

“Natsdem”

THE NEW WAVE OF ANTI-PUTIN NATIONALISTS

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Marlène Laruelle

George Washington University

In the December 2011 protests in Russia, pro-Western democrats marched together with new and old nationalists. Some of the latter, such as Eduard Limonov and his *Limonovtsy*, are accustomed to demonstrations and have been rallying against Vladimir Putin since the second half of the 2000s. Others committed themselves to the effort after the announcement of Putin’s return to the presidency and the fraudulent parliamentary elections. While some nationalist movements involved in the protests have maintained their traditional anti-Western orientations, others have sought to combine a pro-Western democratic stance with “nationalism.”

In Putin’s Russia, “nationalism” is not a strictly defined ideology linked to one political platform or an electoral machine. Rather, it is a tool used by all actors— from the Kremlin and United Russia, to the Communists and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, to far right extra-parliamentary movements and the liberals (with Garry Kasparov being a good example of the nationalist-liberal conjunction). All have their own definition of what is meant by the “nation,” the “Russian question,” “nationalism,” and “patriotism.” These are the terms in which some key issues for Russian society are being debated, such as the definition of citizenry, the federal nature of the Russian state, migration policy, and the North Caucasus issue.

Entering into the spotlight only in December 2011, the tide of “national-democrats” — *natsdem* in Russian—reflects the evolution of Russian society. This paper discusses the genesis of this new wave of “national-democrats,” the major role attributed to blogger Aleksey Navalny, and his vision of Russia’s future. Also analyzed are the main paradoxes of the *natsdem* movement.

Genesis of the Natsdem

The *natsdem* were not born with the December 2011 protests, even if it was then that they gained prominence in the media. Their origins are at least threefold: the anti-Putin strategy of the *Limonovtsy*, Alexander Belov's calls for a European populism and politicization of the Russian March, and the new wave of nationalist intellectuals.

The *Limonovtsy*, supporters of Eduard Limonov and his National-Bolshevik Party until it was banned in 2007, represent a unique case in the history of nationalist movements in Russia. Contrary to the set of other movements endorsing one or another form of nationalism, the *Limonovtsy* present themselves at the extreme left of the political spectrum, not the right. Since the creation of the movement in 1993, their collective mise-en-scene and repertoire of actions have changed little (leftist revolutionary narrative, violent street activism, rituals of belonging, worship of sacrifice, and clashes with the security forces). However, under the personal influence of Limonov, their tactics have evolved. While the movement still claims to be fighting against the crimes of European liberal thought, Limonov was one of the founding members of Other Russia back in 2006. Limonov and Garry Kasparov closely collaborated in the Marches of the Discontented and the Strategy-31 protests that inaugurated the current wave of civic protests. During the December 2011 protests, Limonov opposed the fact that Boris Nemtsov and other liberals ceded to pressure from the Kremlin by agreeing to demonstrate not on central Revolution Square but at Bolotnaya Square, and he has kept his own demonstrations going in parallel. Although the *Limonovtsy* never endorsed a liberal or democratic nationalism—two antithetical adjectives to their political conceptions—they were the first, within the nationalist camp, to give prevalence to tactics over ideology, and to consider that the fight against Putinism necessitated an alliance with the so-called liberals and democrats.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum is Alexander Belov, the former leader of the Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), which throughout the entire decade of the 2000s grouped under its banner many skinhead groups before being banned in 2011. Belov plays the ethno-nationalist-discourse and fear-of-migrants card. In 2008, he announced a change of strategy by moving away from far right radicalism to transform the DPNI into a “respectable nationalist movement with European tendencies,” on the model of the French National Front or Jörg Haider's Alliance for the Future of Austria. In several interviews, Belov continues to clamor loudly and clearly for this change, stating that there is no future for nationalism in Russia without its Europeanization. He thus embodies a growing part of the Russian far right that desires to ally with Europe and with the United States in the name of defending the “white world” in its civilization war against “peoples of color.” Although Belov entertains close and ambiguous relations with some official circles in the Kremlin, particularly thanks to his contacts with former *Rodina* leaders Dmitry Rogozin and Andrey Saveliev, his main means of visibility, the Russian Marches that take place annually on November 4, have now become politicized, with their anti-Putin tone growing in stature. The first political slogans, mainly against the security services and in favor of releasing prisoners of conscience, emerged in 2007. But the real turning point dates back to 2010, when more

structured slogans against Putin's political system and appeals to bottom-up modernization emerged. In 2011, the Russian March, with the presence of Aleksey Navalny, unintentionally became a sort of announcement for the December protests.

Lastly, a new wave of nationalist intellectuals has taken shape in recent years. This generation of publicists is young (born in the 1970s) and uses blogs and digital social media as their main places of expression. Many of its members received their training in the media network of Gleb Pavlovsky, in particular *Russian Journal*, and are closely connected with youth underground culture and certain nationalist artistic milieus (such as the works of artist Aleksey Beliyev-Guintovt). Devoid of a unified ideological platform, the wave's main actors denounce the preceding generations for their inability to profoundly renew Russian nationalist theories and for living in a closed world, cut off from interaction with the major Western debates on the theme of the nation. While some among them, such as Yegor Kholmogorov, advocate a brand of nationalism inspired by both Stalinism and monarchism, others such as Mikhail Remizov call for a Russian neo-conservatism in large part inspired by European conservatism and American neo-conservatism. Others, such as Konstantin Krylov, Aleksey Shiropaev, and Aleksander Khramov, desire a democratic nationalism with a liberal orientation. This third tendency recently expanded and played a key role in shaping the pre-December 2011 period of the *natsdem* by publishing the current's main reference texts.

Aleksey Navalny and the Question of Russian Identity

It is, however, Aleksey Navalny that has crystallized the notion of *natsdem*. Navalny has attracted much of the protesters' attention because he combines major influence within the Russian blogosphere with legal moves, especially minority shareholder activism and court actions. A former Yabloko member who was dismissed from the party for his participation in the Russian March in 2011, Navalny has defended Alexander Belov and Dmitri Demushkin, one of the main neo-Nazi ideologists, both of whom stand accused of inciting racial hatred. Navalny has been implored on several occasions, by journalists as well as by protest activists like Boris Akunin, to clarify his stance on questions of national identity, with the underlying idea being that "nationalism" and "democracy" cannot go together.

Navalny's stance, expressed in the *Narod* manifesto published in 2007 – which he still claims to defend word for word – as well as in more recent interviews, is founded on several arguments. To begin with, he justifies his position on the experience of European history, seeing in it an intrinsic link between nationalism and democracy. For him, all European nation-states were born of the connection between the entry of the masses onto the political scene and the establishment of a national repertoire (language, historical moments, and a pantheon of heroes), whereby an official line is drawn between that which does and that which does not belong to the nation. He is therefore strongly opposed to what he calls the chimera of a *rossiiskii* (state-related) identity separated from *russkii* (ethno-cultural) identity, and he calls for the abolition of federalism in Russia. To become a democratic nation-state on the European model,

Russia has to become a unitary state (*russskoe natsional'noe gosudarstvo*), and can have but one identity – Russian (*russskii*) – to intrinsically link national identity and civic rights.

To this end, Navalny has reformulated the slogan of the Russian far right, “Russia for Russians,” instead promoting that of “Russia for Russia’s citizens,” which can be construed as a call for civic activism and political involvement. Since it is democratic, this new Russian (*russskii*) identity would be compatible with the ethnic diversity of the country and its imperial past, offering assimilation to those who desire it, as well as the respect for cultural differences in the name not of federal but of democratic principles. The merging of national identity and citizenship should therefore make it possible to stamp out the risks of secessionism while establishing an accepted restrictive policy of assimilation for migrants. According to Navalny, “those who come to our country but do not wish to respect our laws and our traditions must be expelled.”

A symbol of Navalny’s equally political and national narrative, the North Caucasus has become a central element of *natsdem* thought. In spring 2011, Navalny co-launched a campaign called “Enough feeding the Caucasus” – a campaign that Putin, Medvedev, and North Caucasian leaders sharply criticized. This campaign, adopted by several anti-Putin nationalist activists, states that the autocratic and corrupt regimes of the North Caucasus – and especially that of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya – are the archetype of Putin’s system. One does not function without the other: the disappearance of Putin’s system would provoke the collapse of the North Caucasian regimes, and the fight against the North Caucasian regimes bring a direct blow to Putin, since non-democracy in Russia is the fruit of poor management of the Caucasian conflict beginning with the first war in 1994. This political discourse, however civic in its basic foundations, also rests on cultural presuppositions that define the North Caucasus as an area that is “culturally foreign” to Russia, against which it is necessary to erect a sort of iron curtain.

The debate, hitherto covert, of a possible partition of the North Caucasus from Russia has thus re-emerged in part via *natsdem* activism on the matter, although the idea enjoys no consensus in the movement. Navalny himself remains ambiguous on the subject of partition. Similarly, his request for amnesty for federal forces who committed violence during combat in Chechnya seems to stand in contradiction with his denunciation of the central and north Caucasian security services. Clearly oriented toward the West in terms of political values and cultural models, the *natsdem* narrative stumbles when it comes to Russia’s imperial legacy. A “Russia-first strategy,” which would stipulate that Russia’s main mission is its democratization, its modernization, the well-being of its citizens, and its integration into the Western community, but also the maintenance of its “Russianness,” implies a change of narrative toward both Central Asia and the Caucasus. Although Navalny and his counterparts accept the idea that Moscow should no longer act as a hegemon in Central Asia and advocate a strict migration policy, there is nonetheless no unanimity concerning the fate for the North Caucasus.

Conclusion

For the first time since the era of Soviet dissidence, some “liberals” and “nationalists” find themselves united in the same struggle against their common enemy—the Putin regime. As in Soviet times, ideological divergences have not gone unnoticed, but they have been put aside in the name of shared short-term objectives. As Alexander Verkhovsky from the SOVA Center has noted, the Russian liberal opposition has great tolerance toward their nationalist counterparts. Political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky has defined the atmosphere of Russia in December 2011 as “Perestroika-2,” a time when the authorities were obliged to recognize that society is pluralist and not uniform and that the lines of divide between contradictory ideologies are effaced by the struggle of the moment.

The Kremlin’s capacity to manage the masses through, among other things, the patriotic/nationalist narrative, has never been monopolistic. There has always been a plurality of nationalist voices in Russia, despite the Kremlin’s attempts to silence those that run counter to its authority while promoting those that serve its political goals. The ability of the *Natsdem* to broadcast themselves, essentially via social media and Internet activism, confirms that “nationalism” is not a product of the Putin regime but a flexible ideological tool, which also has its place in an anti-Putin political context, and will have one in post-Putin Russia. The call for a “Russia-first strategy,” one that is at once pro-European, democratic, and modernizing, but also xenophobic, might turn out to pay off in future years by targeting youths and the educated middle classes.

The idea often put forward by some Western analysts that nationalists could “subvert” pro-democracy or pro-Western movements in Russia is badly formulated, since it forgets that the West is devoid neither of turbulent debates on the relationship between national identity and citizenry, nor of failures in terms of the integration of its newcomers or minorities. Navalny is right in asserting that nationalism is a European legacy and that the Europeanization of Russia, in terms of political regime, will probably also affect its definition of the nation. Recent electoral successes of populist anti-migrant parties in numerous European countries, both in the French-Flemish world and in the Nordic states, as well as Hungary’s evolution, confirm that the Russian debates are part of a contemporary pan-European framework in which national identity has become a renegotiable criterion of belonging.