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# COMMENT

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## **Nationalism is a double-edged sword** > In the future, Putin may have little to offer in order to maintain his interpretation of Russian nationalism

A nationalistic mood has characterized the Russian president's speeches, the aim of which is to mobilize the Russian people against an external threat at a time of crisis. Even though Vladimir Putin's interpretation of nationalism emphasizes national cohesion, his message may simultaneously strengthen ethnic nationalism in Russia.

At the turn of the year, President Vladimir Putin gave a traditional speech that offered his audience little that was new, either at home or abroad. In his traditional address, the President stated that love of one's country is the strongest of feelings. According to Putin, that feeling had come to life in the form of brotherly support for those Crimean residents who expressed their will to return home. During the previous year, Putin had been promoting national unity, and the latest speech was no exception to that line.

Putin's speeches are aimed at mobilizing the Russian people against an external threat at a time of crisis. The main opponent is supposed to be the United States, but the European Union gets its fair share of the rhetoric. This was made explicitly clear in Putin's speech at the Valdai Discussion Club in October 2014. Putin uses the rhetoric of external challenge for strengthening the nationalist upheaval: the evil needs to come from the outside so that the leader can be seen as strong, and what is more, capable of leading in a difficult situation.

In November 2014, Levada, the well-respected Russian public opinion research centre, conducted a poll showing that attitudes in

Russia towards the US and the EU had become more negative than ever before. In comparison, in September 2013, 41% of respondents viewed the US either very or somewhat positively, and the EU was perceived in a similar way by 56% of respondents. In November 2014, the figures were 18% for the US and 26% for the EU. This is a signal that should be taken seriously. It shows that Putin's message has been successful among the public.

The question remains as to whether the government will be able to sustain this success in the coming years. When considering the future of Russia, it is essential to understand that nationalism, by nature, is a double-edged sword.

Putin emphasizes the inclusive interpretation of nationalism. The aim is to turn all the peoples in Russia, regardless of their nationalities, against Western values. But at the same time the nationalistic and imperialistic rhetoric is strengthening the racist and xenophobic sentiments that threaten the unity of the state from within.

In other words, even though Putin has made it clear what he thinks is the acceptable form of nationalism, the nationalistic mood is hard to control. It is like water: when it rises, it cannot be directed.

There are many nationalistic movements in Russia that have different attitudes towards the current regime. The crisis in Ukraine has made the field even more diverse. Some movements, such as the neoconservatives, demand more decisive measures in foreign policy, whereas others, mainly some of the national democrats, have criticized the Russian annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine from the beginning.

The common denominator in all of these movements, however, is xenophobia. Despite the fact that the definition of 'Russianness' is changing and flexible, all the nationalist movements make a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Ethnic racism occurs on an everyday basis. Prejudice is most common towards the Central Asian and Caucasian minorities.

During the past year the nationalistic activity has become fragmented, but the nationalists' core xenophobic ideas are still widely endorsed. According to the latest opinion polls on the topic in August 2014, support for nationalistic slogans, such as 'Russia for Russians' and 'Stop feeding Caucasia', has decreased – which is not to say that it has ceased to be high. 18% of respondents were fully in support of the first mentioned

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statement, and 36% with certain conditions. The majority of Russians refrain from political activities, but the xenophobic attitudes are latently present in society.

The difficult economic situation poses a major challenge for the current regime, both directly and indirectly. Furthermore, what is perhaps not clearly visible in these polls is that political isolation coupled with the ongoing battle over information-sharing creates suspicion and confusion that are not clearly addressed. This combination is a fertile breeding ground for nationalistic populism.

Therefore, it is not clear whether the chosen interpretation of nationalism will continue serving the state leadership in the near future. Firstly, because it carries with it an inner contradiction: promoting inclusive state nationalism from above also inevitably boosts the ethnic nationalism that now has suitable conditions to develop. Secondly, in the weakening economic situation the constructive elements of Putin's nationalism are in short supply.

It is often said that the Russians are used to hardship. This has certainly been true in the past. But today's Russians have been able to enjoy unprecedented wealth for over a decade now. It remains an open

question as to how long they will be ready to make personal sacrifices for the 'glory and greatness' of their country now that they have more to lose.