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Kusche, Robert

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ANALYSIS

Racist Violence and Neo-Nazi Movements in Russia

Robert Kusche, Dresden

Abstract

In spite of repression by governmental authorities, a right-wing extremist movement has established itself in Russia. It is winning popular support for its slogans and therefore claims to act as the voice of "the people's will". However, its victims and their families are often marginalized and excluded.

Right-Wing Violence

Racist acts of violence, be it murders, assaults or right-wing terrorism are still almost everyday occurrences in Russia. There are numerous attacks against those perceived as "non-Russians" in the streets. The modus operandi of the extreme right is to aggravate social conflicts and imbue them with racist hatred. Frequently, this results in incidents reminiscent of pogroms.

The 542 racist murders and assassinations of political opponents since 2004 in Russia are only the tip of the iceberg. In 2012, extreme nationalists alone carried out 19 murders. Even if the numbers have been declining since the all-time high of 116 murders in 2008, statistics of the independent observer, the "Sova" center, provide evidence of the continuously high level of violence. The number of registered physical assaults, on the other hand, is comparatively low (187 in 2012), since the victims often do not file charges due to fear of the police and the authorities (see also Statistics p. 19ff.). Moreover, society at large and the media appear to be growing increasingly indifferent to the issue of right-wing violence.

Attitudes and Societal Discourse

What is the reason for this "aversion" to everything that is not "genuinely Russian"? It would be wrong to believe that the phenomenon of racist violence is restricted to the so-called fringes of society. As elsewhere, racism in Russia is based on deep-rooted inhuman attitudes among large parts of society, as well as the church and the state. While Russian President, Vladimir Putin, emphasized in early 2012 that the multiethnic state epitomized Russia's state identity, he simultaneously stressed the special and privileged role of "genuine Russians". This provocative choice of words was aimed at appeasing those nationalist elements of the electorate that had taken part in anti-Putin protests. In a situation in which, according to Levada polls, about 67 per cent of the population approves of the slogan "immigrants are taking Russian jobs" (see Figure 6 on p. 15), and 56 per cent support the notion of "Russia for the Russians" (see Figure 4 on p. 14), Putin's move seems to be in tune with popular sentiment. Moreover, Levada reports that 83 per cent of respondents support the use of "stringent measures" in order to remove illegal immigrants, and 65 per cent call for a reduction of immigration to Russia (see Figure 5 on p. 15 and Figures 1 and 2 on p. 13). Latent attitudes that assign varying levels of value to different groups of people can serve to legitimize right-wing violent offenders, especially if societal authorities do not take a clear stance against those inhuman ideologies.

Ideology

Acting on the assumption of statehood as an ethnically exclusive concept and national chauvinist attitudes, the extreme right cultivates, for example, anti-Semitic notions of a global conspiracy, biological racism, the institution of a dictatorship free of enemies foreign and domestic, and elimination fantasies. Such extreme right-wing ideologies are adaptable to varying degrees. Thus, for example, certain frames of interpretation are able to create a positive reference to German National Socialism. Elements of paganism, as well as the notion of a preemptive strike against "Jewish Bolshevism" are adopted, in order to relate positively to historical National Socialism. The central demand of the Russian extreme right today is the creation of an ethnically cleansed Russia.

Extreme Right-Wing Staging Grounds and Spheres of Activity

In a Russian society in which the authorities and rulers often resolve conflicts by repressive means, the extreme right-wing movement have sought to find issues and staging grounds that are not of major importance to the state in order to avoid repression. The extreme right still has no autonomous party in the State Duma. In spite of its voter potential, it has failed so far to win any seats because of administrative obstacles and internal disagreements. Recently, the "Novaya Sila" (New Power) party, founded in 2012, was barred from registration. In the past, however, the extreme right has been able to count on the support of individual deputies.

However, all serious efforts to take over the parliament to form an extra-political staging ground have so far failed. Therefore, the actors are restricted to the role of an extra-parliamentarian opposition; nevertheless, certain individuals exploit this sphere of activity with sufficient skill to ensure their continued public perceptibility. The most important and biggest event is the

annual "Russian March" of about 5'500 protestors in Moscow. In 2012, it took place for the first time on a route through the city center. The main topics are anti-immigration rhetoric and advocacy of a "pure"—i.e., "white"—Russia. Swastika flags, Nazi salutes, and acts of violence are routine hallmarks of the demonstration. One of the main slogans of the protest—"Stop feeding the Caucasus"—is supported by about 65 per cent of the population, according to a Levada poll (see Figure 9 on p. 17).

In the 2000s, the "Movement Against Illegal Migration" (DPNI), which was banned in 2011, developed a strategy of aggravating and exacerbating social conflicts. The first such incident was observed in 2006 in the small Karelian town of Kondopoga. Members of the movement, who had travelled there, youths, and many inhabitants of the town issued an ultimatum of 24 hours for all Caucasians, who had moved there, to leave Kondopoga and for the re-establishment of "Russian control" of the city market. A massive police presence was required to stop the ensuing riots. From 2006 onwards, there have been at least 17 assaults of this kind all over Russia, including in the regions of Kirov and Stavropol in 2012. The extreme right exploits such "inter-ethnic" conflicts as a stage for spreading its views.

One reason for the prevalence of right-wing violence in Russia is the fact that organizations, such as the DPNI apply the "Kondopoga strategy" to create opportunities, as well as a framework, for such attacks. At the same time, neo-Nazi organizations offer weapons instruction in paramilitary boot camps.

After comparable riots in the center of Moscow in 2007 and 2010, and after international headlines covering a multitude of murders of anti-fascists, migrants, activist lawyers, and journalists by the extreme right, the state reacted with massive crackdowns on organizations and arrests. As early as 2002, the Russian penal code forbade acts of "political, ideological, racist, national, religious hatred and hostility, or against any social group" (RF penal code, Art. 63, paragraph 1e). Moreover, the legislation concerning anti-extremism (Art. 282) allows for the prosecution and ban of "extremist" organizations; however, it is used against disagreeable opposition groups with equal frequency as it is used against extremists.

Extreme Right-Wing Subculture

Additionally, a network of right-wing extremist gangs and subcultures has established itself in Russia that is ready to carry out its aims with physical violence and militant actions in the streets. These groups represent the base of the neo-Nazi movement. They are small, often nameless, not bound into any party structures, and have a low threshold of access for new members—often via concerts, football matches, and other subcultures. Common actions and events, as well as symbols and codes contribute to identity formation. Their repertoire ranges from neighborhood-level sticker and graffiti actions to street violence. Racism and positive references to National Socialism are among their guiding motives.

Music is one of the most important media to transport the ideology and an extreme right-wing lifestyle, and furthermore offers the opportunity for quite profitable sales. Among the most popular Russian neo-Nazi bands are "Kolovrat", "Antisystem", or "Wotan Jugend". All are openly neo-Nazi and refer positively to National Socialism. The songs of "Kolovrat" reference the "heroes" of the Vlassov Army, who collaborated with the Germans during the Second World War. There have also been instances of co-operation between German and Russian bands. The German songwriters Jan Peter and Fylgien played at the Moscow "Price of Freedom" festival on 8 February 2013. Both songwriters are established figures in the German neo-Nazi scene and play regularly at events of the German neo-Nazi NPD party. Jan Peter, who is also the guitarist of the German right-wing rock band "Sleipnir", is said to have contacts with the neo-Nazi "Blood and Honor" music network and to militant groups. He recorded the song "Frei-Sozial-National" (Free-Social-National) together with the Russian band "Russkii Styag" (Russian Banner). Such co-operations show that Russian neo-Nazis have long managed to establish international networks and links. The ideological bracket for international cooperation is the "concept of ethno-pluralism", a vision of "white European peoples" coexisting without "racial miscegenation", and a positive reference to certain aspects of paganism.

The indisputable pervasiveness of the ideology is seen particularly in the case of the extreme right-wing groups that spread fear and terror as "death squads". The so-called Voevodin-Borovikov cell, which was held responsible for at least four murders, was particularly notorious. Borovikov was shot dead by the police during his arrest and has since been considered a hero and martyr of nationalist resistance in Russia.

In 2012, too, neo-Nazis received prison sentences: For instance, ten members of the "Autonomous Combat Terrorist Organization" (ABTO) were sentenced to between eight and ten years in prison for a series of arson and bomb attacks. In Moscow, members of the gang of Jan Lyutik (real name: Yemelyan Nikolaev) were sentenced to between eight and 19 years in prison for participation in several "ethnically motivated" attacks on migrants.

If they are given long prison sentences, the offenders can count on their comrades' support through donation

campaigns, information, and demonstrations of solidarity. The webpage "geroivoli" publishes the names and stories of prisoners, deceased activists, and alleged traitors. A self-perception of being victims of political repression by a state regarded as illegitimate has become part of the collective identity pattern of the extreme right. This creates links to the opposition movement, which often fails to demarcate its own ranks sufficiently from those of the neo-Nazis. Thus, at protest rallies in December 2011, high-ranking neo-Nazis also spoke in front of several thousand demonstrators. Prominent neo-Nazi Vladimir Tor used this public appearance as an opportunity to announce his solidarity with "national" political prisoners.

After the Protests in Winter 2011/12

The participation in the protest of the democratic opposition against Putin, and the concomitant support for pro-Western ideas associated to the mainstream opposition, has given rise to divisions in the right-wing camp. Among many neo-Nazis, frustration at failing to establish their own party has bred a preference for "direct actions" against minorities. At the same time, the state usually only feels compelled to intervene if its monopoly on power and force is being questioned. This is why access to parliament is blocked and certain organizations are banned. It is undisputed that the legislation against extremism and the legal code offer powerful instruments against the extreme right. Their effectiveness is, however, limited because of the high degree of ideological indoctrination of the offenders, their acceptance in society, a lack of political alternatives, and the unwillingness to bring about change regarding the causes of extremism.

About the Author

Robert Kusche is a political scientist and manager of the Information Center for Victims of Right-wing and Racist Violence of the RAA Sachsen e.V.. He spent some time in Moscow as an ASF (Action Reconciliation Service for Peace) volunteer, and wrote his Master's thesis on the extreme right in Russia. He is the co-author of the regional report "Hate Crime in Russia" of the foundation "Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft" (Memory, Responsibility, and Future—EVZ).

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