Xenophobia in Post-Soviet Russia

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The phenomenon of Post-Soviet xenophobia in its various manifestations has been consistently observed by independent think tanks, especially after 2000 when a report by the Moscow Helsinki Group first posed this pressing problem to the Russian human rights community. Russia has experienced considerable economic and political change over the past decade. However, in terms of xenophobia, racism and nationalism the country has continued to experience trends that were first identified ten years ago. This academically 'innocent' phrase has in fact many disturbing consequences, including: growing violence, racial profiling, increasing nationalism and radicalisation, the majority's silent support of some very unpleasant ideas, civic apathy and emasculation of many democratic mechanisms.

These trends and manifestations are by no means unique and could be compared with the situation in other countries, including Russia's closest neighbours Ukraine and Kazakhstan. A global outbreak of strong feelings of national identity as well as geopolitical processes has also influenced the situation. Whatever the factors, Russia needs a better understanding of the complexities of its xenophobia in order to establish effective remedies.

1. A Steady Rise

Xenophobia, which has been linked to economic challenges, the intensification of migration flows and new identities and lifestyles, is becoming increasingly visible around the world and Russia is no exception. Most regions in Russia have observed a rise in the problem which manifests itself in a wide range of ways, from "soft" forms including hate speech and negative behavioural patterns to violence. The deteriorating situation could have been abated with a timely reaction from both the Russian authorities and citizens. In fact the first few years of this "epidemic" were spent unwisely engaging in observations that merely attempted to voice the problem.

In the early 2000s, xenophobia was largely overlooked and perceived as an understandable consequence of Russia's economic and social transition. The slow but gradual increase of xenophobic sentiments was perceived as a minor problem when compared to other "state emergencies" such as the war in Chechnya and the ongoing economic instability. This attitude, together with the rare public condemnation of ethnic violence, created a favourable climate for the growth of wider manifestations of hostility and hatred.

As scholars attempted to establish a correlation between implicit and explicit xenophobia – or how hate speech and latent xenophobia affect more violent manifestations of hatred – the number of attacks grew steadily. These attacks were most often targeted at "immigrants" who were visually different or, according to law enforcement agencies and the press, "non-Slavic" in appearance. While many "non-Slavs" could have been Russian

citizens due to the heterogeneous nature of the Russian state, the message of xenophobia was clear and targeted "immigrants" from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and China.

Several years of aggravated violence, coupled with internet-based and other activities by overtly far-right groups, eventually raised the status of this issue so that it could no longer be ignored. After several murders of students with Asian features on Nevsky Prospect, the main street in Saint Petersburg, and the unprecedented cruelty of the murder of Hursheda Sultanova, a 9-year old Tajik girl in February 2004, the first official statements on this complex problem were made. Rashid Nurgaliyev, the acting Interior Minister at the time, admitted that "acute manifestations of extremism" existed towards visual minorities in Russia. Nonetheless, it took another year for the government's approach to change. Racist attacks were framed as "extremist crimes" that constituted a threat to Russia's security, and in 2005 the then Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the issue during his internet-conference session with Russian citizens.

2. Trends and Statistics

"Extremist crime" was the term used to express the social concern over xenophobia-related violence in the national report submitted by Russia to the UN Universal Periodic Review in 2009. The report officially recognises the increase of such crimes and provides some statistics relating to the extent of the issue. It demonstrates a steady increase in "extremist crime" in Russia and states that the number of registered extremist acts rose from 130 in 2004 to 152, 263 and 356 in 2005, 2006 and 2007 respectively. In the first half of 2008 alone, 250 extremist crimes were registered.[2]

The most conservative estimate of "extremist crime" during 2008 has been carried out by the SOVA Center, an independent think tank that has undertaken the most consistent research on this issue. This research suggests that in 2008 there have been no less than 525 victims of racist and xenophobic violence, 97 of whom have died. It also reveals that the majority of the offences were being committed in the Moscow and Saint Petersburg regions.[3]

The Russian NGO community, not surprisingly, prefer using other terminology: "hate crimes". Their general analysis of this trend is best summarised in the recent shadow report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.[4] Supported by 33 NGOs, this document marks out three main facts regarding hate crime and hate speech in Russia:

1. The number of hate crimes has recently been growing by 20% a year. Hate crimes have become increasingly cruel and often involve weapons and explosives. As a rule, the organisations instigating this discrimination and violence, act openly and with impunity.

2. The prosecution of hate crimes is on the rise; however, it falls short of what is necessary in view of the scale of hate crimes and racist propaganda.

3. Some officials cooperate with racist organisations and/or allow statements which are overtly intolerant towards particular ethnic groups. For example, propaganda campaigns against opponents on the international arena have led to hate speech against some ethnic/national minority groups living in Russia.

In a sense, the lag between violent actions and counter-measures is a result of the initial inertia in the response to the "xenophobic

challenge". A recent SOVA report[5] explains that in 2008, across 19 regions of the country, there had only been 33 successful prosecutions for racist violent crimes where hate was recognised as an aggravating motive of the offence. Any positive changes in the prosecution of cases of violence are however immediately overshadowed by other facts. SOVA documented racist and neo-Nazi motivated attacks in 44 regions of Russia. Aside from organised nationalist groups, such as the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (*Dvizhenie protiv nelegalnoi immigratsii,* DPNI), the estimated number of active informal skinhead movement members is between 10,000 and 20,000, mostly youths painting racist graffiti and organising attacks on minorities.

These figures were first made public by Galina Kozhevnikova, SOVA Deputy Director in February 2009 at the Independent Press Centre in Moscow. It was exactly three weeks after another press gathering had been held there by the well-known Russian human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov. Following the press conference, while on their way to the underground station, Markelov and Novaya Gazeta reporter Anastasia Baburova were brutally murdered. Ms. Kozhevnikova had also received an e-mail threat herself one day before her press conference.

3. Understanding the Roots of Xenophobia

It is not an easy task to single out the dominating factors feeding xenophobia in Russian society. Being a complex and subjective notion, xenophobia is closely linked to the hardships of economic transition; nationalism in times when the meaning of "nation" is unclear; the challenges of globalisation including unprecedented human mobility; and history.

The historical perspective is preferred as an explanatory tool by some scholars; and it may be true that the deep roots of modern xenophobia can be found in 19th century village communal traditions or within the idea of Soviet collectivism. It is reasonable to recall Soviet concepts such as "internationalism" and "peoples' friendship" as well as the suppression of any manifestation of nationalism when considering the roots of xenophobia in Russia. The tumultuous *glasnost* years and 1989 opened the floor for nationalist discussions and then led to the so called "parade of sovereignties" of the former USSR republics.

From this perspective, the 20 year period in which people have had the freedom to openly express their thoughts for the first time (including nationalistic sentiments) may not have been sufficient for the development of new national identities. This is especially the case in a country whose vast territory contains a great many national identities, such as Tatar or Bashkir, alongside the Russian identity.

To an extent it was predictable that some form of ethnic based nationalism should have replaced the composite Soviet identity. The redefining of identity supposes distinguishing oneself from "others" through simplistic "us" versus "them" judgements (which is typical for emerging identities). Certainly, while Russia was in transition, the consequences of this process had no chance of being thoroughly reflected upon and analysed.

Another common argument in debates about xenophobia in Russia rests on the external challenges the country has faced at the economic, political and security levels. The list of factors which probably added to the spread of xenophobic sentiments usually includes the economic difficulties of the 1990s

and the growing economic divide, disintegration, tensions and geopolitical reconfiguration on Post-Soviet territory, which included a wave of labour migration. In the absence of comprehensive policies, many of the consequences of the rapidly changing life in Russia have been imbued with negative, xenophobic interpretations. For example, labour migrants are blamed for "stealing" local jobs rather than being recognised for the value they contribute to society by taking unwanted, unqualified work. Similarly, proponents of this argument have suggested that unprecedented terrorist acts in the North Caucasus, Moscow and elsewhere, two wars in Chechnya and global counter-terrorism rhetoric have made the growth of xenophobia almost inevitable.

Other analysts have tended to emphasise the influence of the years of Vladimir Putin's governance and have even charged the authorities with using xenophobia as a tool to unify Russian society. Though such an explanation may be too mechanistic, two facts should be taken into account when exploring this issue further – the comparatively late acknowledgement of xenophobia as a social problem and the recent politicisation of xenophobia.

4. Can Xenophobia Be "Managed"?

The question we should pose here is whether, along with "manageable democracy"[6], xenophobia in Russia was also considered "manageable", especially after ethnically motivated violence and incitement of racial hatred has been condemned by top officials? And if so, how has it been "managed" lately?

The strategic solution for dealing with xenophobia and related xenophobic violence was to "re-brand" it as an element of "extremist activities". Governmental authorities initiated a "counter-extremism" campaign that resulted in an increase of court cases concerning incitement to hatred and of suspensions of radical newspapers for using hate speech.

Russia's new President Dmitry Medvedev, at the Meeting of the Council for Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights on 15 April 2009, commented on the campaign:

> "The last problem brought up here is that of extremism. I feel that we have made advances on the subject, because just 10 years ago, the law enforcement authorities were reluctant to deal with it or even discuss it. Now, they have begun addressing it, and they have been initiating some criminal cases – perhaps not as often as they should, but nevertheless, progress has been made."[7]

This progress is indeed important, though it is controversial from the civic organisations' perspective. Anti-extremism legislation, the Law on Combating Extremist Activity, was specially amended to deal with cases of racial hatred and violence; however, it is often regarded as a double-edged sword. It defines "extremist activities" broadly and in some respects it goes further than the provisions of the Criminal Code. It permits selective application and at the same time establishes serious penalties for organisations and media engaging in extremist activities. Human rights monitors have repeatedly expressed their concerns about this legislation's potential to limit freedom of speech and other human rights. Alexander Verkhovsky and Galina Kozhevnikova of SOVA believe that the concept of "counter-extremism" activities has substantively altered the context of counteracting racism and xenophobia:

> "It is defined as 'counteraction to extremist activities' and develops exclusively as a fight against 'extremism', thus dragging the issue into the political domain, leading

to selective and discretionary application of law and shifting the focus of preventing and eliminating discrimination from the protection of individual rights and dignity to a fight against those whom the state deems its opponents."[8]

The issues of civic freedoms and xenophobia "management" remain at the top of the political agenda in connection with another resonant topic - non-violent gatherings and the right to hold rallies or demonstrations.

5. Xenophobic Marches

Since 2004 and until very recently, Russian politics has been commonly characterised by a discourse of the growing consolidation of power, the erosion of democratic institutions and Russia's economic and geo-political resurgence. A general reduction of the space for political discussion and criticism has been one of the obvious features of this period. Many NGOs and political parties have been affected along with other institutions.

The 2004 legislation on public meetings, rallies, demonstrations, marches and picketing[9] introduced more restrictive regulations. In particular, the majority of activities of this kind now require official permission from the authorities complying with a special procedure, and failure to obtain permission renders them illegal. The legislation also places restrictions on the type of venues in which pubic events can be organised.

This restrictive legislation, however, has not helped prevent instances of open racism, the most notable of which was the "Russian march", which took place on 4 November 2005, the Day of National Unity (a new Russian public holiday which replaced the October Revolution Day). That day, over 3,000 people marched along the main Moscow boulevards in the city centre, some of them chanting "*Heil* Hitler", "Glory to Russia", and raising their hands in the Nazi salute.

This unexpected first "legally authorised" far-right mass event demonstrated the ugly side of modern nationalism in Russia. Footage of the march on TV and coverage in the press were a shocking revelation for many people in Russia. Moscow city authorities were also concerned. The "Russian march" was banned in 2006 and unauthorised gatherings and radical actions were blocked by the police. Later marches have been ordered to be held away from the city centre and popular routes and locations. The same tactics are employed by other big Russian cities where such marches have been increasingly common.

Following the ban on the 2006 event in Moscow, the city mayor Yuri Luzhkov commented to a TV channel:

> "I made a decision to ban the so-called Russian march. I appreciate that those extremists may try and stage something of the kind somewhere else in the city. However, we shouldn't allow this sort of activities to do damage to the unity of our society."

This position, however, is controversial according to human rights organisations. Ludmila Alexeeva, Chair of the Moscow Helsinki Group, the oldest human rights institution in the country, stated that banning a public rally is against the law, and the authorities could only order the organisers to change the venue. She raised this issue at the recent meeting with President Dmitry Medvedev who admitted that "naturally, the authorities never want to allow these kinds of events and their decisions are partially understandable, but in any case, they are not based on the rule of law..."[10]

The dilemma faced by the authorities who are acting to preserve "the unity of the society" through restricting freedom of expression and assembly has been reinforced every year since 2006 in connection with another type of march which is related to combating an associate of xenophobia – homophobia. Thus, Moscow authorities have famously been blocking any attempts to organise Gay Pride parades in the city. The justifications put forward for blocking such parades have included the claim that the march will provoke action by skinheads and other far-right groups as has happened in some Eastern European cities; that security can't be fully guaranteed; that much of the gay community opposes the Gay Pride parades; and that society is not ready for them yet.

6. Perilous Ambiguity

In addition to legislation and law-enforcement, governmental rhetoric is another important source upon which observations about xenophobia in Russia can be based. The most obvious conclusion to draw from observing governmental rhetoric is that the signals sent out by the Presidential Administration and the state-controlled or state-influenced media are ambiguous and – in many cases – controversial.

As the German scholar Andreas Umland has written,

> "While primitive hatred of foreigners and ethnic violence are officially stigmatised, the dissemination of national stereotypes and anti-Americanism, in particular, by government-directed information channels and political pundits continues unabated. On the one hand, the political leadership is promoting the integration of Russia into Western organizations such as the G8 and the World Trade Organization. On the other hand, the discourse among political experts, as well as intellectual life in general, are characterized by the spread of an anti-Western consensus often described as 'Eurasian', the essence of which is the assertion that Russia is 'different' from, or indeed, by its nature, the opposite of the US."[11]

The wording and manner in which these official perceptions are delivered to the public range from subtle and delicate to quite straightforward, depending on the subject. For instance, they can be delivered in a purely theatrical way, such as the purposeful pause which former President Vladimir Putin included in his statement in 2006. When a reporter asked him who the next president of Russia would be Putin's response was: "The next president would be the one elected by the 'ethnic' Russians [*pause*] and other peoples of the Russian Federation."

A different strategy was followed during the so-called "anti-Georgian campaign" by the Russian media in 2006. After the Georgian Interior Ministry detained four Russian officers and later expelled them on charges of espionage, Russia introduced tough economic sanctions against Georgia. Research conducted by SOVA identified a significant increase in anti-Georgian statements in the press as part of the campaign against Georgia's actions. Other human rights organisations also noted the role of the media:

> "Russian television stations actively supported and justified the government's singling out of Georgians through daily news programs as well as weekly analytic and political programming and special series. For example, one-sided news coverage in early October on the government-owned Channel One exclusively presented the position of government officials and agencies and regularly connected Georgians to violations of the law, including organized crime."[12]

The media very rarely talked about attacks on ethnic Georgians or the other kind of incidents that were provoked by this campaign. Nor did they cover the views and actions of the critics of this fanning of xenophobic sentiments. At the same time topics such as "Georgian criminality", "Georgian terrorism" and "Georgia parasitizing on Russia's economy" (referring to people of Georgian origin transferring money from Russia to support their families in Georgia) were abundant in the media. As SOVA's research has ascertained, even expressly political rhetoric is often interpreted as relating to ethnicity. The media coverage was immersed in anti-Georgian political sentiment that rendered the overall situation close to a "public hysteria". The most shameful episodes of "witch-hunting" during this campaign included orders from at least two Moscow police districts for public schools to produce lists of children with Georgian names, birth dates, addresses and information on their parents' employment.

Nonetheless, at least in terms of the "management of xenophobia", the lessons from this episode seem to have been remembered. Instigated by political rhetoric, xenophobic sentiments can quickly run wild and slip out of control. When reporting on the war in South Ossetia in August and September 2008, therefore, the Russian press kept their coverage exclusively political (not ethnic) and the number of xenophobic remarks by government representatives was markedly reduced.[13]

7. Xenophobia's Disguises

If we were to name the current "campaign" in which the xenophobic banner resides it would probably be "anti-migrant". In fact, general xenophobia in the public discourse fairly easily transforms from one type to another. Taking into account the general proclivities for xenophobia, the world economic downturn of late 2008 – 2009 has made it more visible.

With an increase in unemployment, social distress and anxiety are easily and naturally channelled into anti-migrant sentiments. Labour migrants, if they lose their jobs, are believed to stay in Russia and turn to crime by many in Russian society. There is also a wide-spread belief that "they steal the jobs". In some ways such beliefs are also a relic of former Soviet prejudices against *limitchiki* (local "guest workers" – small-town dwellers the state had moved to central big cities as cheap and low-qualified workforce in industry).

According to a 2005 survey by Mikhail Alexeev[14] on the xenophobic proclivities among the Russian youth, around 36% of respondents who were 18 – 25 years old and 43% of those 40 or over completely or partially supported the statement "all migrants, legal or illegal, and their children should be sent back to their places of origin."[15]

In recent years labour migrants, especially visible minorities, have not been fully welcomed in the main Russian regions. Having one's papers in order is often not a sufficient guarantee against discrimination by law enforcement agencies. In 2006 the Open Society Justice Initiative conducted a study on "Ethnic Profiling in the Moscow Metro". It examined whether and to what extent the Moscow Metro police disproportionately stopped individuals based on their appearance as "Slavs" or "non-Slavs". The results were unexpectedly high: non-Slavic appearing passengers were over 20 times more likely to be stopped for an ID check.[16] By comparison, in the US and the UK, it was four to five times more likely for a person who is a visible minority to be stopped.

This is just one example of discriminatory practices considered normal and natural both by society and law-enforcement agencies. Consequently such practices are very rarely questioned or studied as a source of xenophobia. What is more disturbing in the light of the financial crisis, however, is the trend of linking migration to criminality as such. Apart from contributing to the general growth of xenophobia, this logic is the basis for the police to justify the lack of effective responses by casuistic arguments such as the one that "migrants have committed more crimes than were committed against them."[17] It also strengthens the state's overall approach to regulating migration.

8. Infantile Disease?

So if the question is whether the state is trying to politicise xenophobia, the answer is definitively yes. At the same time if one asks whether the state is trying to counter-act xenophobia, the answer is again yes. This controversy obviously makes combating discrimination quite complicated.

What is perhaps most problematic, however, is the controversial state of Russian society itself. On the one hand, there is what has been called by President Dmitry Medvedev "deep-rooted public distrust toward institutions of power" and a fairly reserved attitude towards their actions. On the other, there's a clear lack of public interest in the issues of discrimination and xenophobia and a lack of demand for enforcing existing legal mechanisms.

Civil society institutions have been weakened in the recent past and the Russian social fabric has been fractured. Growing individualism has brought many positive changes, but it has also affected people's ability to raise pressing issues, discuss and advocate for their community interests. Even in cases of escalating racist and neo-Nazi violence, Russian society largely ignores discussions about what is permissible and socially acceptable and what is normal and abnormal. Such a dialogue only happens within small audiences such as at universities, NGOs or – as was the case many years ago – in peoples' kitchens.

During one such occasion – at the conference on the impact of hate speech on politics and society in Moscow, Alexander Auzan, Professor of Political Economy, compared Russian nationalism to a fever. This metaphor was used in a positive sense, as a symptom of an infantile disease. According to Auzan, this "fever of nationalism" could be perceived as an indicator of the current state of the "organism" – a specific moment in the transition from an "ethnic" to a "civic" nation.

9. Conclusion

Concerns that xenophobic sentiments might be politically exploited are getting stronger - recently the issue has been treated as a threat to national security. Despite the recent positive changes in the level of prosecution, state rhetoric reveals an ambiguity in regard to different manifestations of radical nationalism and discrimination. As this phenomenon has not yet been adequately explored and understood, xenophobia in Russia cannot be considered fully "manageable" – neither is it, in this sense, politically controlled or effectively restrained. Much depends on sensible and consistent governmental strategies. However, the issue is unlikely to be resolved without non-state actors' participation, educational efforts, civilian oversight and introducing good international practices.

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[2] Materials Prepared by Russian NGOs for the Universal Periodic Review of Russia in the United Nations Human Rights Council. *Russia's National Report for 2008 under the new Universal Process Review procedures.* 04.02.2009, available at: http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4254/B87D16B.

[3] Kozhevnikova. G, "Radical Nationalism in Russia in 2008, and Efforts to Counteract It", edited by A. Verkhovsky, available at: http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/CCD6D21.

[4] *Compliance of the Russian Federation with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination: Russian NGOs' Alternative Report*. 2008, available at: http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4254/B8954EB.

[5] See http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/.

[6] I use the term "manageable democracy" in the sense of a Russian model of governance. The term was coined by Vladislav Surkov, one of the Presidential Administration spokesmen, in a public speech in 2004.

[7] "The Meeting of the Council for Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights under the President of the Russian Federation - An official transcript", 15 April 2009, available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2009/04/15/1932_type82913_215131.shtml.

[8] See above, note 3.

[9] Federalny zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii o sobraniah, mitingah, demonstratsiah, shestviah i piketirovaniah, N 54-F3 (19 June 2004).

[10] See above, note 7.

[11] Umland, A., "'Neo-Eurasianism', the Issue of Russian Fascism, and Post-Soviet Political Discourse", *Opednews*, 11 June 2008, available at: http://www.opednews.com/articles/-Neo-Eurasianism---the-Iss-by-Andreas-Umland-080610-4.html.

[12] Human Rights Watch, *Singled Out: Russia's Detention and Expulsion of Georgians*, October 2007, pp. 34 – 35, available at: http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/russia1007/russia1007web.pdf.

[13] See above, note 3.

[14] Alexeev, M. A., "Xenophobia in Russia. Are the Young Driving It?" *PONARS* Policy Memo No. 367, December 2005.

[15] Additionaly, approximately 60% of respondents in the age group 18-25 and 57% of respondents 40 and above expressed complete or partial support for the slogan "Russia for the Russians".

[16] Open Society Justice Initiative, *Ethnic Profiling in the Moscow Metro*, New York, 2006, available at: http://www.justiceinitiative.org/activities/ec/ec_russia/metro.

[17] See above, note 2.