

**NATIONAL POLICY OF
THE RUSSIAN STATE:
DELIBERATIONS ON PUTIN'S ARTICLE**

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Introduction

On 23 January, 2012, *Nezavisimaia gazeta* carried an article by Prime Minister of Russia Vladimir Putin entitled "Russia: The National Question," which took the Russian public by surprise. Indeed, this was the first time in his twelve years on the political Olympus that the

Russian leader had turned to the national question. The article invited very contradictory opinions and sent waves in all directions.

The presidential candidate (he was elected president a couple of months later) tried to analyze various aspects of national relations in Russia—a fact which in itself deserves the close attention of the expert community. And it was with

this aim that I too took up the pen. I live in the Chechen Republic, the most complicated and conflict-prone constituency of the Russian Federation (part of the North Caucasian Federal District, which also includes the Stavropol Territory and all of the North Caucasian republics, with the exception of Adigei, which belongs to the Southern Federal District).

Vladimir Putin: The National Question

It seems that the presidential candidate turned his attention to the national question in Russia under the pressure of the rising tension that became obvious some six years ago and has been steadily climbing. The events of September 2006 in Kondopoga were the beginning: the conflict that arose in this Karelian town had criminal overtones and ended in the murder of two local crime bosses.

This stirred up the local people; migrants from the Caucasus were attacked, their property burnt down; and over 100 rioters were arrested. To avoid further disturbances, about 60 people of Caucasian origin were evacuated to Petrozavodsk.

On 24 May, 2007, Stavropol was shaken by another ethnic conflict when a Chechen student G. Ataev was killed in a massive scuffle. On 3 June, two Russian students—D. Blokhin and P. Chadin—were found murdered. “The Chechens have taken revenge for the death of their friend,” was the common opinion.

On 11 June, 2007, an impromptu rally in Stavropol gathered about 700; as could be expected, it developed into mass disturbances. The gathering demanded the removal of Chechens and Caucasian migrants in general from the city. Alexander Chernovolov, who was more active than the rest, stirred up the crowd with nationalist slogans and called on the local authorities to evict all non-Russians from the city, using barefaced obscenities to describe them. The law enforcers instigated a criminal case against him under Art 282 “Incitement of National, Racial, or Religious Enmity” of the RF Criminal Code. Over 50 other rioters were detained.

On 27 November, 2010, in a scuffle between several dozen Cossacks and Chechens in Zelenokumsk (the Stavropol Territory), several Cossacks were wounded and one Chechen received a head injury. The clash was caused by the attempted rape of a 15-year-old girl, which had allegedly taken place on 21 November. Sergey Ushakov, Deputy Chairman of the Government of the Stavropol Territory and responsible for security, told the Novosti Information Agency that the conflict was a purely criminal clash with no ethnic overtones to it.

On 6 December, 2010, Spartak football fan Egor Sviridov was killed in a fracas with people from the Caucasus in a Moscow café. On 11 December, 2010, over 5 thousand football fans and Russian nationalists gathered on Kronstadt Boulevard (in Moscow’s outskirts) for a procession in memory of their dead comrade. Very soon, however, the action moved to Manezhnaya Square (in Moscow’s center) where the disturbances caused 32 casualties. Criminal cases were instituted against the initiators and people who resisted the police. Finally, five people were brought to court: two activists of Other Russia (K. Unchuk and R. Khubaev); I. Berezyuk, a citizen of Belarus and member of the Strategy 31 move-

ment, as well as L. Panin and A. Kozevin. They were accused of calling to mass disorder, inciting national hatred and enmity, using force against representatives of the government, and engaging in hooliganism.

Members of the national (mainly Caucasian) diasporas of Moscow reciprocated with an attempt to rally at the Kievskaya metro station, which was cut short by law enforcers.

On 16 December, 2010, during the annual Q&A session “A Conversation with Vladimir Putin, Continued,” Prime Minister Putin said that extremism would be mercilessly persecuted and pointed out that “we must not tar everyone from the Northern Caucasus or indeed any other nationalities, in fact anyone at all, with the same brush.” He called on all citizens of Russia, irrespective of age, to remember that they lived in a multinational and multiconfessional state and that citizens of the same country should make sure that “people feel at home everywhere in Russia, we must all behave appropriately, so that a person from the Caucasus feels safe walking around Moscow, and Russians of Slavic origin feel safe living in the Northern Caucasus.”

On 21 December, 2010, Vladimir Putin met with the football fans and laid flowers on the grave of Egor Sviridov, killed in a skirmish. This put the Caucasian diaspora on guard.

On 27 December, President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev opened the joint session of the State Council and the Presidential Commission on Nationalities Projects with a statement that the nationalities problem was still acute in Russia; he pointed out that ethnic tension was very obvious in many regions and that “ethnic conflicts are lethal for Russia, no matter where they occur.” The president was concerned about the fact that the centuries-old ethnic balance in many of Russia’s regions is undergoing rapid changes. These changes are mainly responsible for the ethnic conflicts fanned by political extremists and criminal communities.

The president was absolutely right: no matter where ethnic conflicts flare up, be it in the Caucasus, the Volga area, Siberia, or Moscow, they undermine the foundations of society and the state.

President Medvedev was obviously convinced that the inflow of migrants to Russia and the resultant demographic pressure were behind at least some of the numerous problems.

In the small hours of 1 July, 2011, local people in Sagra, a Ural settlement, clashed with newcomers from Ekaterinburg. The sides used pneumatic pistols, rifles, nunchaku, baseball bats, truncheons, knuckle-dusters, axes, etc. The fight, started by the activities of a local drug dealer, was not free from criminal undertones. Twenty-one people were incriminated under Art 209 (banditry) and 212 (mass riots) of the RF Criminal Code; 18 of them were detained; the most active fighters—Sh. Katamadze, M. Bekov, P. Safarov, and A. Selimov—were put on the federal wanted list; an order was issued on bringing them to criminal responsibility.

These conflicts, which looked like criminal clashes and were later treated as national, served as the starting point for assessing the national situation in Russia and formed the foundation of Putin’s article, the conclusions of which proved to be timely and highly necessary.

Russian Marches: Nationalism Comes to the Fore

On 4 November, 2008, the Movement against Illegal Migration and the Slavic Alliance started a series of so-called Russian Marches. The first of them attracted about 850 people, mainly from the Russkiy obraz (Russian Image) and the Narodny Soyuz (People’s Union) structures. The sanctioned rally took place on one of the Moskva River embankments under the flags of the Navy of Russia and

the People's Union and red flags of the Soviet Union, as well as banners with icons; about 20 participants were clad in hauberks and carried shields.¹

In 2010, Russian Marches took place in 46 cities of Russia (in 38 cities), Ukraine (7), and Moldova (1). In 2011, the geographical scope of the Russian Marches widened by almost 25%.

The largest of them took place in Moscow on 30 October, 2011; there were no less than 15 thousand people in the 1.5-km-long column. None of the opposition structures had managed to gather together such a large crowd, to say nothing of the nationalist movement. Eyewitnesses later said that the march had been as impressive and as igniting as the Olympics or military parades.²

Konstantin Krylov, one of those who organized the procession, was arrested on its eve; a criminal case under Art 282 "Incitement of National, Racial, or Religious Enmity" of the RF Criminal Code was instituted against him.

On the eve of the main Muslim holyday, Russian Marches were organized in many cities of Russia; this time the participants did not limit themselves to their famous slogan "Stop feeding the Caucasus!" but added obscene commentaries about Allah to hurt the religious feelings of the faithful.

They also shouted their usual slogans: "Russia is for the Russians!" "Russia is for the Russians, Moscow is for the Muscovites!" "Russia should have Russian Power," "One for All and All for One!" "Beat the Khachiks to save Russia!" "Stop feeding the Caucasus!" "Down with the Party of Swindlers and Embezzlers!" "Russia without Putin!" "Ziga-zaga," "Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil—we shall build a paradise for the whites!" "They will build minarets in Moscow—we should thank Putin!" "Why is our budget in holes? Because Kadyrov is full!" "Budanov is a hero of Russia," "Moscow is a city without churki."³ The participants used other derogative terms that insulted the human dignity of the peoples of the Caucasus.

Similar marches took place in other cities of Russia (St. Petersburg, Kaliningrad, Saratov, Tula, and Novosibirsk) and in Ukraine.

Early in 2011, the nationalists intended to organize regular youth marches to make them look like a natural and absolutely acceptable phenomenon.⁴

In expectation of repressions, the nationalists started planning a united political structure. Chairman of the Main Council of the Union of the Russian People Alexander Turik deemed it necessary to say: "I call on the leaders of all Russian organizations to start a dialog, to close ranks. Our enemy is strong because we are disunited. In fact, our disagreements are much less important than our common super task: we should take power and start building Russia our own way."⁵ The participants wrote that during Putin's presidency no less than 1,450 nationalists had been repressed.⁶

According to Leonid Byzov, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russian March 2011 was an important event which brought together the entire protest electorate: "Today there are leaders and a more or less stable ideology. One can even say that a revolution in Russia, if any, will not be free from nationalist slogans."⁷

¹ See: "V Moskve nachalis 'Russkie marshi'," available at [<http://www.ves.lv/article/60130>].

² See: "Russkiy marsh—2010. Triumf natsionalizma," available at [http://clubs.ya.ru/4611686018427440168/replies.xml?item_no=110].

³ "Uchastniki 'Russkogo marsha' v Moskve oskorbili musulman," available at [<http://ansar.ru/rfsng/2011/10/30/23949?>]. Khachiki and churki—derogative term applied to all people from the Caucasus; Sieg Heil—hail victory, fascist greeting; Colonel Budanov was sentenced for killing a Chechen girl.

⁴ See: "2011-i god dlia Russkogo natsionalizma. Khonika i itogi," available at [http://dpni.org/articles/novosti__d/28600/].

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ [http://dpni.org/articles/novosti__d/29685/].

⁷ L. Byzov, "Natsionalisty stali takoy siloy, na kotoruiu nevozmozhno ne obrashchat vnimaniia," available at [<http://www.lentacom.ru/comments/12820.html>].

Any attentive analyst can easily detect that the radical nationalists have moved closer to certain groups of the liberal and leftist opposition, which might create an anti-government popular front.

The Russian Marches might develop into a political force; today the Russian nationalists are moving toward the ideology of the European right, the determined opponents of migration.

The Levada Center, which studies the rise of nationalism in Russia, obtained the following answers to the question “Do you feel hostility from people of other nationalities?”: “Very frequently,” 4%; “Fairly frequently,” 14%; “Rarely,” 27%; and “Practically never,” 50%.

Over half of the respondents agreed that in the last 5 or 6 years the number of Russians who share extreme nationalist views had considerably increased because of the provocative behavior of national minorities, the low standard of living, and frequent terrorist acts.

Forty-two percent is convinced that the Russian authorities are fighting extreme Russian nationalism, while 20% is convinced that the authorities are encouraging nationalists and promoting nationalist feelings.⁸

If encouraged, nationalism might develop into an uncontrollable element with a dynamics and development logic of its own; it will not be easy and will definitely be very expensive to put the genie back into the bottle.

Who Wants to Isolate the Northern Caucasus?

Russian nationalists are fond of holding forth about changing the Constitution (which describes Russia as a federal state) to transform Russia into a mono-state with gubernias instead of national republics (constituencies of the Russian Federation).

There is the opinion in the expert community that the Northern Caucasus is the main source of the steadily rising national tension.

It should be said that in Russia there is a stable negative attitude toward people from the Caucasus (“people of Caucasian nationality” is the current term). In the last 10 to 15 years, the media and certain political figures have done a lot to create a highly negative image of the Chechens; at first people were scared by the talk about the “Chechen mafia” and “forged Chechen banking documents”; then the hostilities added new terms: “Chechen bandits,” “the Chechen war,” “Chechen terrorists,” “Chechen Wahhabis,” “Chechen female suicide bombers,” etc. Prominent Russian ethnologist Valery Tishkov has gone even further: one of the chapters of his *Society in an Armed Conflict (Ethnography of the Chechen War)* is called “Chechen Anti-Semitism and Conspiracy Theories.”⁹

Never in their history have the Chechens been anti-Semites; Dr. Tishkov’s invented term, however, stuck: duly impressed, the Russian public became even more negative about the Chechens.

People in Russia remain captives of what looks like the ideological myths the authorities have imposed on them; today, very much as before, the negative image of the Chechens is still alive among Russians, who use derogative terms, such as “blacks,” “bandits,” etc., when talking about Chechens and other people from the Caucasus.

⁸ See: V. Bode, “Nationalizm v Rossii,” available at [<http://www.svobodanews.ru/content/article/24338237.html>].

⁹ V.A. Tishkov, *Obshchestvo v vooruzhennom konflikte (etnografiya chechenskoy voyny)*, Nauka Publishers, Moscow, 2001, p. 476.

Some think that the crisis in the Northern Caucasus is gradually becoming systemic; so far neither the government nor society has pointed to the way out.

The leading media are indulging in writing about so-called financial discrimination against the Russians. *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, for example, insists that the authorities are trying, without tangible results, to “buy stability” in the Caucasus. Until 2025, writes the newspaper, “Chechnia can expect 498 billion rubles from the federal center; 156.2 billion of this huge sum is intended as compensation for ‘the housing lost during the military crisis in the Chechen Republic’.”¹⁰

It further writes that the North Caucasian republics are turning into a huge “black hole” that sucks in budget money. Journalists quote the following figures: the Center covers 69% of the budget spending of the Caucasian republics; in the case of Chechnia and Ingushetia, the share is 91%; Daghestan, 75%; Kabardino-Balkaria, 60%; and North Ossetia and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, 55%. The state budget pays 47 thousand rubles per capita in Chechnia, 27 thousand rubles in Ingushetia, while the average figure for Russia is only 5 thousand.

The above suggests obvious unfairness: some constituents of the Russian Federation are living at the expense of others.

These disproportions cause separatism and national tension; there is the opinion that the Caucasian regions that enjoy lavish donations produce nothing but crime and terror exported to central Russia.

It is suggested that financial donations should be proportional to the regions’ contribution to the state treasury. On 23 January, 2012, Vladimir Putin had the following to say on this score at the Forum of Ethnic Groups of Southern Russia in Kislovodsk: “All our political opponents and rivals have been constantly trying to split off the Northern Caucasus from Russia, century after century. This only goes to show the geopolitical importance of this region in the world. If (and I hope this will never happen) Russia is stripped of any of its national formations, it will immediately shrivel up and turn irrevocably into a third-rate regional power.”

When talking about the role of the Russians in integrating the Russian state and society, Vladimir Putin said at the Forum: “Russians are like a magnet: they attract other peoples of the Russian Federation today. If Russia is pulled apart, it will simply cease to exist and the first people to suffer will be the Russians. We must not, we have no right to permit this under any circumstances, and we will not permit it.”

By way of commenting on the calls to separate the Caucasus from Russia, Prime Minister Putin deemed it necessary to warn: “Why am I telling you all this? I am telling you this because we know what happened in Chechnia in the past, and how difficult it was for everyone throughout Russia, including the Chechen people. When I first went to Chechnia, the hostilities were still going on there. I went into a school and found out that children had not been coming to that school for several years. There were no desks or chairs in the classrooms. Do you see what I am driving at? If we allow ourselves to be drawn into such processes, the same will happen all over the Caucasus. We must prevent this. These negative effects can happen both in the Caucasus and throughout the whole of Russia. When they start screaming: ‘Stop feeding the Caucasus,’ just wait, tomorrow a new call will inevitably follow: ‘Stop feeding Siberia, the Far East, the Urals, the Volga Region, the Moscow Region...’ This is the procedure followed by those who brought the Soviet Union to its knees.”

Vladimir Putin shared his conceptual considerations: the West, confronted by a huge wave of migrants who brought their specific customs with them and who could not integrate into the new social environment, was not prepared to accept them. This feeds nationalist sentiments and talk about the failure of multiculturalism.

¹⁰ “Chechnia vystavila Tsenru schet na poltrilliona,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 20 April, 2011.

The prime minister of Russia wrote on this score: “The ‘melting pot’ of assimilation is stalling and smoking, unable to ‘digest’ the growing migration flow. In politics, this has been reflected by ‘multiculturalism,’ which rejects the notion of integration through assimilation. It elevates the ‘right of minorities to be different’ to an absolute and, at the same time, fails to balance this right with civil, behavioral, and cultural obligations with regard to the indigenous population and society as a whole.

“Behind the ‘failure of the multicultural project’ stands the crisis of the very model of a ‘nation-state’—a state historically built exclusively on the basis of ethnic identity. And that is a serious challenge to be faced by Europe and many other regions of the world.”

And further: “Historical Russia is neither an ethnic state nor an American ‘melting pot,’ where everyone is, one way or another, an immigrant. Russia emerged and for centuries developed as a multiethnic state—a state with an ongoing process of mutual adjustment, mutual understanding, and unification of people through families, friendship, and work, with hundreds of ethnicities living together on the same land. The development of these vast territories, which has filled the whole of Russian history, was the collective effort of many nations.”¹¹

Vladimir Putin is convinced that Russia should remain loyal to the historical idea of a multinational state in which the Russian people remain the core; at the same time any person can call himself Russian irrespective of his ethnic origin; the cultural code and common values are more important.

He described Russia as a polyethnic state and a unique civilization: “The core, the binding fabric of this unique civilization is the Russian people, Russian culture. And it is this core that various instigators and our opponents will make every effort to tear out of Russia with false assertions about Russians’ right to self-determination, ‘racial purity,’ the need to ‘finish the job of 1991 and complete the destruction of the empire, sitting on the necks of the Russian people’ in order to ultimately force people to destroy their Motherland with their own hands.”¹²

He criticized those who favor the idea of a purely Russian state: “I am deeply convinced that attempts to promote the idea of creating a Russian ‘national’ mono-ethnic state contradict our thousand-year-old history. Moreover, it is the shortest path toward the destruction of the Russian nation and Russian statehood as well as any viable sovereign statehood in our land.”¹³

Who insists on a Russian state and who is the organizer of the Russian Marches? The answer is found in one of the documents of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, which offers the reader “a new nationalities policy of Russia”: a national state of the Russian people.¹⁴

Russians should be officially recognized as the state-forming nation: the authors argue that as the officially recognized national majority Russians should be compensated for the absence of their own autonomy with official recognition of them as the state-forming nation with additional state support comparable to what other peoples receive from their regions.¹⁵ The document says in part: “This is not only justice. This is a question of the survival of Russia and its prosperity.”¹⁶

This means that the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia has formulated the idea of setting up a Russian state and official recognition of Russians as a state-forming nation. Its role in the Russian Marches, at which all sorts of nationalist slogans are loudly proclaimed, is obvious.

¹¹ V.V. Putin, “Russia: The National Question,” available at [<http://rt.com/politics/official-word/migration-national-question-putin-439/>].

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ See: *Novaia natsionalnaia politika Rossii*, LDPR Publishers, Moscow, 2011, p. 38.

¹⁵ See: Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

Russians and the Other Peoples of Russia

Today, the national-political situation in Russia is fairly tense, while the Russian patriotic and nationalist forces are only making things worse. They pose as defenders of the oppressed Russian people who live in extreme social and economic poverty. Other peoples of multinational Russia, for that matter, are in the same material and economic situation.

The money being poured into the North Caucasian republics, including Chechnia, does not reach each and every village, district, city, office, the ordinary people and their families, etc. Corruption has survived everything that has been said and written about corruption schemes in Moscow; it makes the top crust of the Russian bureaucracy and the local political and economic ethnic elites rich.

What are called “ethnic clashes” are, in fact, outcrops of economic and social problems of a vast social stratum caused by the low standard of living, lack of social justice, and the law enforcers, who are never on time. This has become a chronic ailment and a systemic phenomenon.

This is what Vladimir Putin had in mind when he wrote: “Systemic problems in society are often expressed in the form of ethnic tension. We should always keep in mind that there is a direct correlation between unresolved socioeconomic problems, flaws in the law enforcement system, government inefficiency, corruption, and ethnically-motivated conflicts. If we look at the history of all the recent ethnic incidents, we will notice this ‘trigger’ in practically all of the cases: Kondopoga, Manezhnaya Square, Sagra. Everywhere we are seeing a keen response to the absence of justice, the lack of responsibility and inaction of certain state representatives, impunity for criminals, and disbelief in equality before the law, the conviction that everything can be bought and there is no truth.”¹⁷

It seems that having diagnosed the illness and identified the causes of ethnic tension in Russia, Putin should have come up with a solution. The article, however, does not offer any clear-cut proposals for improving the situation; the author limited himself to pointing out that in each case the causes of mutual claims should be identified and that mass disturbances and separatism should be prevented; much space is given to the problems of a democratic multi-party system.

Vladimir Putin pays particular attention to the problem of external and internal migration, which not infrequently adds vehemence to ethnic relations inside the country. He concludes that the state migration policy should be improved. Even if illegal migration cannot be eliminated, it should be minimized with the help of the police and migration services.

The author offered certain fairly interesting ideas about legal migration (permanent and temporary): preference should be given to qualified, competent, competitive, and educated people who can easily adjust their behavior to the Russian standards and will easily integrate into Russia.

The adaptation of migrants is a complicated and contradictory phenomenon that calls for adequate legal and civilizational conditions (professional training and language courses among other things) in which migrants of different nationalities will find it easier to integrate into Russian society.

Social disintegration is inevitable in the absence of a well-substantiated nationalities and cultural strategy designed to bring the Russian peoples closer together (with due account of the basic national interests and civilizational development of each of the national groups). This strategy should intercept nationalist, extremist, and separatist manifestations and help formulate human values.

We urgently need a new strategy of nationalities policy in Russia, a country that can bring peoples closer and integrate them on the basis of clearly formulated and shared principles.

¹⁷ V.V. Putin, *op. cit.*

Conclusion

The article “Russia: The National Question” revealed Vladimir Putin’s philosophical principles: he is a traditionalist and supporter of Eurasianism. Russia historically formed as a multinational and multiconfessional state; this means that in order to preserve traditions we should avoid standardization or building a state that is only for Russians (Zbigniew Brzezinski has already favored this project).

Putin clearly outlined the role of the Russian nation as the civilizational core of the Russian state. It is the Russian nation that ties together all ethnicities and makes them part of the multinational people of Russia as described in the Constitution of the Russian Federation.

Prime Minister Putin’s article is fairly interesting because it raises the most topical issues of the nationalities policy in Russia.

It should be said that there are certain shortcomings: it lacks theoretical substantiation of the problems discussed; some of the propositions are eclectic and are obviously borrowed from different conceptions.

It is, however, a clear description of the official position as laid out in the 1996 Conception of the State National Policy of the Russian Federation. The article responds to burning national questions that require prompt and efficient resolutions.
