised group that has been able to make the most of the Ukrainian crisis is the Izborsky Club. Created in late 2012 as a response to the Bolotnaya protests organised by the liberal opposition, the Izborsky Club brings together almost 30 nationalist or conservative ideologists and politicians – who often have contradictory views and conflictual personal relations – under the leadership of an old but always vigorous Alexander Prokhanov. Prokhanov, who presented himself as a Soviet imperialist, cultivated his own network of friends in the military and the security services, and uses the Club as a platform to develop a nationalist storyline that can then be transmitted to the upper echelons of power. The Club's main members – Prokhanov first, followed by the co-founder Vitali Averyanov, and then by the Eurasianist geopolitician Alexander Dugin – have been able to consolidate media visibility through their personal contacts at Channel One – Mikhail Leontyev, among many others – to get high visibility on television and online journals. Three other Club members have also used their visibility in the Russian public space to support 'Novorossiia': Natalia Narochitskaya, director of the Paris-based Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, and famous promoter of political Orthodoxy; Father Tikhon (Shevkunov) a prominent cleric and best-selling writer, the editor of the conservative web-portal Pravoslavie.ru, and rumoured to be Vladimir Putin's personal confessor; and Sergey Glazyev, adviser to the president for regional integration issues, in charge of supervising the Eurasian Union project.

## **Eurasia or Russian World? Empire or Xenophobia?**

Despite this visibility, the concept of 'Novorossiia' and the rapid production of new ideological narratives to explain

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the Ukrainian crisis failed in resolving the apparent contradiction between the Eurasian Union project and the notion of the 'Russian world' (Russkii mir) advanced by the Russian state to protect Russian minorities abroad. The Eurasian strategy does not aspire to recreate the Soviet Union, as US officials unfortunately stated. Rather, it is based on the need for a more modern approach to reassert Russia's role in its periphery in a more competitive way, based on economic integration. It calls for Russia to look south to Central Asia and east to Asia to balance Western influence, and to accept multi-ethnicity in the name of this regional hegemon status. The 'Russian World' narrative originally was based on an ethnocentric vision of Russians as a divided nation, with 25 million 'compatriots' abroad. In the 2000s, it was able to bypass this ethnic/linguistic focus to broaden its scope, and now looks at boosting Russia's soft power abroad by shaping a 'Russian voice' in the world. However, the terminological inexactitude, which blurs the distinction between the Russian world, Russian compatriots, and Russian-speaking population, continues to endow this notion with an ethnocentric tone that contradicts the multiethnic appeal of Eurasianism.

The 'Eurasia' and 'Russian World' narratives seem to compete, offering a multinational versus an ethnocentric definition of Russia's role in Eurasia. However, several layers in fact need to be dissociated. First, if 'Russian World' is understood as Russia's 'civilisational project' and 'voice' in the world – claiming the respect of established regimes against street revolutions as in Syria, or family-oriented Christian values against gay marriage – then the Eurasian Union is only the economic side of the country's reassertion as a regional hegemon. If 'Russian world' is understood as the defence of ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking population in the near abroad, it is a purely instrumental tool used when the Eurasian appeal fails: only those countries which refuse to integrate into Russia's regional hegemon strategy – Georgia, Moldova, post-Yakukovich Ukraine – see their Russian minorities 'activated'; those who play according to the rules, such as Nazarbaev's Kazakhstan, do not have to face Moscow's support for their Russian minorities. In both cases, the 'Eurasia' and 'Russian World' narratives imbricate in each other more than they conflict.

The real contradictory point in the Russian nationalists' narrative is thus not linked to the near abroad or foreign policy issues, but to domestic stances: how can Russia become an (imperial) regional hegemon when society is massively xenophobic? Two thirds of the population asked for a visa-regime with the Central Asian and South Caucasian republics and would like to see immigration stopped. On that issue, only the 'national-democrats' came up with a logical solution, accepting the idea of a 'retracting' Russia, looking for integration with the West, and establishing a new iron curtain with Central Asia and Asia globally, to avoid being 'invaded' by migrants. This 'national-democratic' group lost its popularity during the Ukrainian crisis: its pro-Maidan stance destroyed its legitimacy to define Russia's identity. The nationalist groups that won from the Ukrainian crisis are on the opposite side of the spectrum, giving priority to the regional hegemon scheme without risking addressing openly the xenophobia issue. On that, they follow the presidential administration line of postponing the moment of choosing a national identity narrative and hoping to maintain the lowest common denominator without defining the level of inclusiveness and exclusiveness of Russia's nationhood.

## Conclusion

The Ukrainian crisis has affected the landscape of Russian nationalism by fragmenting the 'national-democrat' scene and strengthening nostalgic aspirations for the recreation of Soviet great-powerness, of Russia's imperial mission, and of the Eurasian Union project. However, media saturation around the Ukrainian crisis will not be eternal, and the disappearance of the migration issue from the spotlight is probably only temporary. Both the regime and the nationalist milieu close to it as the Izborsky Club gained time, but the 'national-democrat' narrative, both xenophobic and pro-European, could return sooner rather than later.

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*Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (Palgrave, 2009), and *Russia's Strategies in the Arctic and the Future of the Far North* (M.E. Sharpe, 2013). She currently works on Russia's identity politics and intellectual debates on national identity.