



# The threat from extreme nationalism

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## Overview

The past year has seen a spate of racist violence in Russia. Traditional xenophobia is now fuelled by economic hardship and increasing non-white immigration - a ripe mix for political exploitation. Official policies have not helped. Only recently, after a previous period of apparent tolerance, even connivance, have the authorities started reacting to this danger - with President Putin summoning political party leaders to a meeting on the subject on 6 December. And some of the government's counter-measures against extreme nationalism may themselves prove counter-productive.

These developments have revived a spectre which has loomed periodically over Russia since the collapse of communism. This is a repeat in Russia of the 1920s-30s experience of Germany, where national humiliation and poorly-rooted democracy gave rise to an aggressive fascist dictatorship. This so-called 'Weimar' scenario is far-fetched. But extreme nationalism must still be reckoned among long-term political risks in Russia.

### Context

The authorities' belated and problematic response to a resurgent danger

### Public Judgements

Learn from history, act now

- > **Gleb Pavlovsky**, Effective Policy Foundation
- > **Musa Umarov**, Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council legal affairs committee

We're defending ourselves - and Russia

- > **Dmitry Rogozin**, Leader, Congress of Russian Communities
- > **Eduard Limonov**, Leader of the National Bolshevik Party

### Wrap

No quick fixes; 'genie-out-of-the-bottle' danger; apocalyptic scenarios far-fetched, but real long-term risks

## Context

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There is nothing new about extreme nationalist and racist attitudes in Russian society. But until recently, the reflection of these social currents in the political sphere has been confined to fringe movements. Although xenophobia was rife in the main opposition Communist Party during the first decade of Russia's transition, it was nevertheless kept in check by the communists' traditional internationalist ideology of the brotherhood of peoples.

More recently, hardline nationalism - overtly racist and prone to violence - has drawn closer to the political mainstream. This was highlighted most graphically by a demonstration in Moscow called the 'Russian March' on 4 November 2005. The groups taking part in that demonstration included the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), the Slav Union and the known fascist party, Russian National Unity. The ranks of demonstrators were thickened by hundreds of skinheads. That 'Russian March' in November 2005 was not only permitted, but even supported by the authorities. Previously, the 'Motherland' political party supported by the Kremlin in the 2003 Duma election to erode the Communist vote had a clear racist tendency.

The Putin administration has since started reacting to this danger. This year's 4 November 'Russian March' was banned. The Motherland party was struck off the ballot in December 2005 Moscow City Duma elections for running a racist television advertisement. On 6 December 2006, Putin held a meeting with ten political party leaders to rally the political class against "extremism" (the generic shorthand in Russia today for hardline racist nationalism).

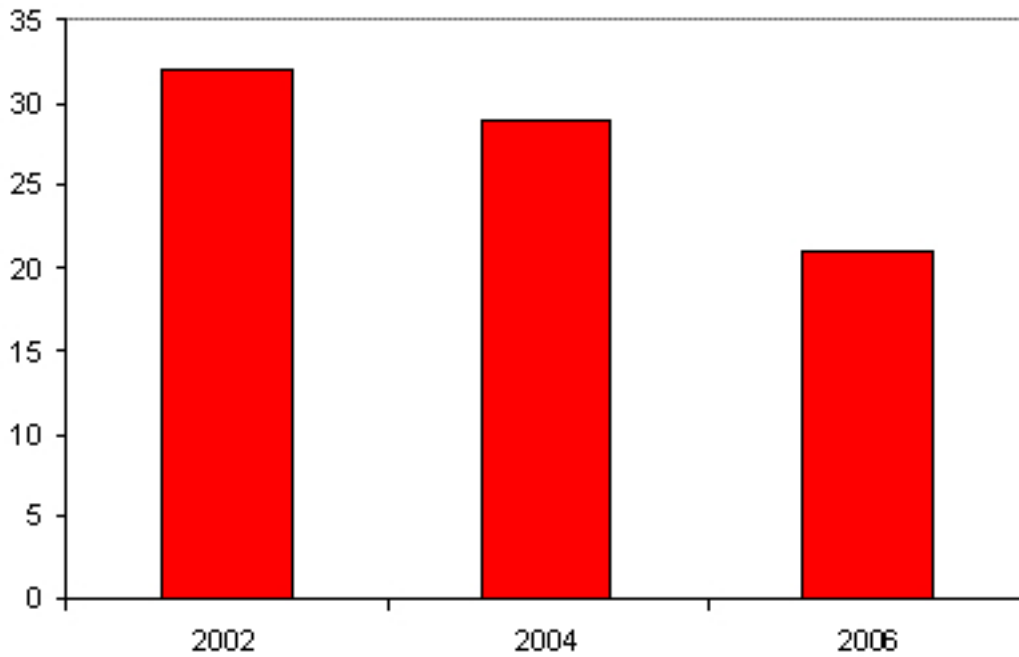
Regardless of official policy, extreme nationalism is a social reality. Traditional racist attitudes are fuelled by the increased immigration from non-Slavic parts of the former USSR and from East Asia, attracted by Russia's tightening labour market. The past year has seen an ever more frequent recurrence of vicious racist incidents. Attacks on foreigners, especially those with dark skins or oriental features, have become commonplace. Students and diplomats, men and women, young and old, have all been targeted. (For a list of some of the better publicised crimes, see.)

The single most disturbing incident, because it had more of a communal than an individual criminal flavour, occurred in September 2006 in the town of Kondopoga in the north-western region of Karelia. A fight between Azeri traders and local whites which caused two deaths triggered a mass pogrom (with the DNPI as ringleader) resulting in the Caucasian (mainly Chechen) community being forced to leave the town.

In response to such tensions, the authorities are attempting a difficult balancing act.

On the one hand, the campaign against extremism has become a political priority. The threat of racism tearing apart Russia's multi-ethnic society is a commonplace in mainstream opinion. Despite the increase in racist attacks in the last two years, the results of opinion polls conducted every other year since 2002 by the Public Opinion Foundation suggest that on the whole Russians are becoming more tolerant of foreigners.

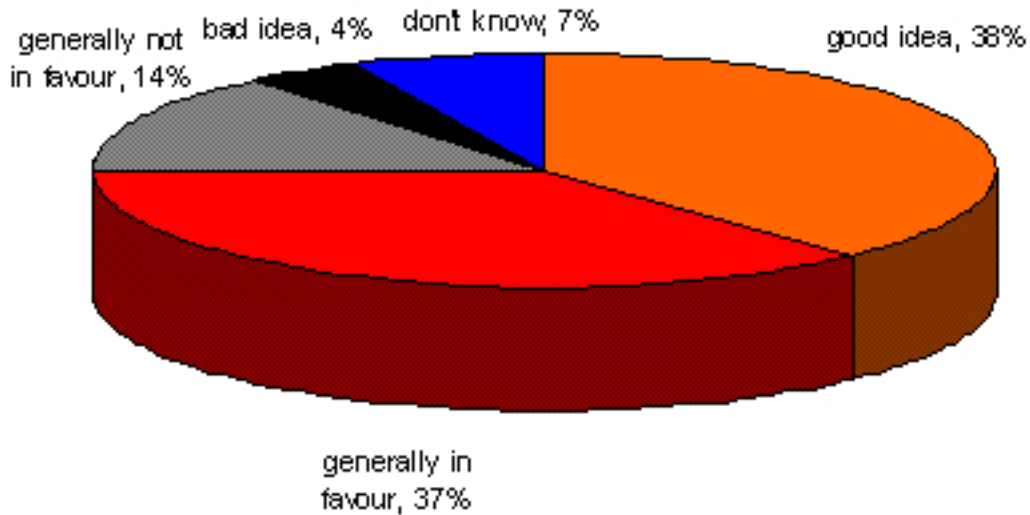
**Percentage of Russians "aggravated by or unfriendly toward representatives of any other nationality"**



Source: Public Opinion Foundation

On the other hand, the Putin administration is seeking to show that it is sensitive to popular resentments against non-Slav ethnic minorities, and especially their dominance of the markets where the majority of the population still buy their fresh food and everyday goods. Putin himself has taken to speaking for the first time of the rights of the "native population". New legislation has been hurriedly enacted to prevent foreigners from working in produce markets. A poll conducted in mid-November by the VTsIOM opinion research agency showed this measure enjoys wide public approval.

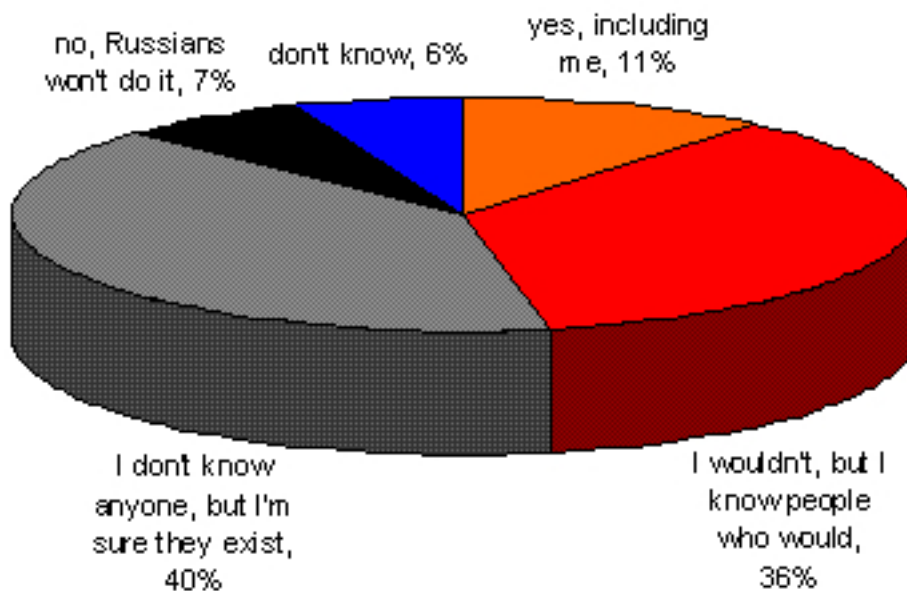
What do you think of the idea that foreigners could be banned from working in markets?



Source: All Russia Public Opinion Centre

But public opinion is less sure of whether the sufficient ethnic Russian stallholders will replace the banned Caucasians to keep these essential markets open.

**A ban on foreigners working in markets would create vacancies. Would Russians fill these places?**



Source: All Russia Public Opinion Centre

The fact that only 47 per cent of those questioned are reasonably confident that Russians would

fill the vacant places highlights the risk of this knee-jerk legislation backfiring.

Meanwhile, hard nationalist political forces are taking advantage of this troubled situation to build up their position. The latest example came on 9 December with the re-formation of the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO). Originally established in the mid-90's by Dmitry Rogozin (who for a time was the leader of the Kremlin-supported Motherland party), this umbrella organisation for a number of 'patriotic' movements always had a strong xenophobic tendency summed up in the slogan 'Russia for the [ethnic] Russians'. But the new KRO is more openly extreme nationalist. Rogozin was joined on the platform by the organiser of 'Russian March', Nikolai Kuryanovich, and the leader of DPNI, Alexander Belov.

## Public Judgements

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No-one denies that extremism is a very real problem in Russia. But, as with many problems in Russian history, those trying to combat it fall back on the two eternal Russian questions: "Who is to blame?"; and "What is to be done?"

### We have to learn from our recent history, and act now

- **Gleb Pavlovsky**, Effective Policy Foundation. Pavlovsky was interviewed by *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* in August, shortly after the bombing of the Cherkizovo Market in Moscow and the sentencing of twelve Russians for the murder of a Peruvian student. Pavlovsky resisted the paper's attempts to pin extremism on skinheads. He described it as society's problem, which has profoundly affected the young generation. These youngsters have grown up in a sadistic social climate, without the values which the Soviet system taught: an understanding of human nobility and an appreciation of the value of life. Yes, such acts must be condemned; but society must provide these young people with a better education and social protection.
- **Musa Umarov**, Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council legal affairs committee (Interview in *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, 3 Nov 2006). Being from the Caucasus, Umarov understands the problem of inter-ethnic tension. The collapse of the USSR saw the loss of much of the wise nationalities policy of that era; indeed, the collapse started when the leaders of individual republics started to blame the Russians for all of their problems. The old and the young were the ones who suffered most from the ending of the Soviet Union; and in the climate of fear, uncertainty and mistrust which developed, migrants were often blamed for all of society's ills. This created a vicious circle, with migrants then going outside the law to defend themselves.

### We're only defending ourselves - and Russia!

- **Dmitry Rogozin**, Leader, Congress of Russian Communities (KRO; Speech at re-founding KRO Congress, 9 Dec 2006). The KRO must become a trade union for the Russian people. For too many people, the word "Russian" has become synonymous with "fascist", but it is Russians who are really under attack in Russia. Russians have the right to expel from Russia any other ethnic group which shows a lack of respect to Russians. We will hunt down Russia-haters and deal with them: in the media, through state institutions and in society. Those who label us "extremists" have their own agenda. We're not extremists, just patriots.
- **Eduard Limonov**, Leader of the National Bolshevik Party (*Gazeta*, 27 Oct 2006). The authorities are scared of us. They are hounding us because they are afraid that people will come to power who have views which differ from theirs. So they just stick the label on us of "extremists" - because we're different!

## Wrap

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The worst cases of extreme nationalism turning into racist violence come about on the basis of fear and ignorance, particularly in smaller towns experiencing economic hardship and uncertainty. Pavlovsky and Umarov are both right when they point to the need for public education. This view is now well established in the political class - led by Putin himself with his latest call for the Culture Ministry and media to lead the charge against racism. But the continuing spate of attacks on foreigners highlights a present danger in the face of which long-term public education programmes seem inadequate.

That danger was aggravated by the authorities' own dalliance with hardline nationalist forces in 2004-5. This partly reflected a perception that the more dangerous political threat to the established order in Russia came not from 'patriotic' nationalists, but rather from supporters of US-backed 'colour' revolutions (orange in Ukraine, rose in Georgia...). Partly also, the existence of an extreme nationalist opposition helps to legitimise the current authorities by a sense that the only realistic alternative is the uncivilised and dangerous extreme nationalist tendency.

Although the Kremlin is now campaigning hard against extreme nationalism, there is an obvious 'genie-let-out-of-the-bottle' danger. Besides its economic flaws, the ban on foreign stallholders in markets may also prove politically counter-productive. Designed to pre-empt extreme nationalist demagoguery, the ban may end up fuelling it.

The Kremlin's control of the political process should, however, suffice to marginalise hardline nationalist movements like KRO. Opinion poll evidence that the majority of the population remains immune to xenophobia rules out the most alarmist 'Weimar' scenarios for Russia.

Yet in the likely event of the successors of the Putin administration losing popularity over time, extreme nationalists could break into the political mainstream. This source of destabilisation must be reckoned among long-term political risks in Russia.