

Rise of Militaristic Sentiment and Patriotic Discourses in Russia: An Analytic Review

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Since 2014, Russian public discourses have been overwhelmed with “patriotic”, nationalistic, and even militaristic elements. Russia used its military power in Ukraine and Syria, and surely this influenced Russian public opinion to a great extent. This paper aims to trace how Russian society has been reacting to Russian foreign policy of recent years.

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Contents

RISE OF MILITARISTIC SENTIMENT AND PATRIOTIC DISCOURSES IN RUSSIA: AN ANALYTIC REVIEW.....	1
Evolution of Russian Militarism Since 2014	4
Crisis of the ‘Model of Stability’	4
Limitations to Militarism	6
‘The Crimean Syndrome’	8
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 10
 ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS.....	 13
 AUTHOR.....	 14

Evolution of Russian Militarism Since 2014

Since 2014, Russian public discourses have been overwhelmed with “patriotic”, nationalistic, and even militaristic elements. Russia used its military power in Ukraine and Syria, and surely this influenced Russian public opinion to a great extent. The stories about Russian soldiers—called “polite people”—saving Crimea from the bloodshed of Maidan, a baby allegedly crucified in Donbass by Ukrainian soldiers, and Russia’s massive use of missiles against “terrorists” in Syria are the most well-known examples of how key events in recent years were portrayed by Russian state-owned media. So how has Russian society been reacting to Russian foreign policy of recent years? Can we argue that many Russians have become adherents of nationalistic and imperialistic ideas?

Many responses have been given to the question of how the Crimean situation of 2014 could have happened at all and why the absolute majority of Russian citizens supported the move, which in fact remains denounced not only by the West but the entire world community. Many analysts argue that it was a “natural evolution” of the Russian political regime and society, which are allegedly becoming more totalitarian and aggressive towards the external world (Giles, et al. 2015). More moderate analysts claim that both the authorities and the people have fallen victim to a “struggle for recognition”—a quasi-Hegelian argument used by Francis Fukuyama to explain the growing nationalism in the world. In the Russian case, the story is about overcoming the “humiliation” Russia went through in the 1990s after the demise of the Soviet Union and that is now associated with Western foreign policy (Klimeniouk 2016). Another group of analysts argue that the Russian authorities simply manipulated Russian society in order to stay in power, so the Russian people were the victims of state propaganda (Grozovski 2014).

Crisis of the ‘Model of Stability’

The decision to react to Maidan by taking Crimea emerged in a situation where the political legitimacy of the authorities had tremendously declined, and some kind of a frustration could be observed in the country. For instance, in a 2013 survey conducted by the state-owned sociological agency WCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) about the country’s achievements in the last

10-15 years, more than 40 percent of Russians stated that there were no reasons for being proud of the country (Gazeta.ru 2013). Approval ratings for President Vladimir Putin decreased in 2011-2013 to a historical low of 61-64 percent (the average support used to be about 80 percent). The party "United Russia" gained the support of only 43 percent of citizens in the same period, while in 2008 its popularity amounted to 60 percent, according to WCIOM (The Rating of the President and the "United Russia" Party 2015). Russian society's critical stance was turning out to be more than simply a protest of "the middle class" on Bolotnaya Square in 2011-2012.

The "model of stability" that emerged in Russia at the beginning of the 2000s was under threat. It was a challenge not only for the authorities, but also for those citizens who were not determined to cause any revolutionary changes in the country despite growing discontent. This position could be explained both by a historical tradition of conformity and people's unwillingness to return to the 1990s, the decade now associated with the country's degradation in economic and social spheres as well as world politics. Within this context, Crimea became the reason for which Russian society's symbolic unity could be restored, in favor of both the authorities and the population. That's why the population was not simply an object for manipulation and propaganda, but rather an active agent in the elaboration of discourses; "popular geopolitics" was also flourishing. A nationwide consensus emerged on the unacceptability of any discussion about whether Crimea should be returned to Ukraine. It is remarkable that even the supporters of protests on Bolotnaya Square found themselves split—in the end, the majority of protestors decided that "reunification with Crimea" was a great achievement of historical importance. As a consequence, those who have been criticizing the Russian foreign policy remain a "minority within a minority". The consensus has proved to be quite sustainable over time (Volkov 2017).

Symbolic unity was also restored in terms of exercising power: the ratings of the president and the ruling party again reached 88 and 55 percent, respectively. Most Russian citizens are now much prouder of their country's achievements such as the "return of Crimea", the "organization of the Olympics", and the "strength of the Russian army". In comparison to 2013, the approval of the country's status in world politics grew from 50 to 72 percent (Russian Public Opinion Research Center 2016).

Limitations to Militarism

But does this mean that Russian society became militaristic? All independent surveys give us a clear answer: militarism among Russians has a certain limit. For example, surveys carried out by the polling agency ROMIR within the Norwegian research project “Nation-building and nationalism in today’s Russia” found little evidence of a surge in nationalist sentiments among Russians between May 2013 and November 2014. Levels of ethnic and civic pride, desires to defend dominant ethnic group privileges, and perceptions of national distinctiveness all changed marginally. From 2013 to 2014, the number of respondents who preferred expanding Russia’s territory—either to bring Ukraine and Belarus into a Slavic union or to incorporate all territories of the former Soviet Union—dropped from 47 to 38 percent. In 2013, the majority of Russians (56 percent) supported some form of territorial enlargement, while in 2014 a plurality (about 45 percent) supported the status quo (Alexseev and Hale 2015).

It can be argued that a key factor preventing Russian society from falling into true militarism is their belief that a modern great power should not simply be concerned about hard power but also guarantees of good living conditions for citizens (Ibragimova 2017). Despite the large-scale consensus on Crimea and an increase in the overall ratings of the political elites, the crisis of the “model of stability” persists due to lack of reforms, falling oil and gas prices, and sanctions (especially financial sanctions). The Russian economy began to show the first signs of stagnation in 2013. Russian foreign policy did not change the negative public opinion towards how the government manages to improve the quality of life in the country. According to the aforementioned WCIOM survey, the absolute majority of Russians (about 80 percent) responded that they are not proud of the quality of life in Russia at all—both in 2013 and 2016.

Liberal analysts in Russia tend to describe the discrepancy between the demands for a higher standard of living and support for foreign policy with the metaphor of the “struggle between the fridge and the television set”. It seems that so far, the “fridge” manages to win since most Russians seems skeptical of a very assertive foreign policy, particularly if it does not correspond with improvements in living conditions. It does not mean, however, that Russians are ready to rethink Russian policy in Ukraine or Syria. The support of Donbass and struggle against “terrorism” remain popular issues for Russians. But if we look at what the Russian people see as key foreign policy priorities for the

country, “guaranteeing a peaceful and secure existence of the country”, albeit slightly, supersedes the “return of Russia’s great power status” (57 and 51 percent, respectively) (Levada.ru 2016). Besides, as WCIOM discovered, the absolute majority of Russians perceive the annual Military Parade on May 9 not as a demonstration of strength but as a means for preserving historical memory and honoring veterans (The Victory Parade: A Tribute to Memory or Demonstration of Power? Press-Release N2821 2015).

In this context, it is not surprising that what has been happening in Russian foreign policy since 2014 is not qualified by the majority of Russian citizens as fighting a real war abroad. Russia’s “war with terrorism” in Syria is an exception, but even there, most Russians believe they are observing something that can be called a “television war”—a war that is pursued without victims, except for terrorists. Analyst Andrey Kolesnikov applies the same framing of a “television war” not only to Syria but also to the Ukrainian conflict (Kolesnikov 2016). In the Ukrainian case, the Russian authorities argue that no Russian military has been participating (and therefore has fallen victim) in the conflict, while some independent media reported such casualties (Ponomarev 2014). Most Russians (70 percent) are against any land-based military operation in Syria and support only air strikes (Fom.ru 2015). Besides, the Russian authorities try to hide, and not glorify, the real victims of the warfare. In May 2015, President Putin signed a decree that rendered military losses “in times of peace” classified information (Khamshiashvili and Filipenok 2015). And in 2015, it took two weeks for the Russian government to officially recognize that the catastrophe with a Russian plane over Sinai was a terrorist attack and was connected with Russia’s role in Syria (Gromov, Petelin and Ivanov 2015).

Thus, the Russian authorities feel very well where the limits are for “adventure-seeking” in foreign policy. For instance, in March-August 2014, President Putin actively used the term “Novorossiia”. In one of his public speeches in April that year, he even underlined that cities with a large number of Russian speakers, such as Odessa, Kharkov, and Nikolaev, had never belonged to Ukraine in Tsarist times but are now under Ukrainian rule, and that citizens’ rights should be protected with respective guarantees provided (A Direct Line with Vladimir Putin 2014). But in the Fall-Winter 2014, the Russian president began to abstain from using these notions publicly, constantly stressing that the Ukrainian conflict should be solved by peaceful means (Large Press-Conference of Vladimir Putin 2014). The same happened to the term “Russian world” (“*Russkiy Mir*”), which is now used much more cautiously. Our argument is that

such a change in foreign policy rhetoric did happen due to not only external circumstances (sanctions, absence of any premises to realize these projects, etc.), but also an explicitly negative stance of the Russian population to having any “real” war with Ukraine or the West.

‘The Crimean Syndrome’

“The Crimean Syndrome”, as many analysts characterized the euphoria after the peninsula became a part of Russia, is almost over. This can be observed by looking at how the “reunification with Crimea” is now celebrated and represented publicly. For instance, in March 2017, the rally honoring the triennial was organized not close to the Kremlin, but near Moscow State University. President Putin neither attended the meeting, nor travelled to the peninsula, as he used to (Rbc.ru 2017). The second example can be provided by looking at the special exhibition in the Museum of Modern Russian History where the “greatest achievements” of the newest Russian history are demonstrated. Large stands illustrate Russian power in the oil and gas industry, military production, theater, cinema, and music, but only a couple of small stands are devoted to Crimea-related events. Crimea has become an ordinary topic.

Surely this does not mean that “the Crimean Syndrome” did not bring any structural changes to the Russian reality beyond the growing support for the authorities. In this sense, the proliferation of practices of deepening and widening state control over society as well as the society’s loyalty to the state could be mentioned. For instance, steps are being taken to control the Internet using the fight on terrorism as a reason (Goncharenko 2016). Besides, the Russian government drastically increased its funding for “patriotic education”—a new five-year governmental program was passed in 2015 with twice the amount of funding for it compared with the previous period (Government.ru 2015). More and more, intellectual uniformity is being established in Russian society, primarily in the educational system. Yet in general, all these activities will hardly help to solve the issue of functional legitimacy that the Russian authorities now face.

Russian politics is now heated due to a new wave of protests. These are not only Alexey Navalny’s demonstrations against corruption, which were surprisingly attended by many young people, but also nationwide movements involving truck drivers, farmers, and people striving against transferring Saint Isaac’s Cathedral to the Russian Orthodox Church or opposing the renovation

program initiated by Moscow's local government. All these events suggest that Russia is returning to "normality". Even if Russians do support the general direction of the current foreign policy, they demand more functional effectiveness from the government, for instance higher living standards, adequate fiscal policies, and healthcare system reform.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

WCIOM – Russian Public Opinion Research Center

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