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Alexei Navalny and challenges in reconciling “nationalism” and “liberalism”

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This article examines the challenges and complexities in the efforts by political activist Alexei Navalny to reconcile “nationalist” and “liberal” modes of thinking in the current Russian environment. After deciphering three major axes of Navalny’s narratives on the national question, the author then discusses the social and political context within which the national-democratic (*Natsdem*) movement was forged. *Natsdems*, who are simultaneously pro-European and democratic but also xenophobic, and who target an audience among the urban middle classes, reflect a fundamental shift in Russian society. The last part of the article discusses the paradoxes of Navalny’s trajectory, in which a failed theoretical articulation between “nationalism,” “democracy,” and “liberalism” nonetheless has translated into a political success.

Keywords: Navalny; Russia; national-democrats; nationalism; liberalism; democracy

Introduction

In September 2013, for the first time since Vladimir Putin was elected president of Russia in 2000, the Kremlin had to manage an election of some importance – that of the Moscow mayor – featuring an opposition candidate who was neither a representative of Soviet nostalgia like the Communist Gennadiy Zyuganov, nor a “puppet” like Vladimir Zhirinovky, and nor a product of the system, such as Dmitriy Rogozin was when he led the *Rodina* (Homeland) party in 2003. The civic activist and blogger behind the anti-Putin slogan “party of crooks and thieves,” Alexei Navalny, was probably more surprised than anyone that he was able to carry out the full term of his candidacy after multiple legal twists and turns and several legal proceedings were initiated against him. The 27% votes he received are a success in the Russian political context. Today he is known by 51% of Russian citizens, a high figure given the control that the Kremlin exercises over major media, in particular television (Rossiyane 2013).

Herald of the anticorruption struggle, Navalny also embodies the new ideological trend of national-democrats (*Natsdem* in Russian), a large and diversified platform that sheds light on the recent evolution of Russian society.

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For some time Russian nationalism had been limited to two main ideological trends, namely ethno-nationalism and Eurasianism, with the latter being divided into two strands, the Eurasianists proper and those who are nostalgic for the greatness of the imperial and/or Soviet past. The sudden emergence of nationalist references among the so-called liberal opponents to Putin has caused confusion among Western pundits. The interpretations put forward have tended to follow a politically correct, black-and-white way of thinking. It has been questioned, for instance, whether ultranationalists could subvert pro-democracy protests (Umland 2012), whether it was a decisive strategy for the “bad guys” to become respectable nationalists, or whether the warm welcome that had been reserved for nationalists by some liberals is a part of a political calculus. This schema implies naively that democracy cannot be nationalist, and that liberalism cannot suddenly become “ill thought.”

Not only does the *Natsdem* movement challenge these conventional, simplistic frameworks, but it also has only been studied in terms of its political significance to anti-Putin movements (Popescu 2012; Verkhovsky 2012). The main goal of this article will thus be to provide an analysis of Navalny’s successes and failures in reconciling “nationalism” with “liberalism,” and to anchor this attempt into a broader societal context. It also aims to reinscribe Russia within the European framework. Nationalism and democracy have advanced in tandem in European history, and nationalism has no predetermined political orientation, merging easily with the politics of both the left and the right. Finally, the contemporary success of xenophobic populist parties in the European Union’s member states should help to qualify the idea that Russia’s current situation is somehow unique.

The first part of the article briefly recalls that Navalny is essentially a politician, not a thinker, which sets limits on the textual analysis that follows. The second part deciphers three major axes of Navalny’s narratives on the national question. The third discusses the social and political context that explains the birth of the *Natsdem* movement, while the fourth investigates the changes of mood in nationalist movements as precursors of this new trend. Finally, the fifth discusses the paradoxes of Navalny’s trajectory, in which a failed theoretical articulation between “nationalism,” “democracy,” and “liberalism” nonetheless has translated into political success.

Navalny: a doer, not a thinker

It is hard to define the *Natsdems* as a movement, properly speaking: some use this self-definition, but others reject it as an outside observers’ label. They are something more akin to a kaleidoscope of individuals with their own set of diverging ideological convictions, ranging from Vladimir Milov, the *Natsdem* who has the most political experience in Putin’s system (he is a former Deputy Energy Minister), and Aleksey Shiropayev inspired by the Western “New Right,” to Valeriy Solovey, a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and author of the well-known *Blood and Soil of Russian History* (Solovey 2008) and Konstantin Krylov, editor of *Questions of Nationalism*

(*Voprosy natsionalizma*; <http://www.vnatio.org/>) and probably the most consequential *Natsdem*, combining intellectual production and political action.

Yet among this group, Alexei Navalny has attracted the greatest Russian and foreign media interest. His nationalistic positions have led to many online debates – ranging from those who, in Western Europe and the USA, dismiss these views so as not to detract from the “Navalny myth” of the perfect Western liberal, to some Russian liberals from the Ekspert media group who compare his success to that which brought Hitler to power, boosted by xenophobic middle classes tired of the previous regime (Mekhanik 2013).

Unlike many other *Natsdem* figures, Navalny first committed to politics as a “liberal” well before being labeled a “nationalist.” He joined Yabloko in 2000 at the age of 24, and rapidly ascended to the upper echelons of the party, through his management of Moscow’s electoral campaign in the nationwide parliamentary election in 2003, and then by becoming a member of the party’s federal council (Golosov 2013).

Yabloko’s repeated failures in the legislative elections of 2003 and 2007 pushed Navalny to search for new political orientations. He began to run under the “national-democrat” label during the period 2006–2007 (Navalny 2007). It seems that after the interethnic riots in Kondopoga (Karelia) in 2006 – which nationalist movements saw as a sign of the long-awaited “Russian national revival” (Kozhevnikova 2007) – Navalny took a nationalist turn. The following year, he launched the “Russian National Liberation Movement,” whose Russian acronym, *Narod*, means “people.” This initiative was sponsored by the shady political analyst and communication specialist Stanislav Belkovskiy, who was then seeking to wrest the monopoly of the anti-Putin nationalist discourse from the hands of Eduard Limonov and his National-Bolsheviks, who then had the wind in their sails (Mokrousova and Reznik 2012). At this time, Navalny also began to follow the Russian March on 4 November,¹ then the only sizeable anti-Putin gatherings, and participated in its organizing committee, which merited his expulsion from Yabloko at the end of 2007 for “causing damage to the party, among other reasons for nationalist activities” (Pribylovskiy 2012).

After being dismissed from the party, Navalny turned in a quasi-professional way to the anticorruption campaigns that brought him notoriety (especially minority shareholder activism and court actions) and launched the RosPil project, which monitors corrupt practices in the government procurement process (<http://www.rosopil.info/>). Created in 2006, his LiveJournal quickly became his “trademark” as the most followed blog on the Russian Internet. With the anti-Putin 2011–2012 winter protests following the announcement of Putin’s renewed bid for the presidency and the December parliamentary elections, Navalny quickly rose to become the most prominent protest figure, and was detained in jail for several days. In 2013, while already under prosecution, he registered as a candidate in the Moscow mayoral election. He was subsequently arrested for his purported involvement in an illegal timber procurement scheme and sentenced to five years in prison, before the decision was suddenly overturned. These zigzags have been interpreted variously as a “glitch” in the political and judicial system, or

as a deliberate strategy – the subtext being the need for the incumbent Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin to have a credible political opponent in order to give his victory more legitimacy (Baev 2013). Navalny was eventually sentenced to five years' probation, a sentence that will forbid him from running in the next presidential elections but will not prevent him from putting his stamp on the Russian political space. He nevertheless occupies a paradoxical position because many among the upper and middle classes in Moscow tired of the Putin status quo do not appreciate the character, his working-class directness, and are concerned about this overly personalized and potentially populist figure.

On several occasions, in particular after becoming the most visible figure of the anti-Putin protests, Navalny has been implored to explain his stance on nationalism and the way it articulates with his democratic position. This question has disquieted not only journalists (at *Ekho Moskvy*, *Lenta*, *Dozhd'* TV, and other outlets) but also popular authors such as Boris Akunin, who found this combination unsettling to say the least and engaged in public correspondence with Navalny. Navalny professes: "I do not see any contradiction in being liberal and speaking at the same time about illegal immigration and ethnic criminality. There is no dilemma there for me, no evolution in my positions" (as quoted in Voronkov 2012, 66). Indeed there may well be no inherent theoretical contradiction. But Navalny has often made contradictory remarks on this reconciling of nationalism and liberalism, or purely and simply refused to answer the questions of interviewers, and quickly became annoyed when journalists insist on having clear-cut and articulated assumptions.

Navalny can only disappoint those who expect from him a modicum of theoretical construction: he is a doer, not a thinker. His goals are eminently political: the broader the support, the better. He is thus not interested in theoretical constructions and refuses to engage in debate over what can be identified as contradictory stances.

However, even before delving into the internal rationale of his comments, Navalny's political tactics in combining "nationalism" and "liberalism" are ambivalent. Although he maintains contact with very many sectors of "civil society," he has never given any support to groups and NGOs that fight against racism and xenophobia, or to "antifa" movements – the antifascist youths, often heavily marked by a leftist stance (Belikov 2012) – and he has never allied with the few groups or figures who defend migrants.

Among the nationalist groups, Navalny openly criticizes only those founded on imperialist rhetoric or nostalgia for the Soviet Union, in particular the Eurasianists, which views him as an American agent (Yevraziya 2013). For Navalny, these groups cannot claim to be nationalist because they are nothing more than "Soviet patriots." And here one can find a long-standing debate, ongoing since the nineteenth century, on whether to adopt a more restrictive definition of nationalism that is limited to ethno-nationalism or a broader one that encompasses imperial movements (Walicki 1989).

Navalny refrains from criticizing other nationalist movements – even when skinheads commit unlawful racist crimes or right-wing ideologues misrepresent

democratic principles that he claims to uphold. He claims, for instance, that the Russian March represents a positive development for nationalism that is “totally adequate and absolutely not dangerous” (Lenta 2011). He hopes for it to “normalize” as an event for “normal” citizens and not only skinheads. Navalny also defended Aleksandr Belov and Dmitriy Demushkin, the latter who is a notorious neo-Nazi, both of whom stand accused of inciting racial hatred, and was troubled only by their enthusiasm for Chechnya as a role model for Russia upon their return from a meeting with Kadyrov (RIA Novosti 2011; Kolezev and Borodin 2012). Finally Navalny does not hide his support for Belov’s Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), recalling that the Swiss People’s Party and the French National Front are much more radical, yet are still recognized as legitimate actors in the Western European political space (Lenta 2011).

Navalny’s ideological inconsistencies on the national question

Navalny does not really advance new propositions to recast the Russian national identity debate; on the contrary, he reproduces many of the clichés currently being used in public space. He never directly opposes the official discourse except that concerning the definition of the state – *rossiyskiy* (civic) or *russkiy* (ethnocultural) – but instead participates in the Kremlin-backed general consensus on the “problems” created by migrants from the North Caucasus and Central Asia.

Russia as a “russkiy” national state

Navalny strongly rejects journalists who ask him how he can subscribe to two contradictory ideologies, democracy and nationalism. For him, there is no contradiction here; on the contrary, both are part of the same stream: European nation-states were born in the nineteenth century out of the connection between the entry of the masses onto the political scene and the establishment of a national repertoire (e.g., language, significant historical events, and a pantheon of heroes), whereby an official line is drawn between that which does and does not belong to the nation. Russia now finds itself in a similar situation: the imperial/Soviet past was autocratic/authoritarian and shedding it means re-associating the nation and democracy. This combination of nationalism and democracy underscores Russia’s European identity: “A nationalist . . . is a person oriented toward Europe. Russian nationalism is an ideology that is very close to the European mainstream, more so than one assumes” (quoted in Voronkov 2012, 70).

Based on the assumption that democracy and nationalism walk hand-in-hand, Navalny states that Russia has no choice but to transform itself into a nation-state, defined as a Russian national state (*russkoye natsional’noye gosudarstvo*). The use of the adjective *natsional’noye* implies that the country’s federal structure should be abolished. Navalny’s argument in favor of the abolition of federalism is that it is a legacy of the imperial past and an extension of Soviet administrative divisions designed to help keep local oligarchs in power. The use of the adjective *russkiy* is

more difficult to decipher. Navalny considers the notion of *rossiyskiy* to be a “chimera” (Manifest 2007) inherited from the Yel’tsin years; separating the two terms, *rossiyskiy* and *russkiy*, accelerates the denationalization of the country, and there should be only one term, as is the case in some European countries.

Unlike ethno-nationalists in the 1990s, Navalny’s usage of the term *russkiy* is indecisive: it is supposed to have a civic, rather than exclusively ethnic connotation. Because it is democratic, the new *russkiy* identity would be compatible with the ethnic diversity of the country, offering the option of assimilation to those who desire it, as well as the respect for cultural differences in the name not of federal, but of democratic principles. However, Navalny has failed to explain the context in which this civic *russkiy* identity would emerge. The *Narod* manifesto reproduces, for instance, very classic statements common to all Russian nationalist movements:

The principal goal of the Russian state (*rossiyskiy*) is to stop the processes of degradation of the Russian civilization (*russkiy*), and to create the conditions for the preservation and development of the Russian people (*russkiy*), its culture, its language, its historical territory. (Manifest 2007)

The use of *russkiy* to define a civic nation struggling against the Putin regime for democratic rights is totally absent in the *Narod* manifesto.

On the contrary, an ethnic interpretation of the nation seems to dominate Navalny’s narrative. On Ukrainian television in 2012, the blogger stated that the Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian peoples were one: “I’m deeply convinced that Ukraine and Belarus are the most important geopolitical allies of Russia. Our foreign policy should be maximally directed at integration with Ukraine and Belarus ... In fact, we’re one nation. We should enhance the integration” (Nieczypo 2012). Facing the reactions of the audience, Navalny had to be more nuanced and defined Ukraine as a “sister nation.” These ambiguities are revealing. If *russkiy* is a civic term encompassing all citizens of the Russian state, then ethnic solidarity with neighboring states cannot be stressed. In addition, while Navalny wants to spearhead criticism toward any kind of authoritarian regime in Russian history, he has been incapable of denouncing Tsarist or Soviet violence against Ukrainian cultural autonomy, which puts him in the classic position of the *gosudarstvennik*, who defends Russia’s imperial legacy no matter what.

A similar paradox can be found in Navalny’s position on the issue of religion. A defender of the separation of church and state, who condemns any discrimination against other religions or atheists, he nonetheless asserts that “the religion of Russia is Orthodox Christianity” (Razgovor 2013). These words help to further blur his message. By failing to clearly separate the cultural symbols used by the church and the legal status of the different confessions, Navalny remains opaque in his political stances. He presents himself as “a Soviet Orthodox: I was baptized, but I don’t attend mass” (Esquire.ru 2011). But he has never questioned the current strategy of the Patriarchate of Moscow of penetrating public institutions such as schools and the military, even though it is a direct challenge to the separation of church and state.

The anti-North Caucasus narrative

Like other *Natsdem*, Navalny sees the North Caucasus as a central element of Russia's problems. In spring 2011, he co-launched the successful media campaign "Stop Feeding the Caucasus" (*Khvatit kormit' Kavkaz*), which voices that the autocratic and corrupt regimes of the North Caucasus – and especially that of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya – are the archetype of Putin's system (Malakhov and Malakhova 2010). One does not function without the other: The disappearance of Putin's system would provoke the collapse of the North Caucasian regimes and the fight against them would bring a direct blow to Putin, because non-democracy in Russia is the fruit of poor management of the Caucasian conflict beginning with the first war in 1994 (Rothrock 2012). To support his statement, Navalny advances several arguments. The first is on the outlaw nature of the Chechen regime, in particular the supra-powers that the Kremlin has *de facto* granted to Kadyrov, which allow him to operate outside the Russian legal system and instead as a personal servant of Putin. The second is on the repatriation of budget subsidies. The North Caucasus Federal District receives some of the highest levels of subsidy in the country, especially compared to what it contributes to the budget. Navalny has launched his own investigations into government spending, proposing the full civil society's control over the expenditure of public funds in the North Caucasian republics (Navalny 2012).

However, when journalists question him about Chechnya's future in Russia, Navalny struggles to take a definite stance, hesitating between identifying the North Caucasus as a political problem, and North Caucasians as either alien to Russian culture or backward on a civilizational scale. He stated, for instance, that Chechnya is no longer a *de facto* part of Russia, because Russian law no longer applies there, but he refuses to support the secession of the republic (Lenta 2011). Even as he tries to link the North Caucasian situation to the fundamental malpractices of Putin's regime, his remarks regularly imply that the North Caucasus is an area that is "culturally foreign" to Russia. In 2007, when *Narod* sought to draw closer to the DPNI, then at its peak, Navalny made a video clip supporting the legalization of firearms – a key DPNI demand – conflating "Islamic terrorism" and "Caucasians," whom he describes both as "vermin" and "cockroaches" that ought to be eradicated by firearms (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=oVNJiO10SWw). This is not the only time that Navalny's willfully provocative remarks have played the chord of racist humor to address the population in an instinctive manner while avoiding legal proceedings.

In many of his interviews after becoming more of a media figure, Navalny has tried to normalize his standpoint, while still maintaining fundamental ambiguities. He proclaims for instance the need to shield Russian territory from Caucasian "problems," but does not elaborate on what this would mean concretely (e.g., as proposed by some other nationalists, erecting a new administration border between Stavropol Kray and the North Caucasus republics). Moreover, Navalny has called for amnesty for federal forces that committed violence during wars in

Chechnya (Manifest 2007), which seems to imply that violence carried out by ethnic Russians against Caucasians is excusable. This amnesty claim has been common to nationalist movements since the first war of 1994–1996, but stands in contradiction with the *Natsdem* position of denouncing illegal acts of Putin’s regime, and especially of the security services. It is only on questions of internal migration of North Caucasians, and in particular of Dagestanis, to other regions of Russia that Navalny seems to often – but not systematically – distinguish himself from other nationalist voices, insofar as he considers that all Russian citizens have the right to move freely in the country.

New nuances in the anti-migration discourse?

Similar inaccuracies are found in Navalny’s stance on the migration issue. He has never offered a precise vision of the relationship he wants for Russia with its Near Abroad. He criticizes all projects for the territorial expansion of Russia, in which he sees the strategy of “an elite that steals from the population on behalf of a slogan to conquer half the world” (Razgovor 2013), and believes that the attraction of a democratic and developed Russia will be enough to draw in neighboring countries. However, he does not favor any rapprochement with Central Asia (the South Caucasus is rarely mentioned). To the contrary, he wants the introduction of a visa regime with Central Asian states, and draws a parallel with the construction of the wall at the US–Mexico border: it shows that the USA has more courage to defend its national interests than Russia does (*Ekho Moskvy* 2013).

When asked about the Russian economy’s need for labor, Navalny is not able to give a clear answer and moves quickly to the role of Central Asian migrants in the development of drug trafficking in Russia (Lenta 2011). However, when interviewed by Aleksey Venediktov on *Ekho Moskvy* (2013), he was pushed to recognize that the figures he had cited on migrant criminality (that Central Asian and South Caucasian migrants were responsible for 50% of all crimes committed in Moscow) were false (these crimes are largely committed by non-Muscovite Russians, and only 1.7% by foreign passport holders). Similarly, he remains blurry about the conditions for and degree of migrant integration: he pledges, “I am for assimilation, not deportation. If you want to live here, then become a Russian . . . Arriving in the US, the majority of people become American” (Esquire.ru 2011). However, during his interview on *Ekho Moskvy*, he came out against any mass naturalization of migrants, and thus showed himself to be far from the American or Canadian model that he seemed to endorse. He states that “those who come to our country but do not wish to respect our laws and our traditions must be expelled” (Manifest 2007), but remains imprecise on what respecting the law means when the law enforcement agencies themselves are known for their endemic corruption, and on how the so-called national “traditions” can be defined. Navalny has thus failed in explaining how state organs can be both judge and party in the migration “problem,” and in debating the opacity of the Russian administration in legalization processes for migrants and the role of the police services in racketing migrants.

Navalny's narrative on migration becomes more fully elaborated only in 2013 with his entry into the Moscow mayoral campaign. In his electoral platform, he emphasizes the role of "corrupt officials" who put migrants "in situations of slavery" and discusses measures to force businesses to hire legal migrants. He also mentions an integration program for migrants founded on learning the Russian language and education for children (Programma 2013). He proposes a more systematic policy to combat illegal immigration (the introduction of a visa system), but does not formulate a position on legal immigration (he never comments on the Russian economy's need for migrants or the population demographic issue) or on the citizenship question (how migrants will become citizens).

Leonid Volkov, Navalny's right-hand man in the Moscow mayoral race, was more specific in recognizing that several unrelated issues have accumulated in the minds of the public and that they must be separated into at least four categories, with each warranting its own response: (1) "Uzbeks and Tajiks" and the labor-market competition they pose for increasingly skilled positions; (2) the North Caucasus, which is not a migration problem; (3) "Azeri on the markets"; and finally (4) "relations with Muslims" in general (Lenta 2013). Volkov promised a specific response to each of these questions during the campaign, but Navalny's platform has remained one of generalities. The way Volkov typologizes these four issues, however, does not announce a comprehensive assessment of Russia's migration policy, and pursues a primordialist narrative about the specific tensions allegedly created by each ethnic group.

Navalny's ambivalence on the migration issue resurfaced in October 2013, during the riots in an outer suburb of Moscow, Biryulevo – the largest nationalist demonstrations since Manezh Square in 2010. The blogger re-tweeted several nationalist statements (Fitzpatrick 2013) and offered its own, sympathetic, explanation of the popular despondency: "One of the expected consequences of such a concentration of migrants [in Biryulevo] is that 50% of the children of neighboring schools do not speak Russian, you understand yourselves that this does not arouse enthusiasm among locals (*korennyye*)" (<http://www.navalny.livejournal.com/868200.html>). Navalny thus participates in the mainstream by denouncing both the concentration of migrants in ghettos and their lack of integration, and wields the vocabulary shared from Putin to the ultranationalists in speaking of Russians as "locals" or "indigenous." Hence he offers no alternative reading by which it would be possible to effectively target the malfunctioning of the Russian bureaucratic system that fuels the violent interaction between "migrants" and "locals."

His views on migration policy remain vague as well. He talks of "reducing the number of migrants, introducing a visa regime which only allows highly skilled migrants in, and increasing work productivity" (<http://www.navalny.livejournal.com/868200.html>). But he does not advance any economic strategy that would allow the country to forgo immigration – only the very fuzzy terminology of "work productivity" seems to suggest a revalorization of unskilled jobs with a view to attract Russian citizens. He also calls for a visa system uniquely designed

for Central Asia and the South Caucasus, but not for Ukraine and Moldova, with the implication that Russia's immigration problem is cultural or "civilizational," not legal or economic (*Ekho Moskvy* 2013).

Navalny as a mirror of Russia's changing identity framework

This *Natsdem* narrative was not born with the December 2011 protests, although it was these protests that gave it prominence in the media. Rather the movement arose out of cumulative changes in social, cultural, and political values in post-Soviet Russia. Russia's national identity is now increasingly discussed in the public space in a defensive way: Russia's historical territorial expansion and its imperial legacy, once celebrated as the core of nationalist feelings, has been replaced by a narrative about the risk of losing Russia's "Russianness." The social groups that have benefited most from the changes of the Putin decades – the middle classes, young, and educated people in large cities – are also the most shaped by the xenophobic narrative.

Between the second half of the 1990s and the end of the 2000s, certain ideas once disparaged as "nationalist" have become legitimate in the public debate, a fact that drastically shifted the overall narrative on Russia's national identity. The theme of federalism, which had dominated in the 1990s, is no longer the angle by which this issue is discussed. The country recentralized during Putin's first stint as president; the economic strongholds of governors were returned to the federal fold via new fiscal policies that favored the center to the detriment of the regions; and the "sovereignty" of autonomous republics is now limited to symbolic questions around language and culture (Chebankova 2010). The issue of the North Caucasus, which profoundly shaped the 1990s, has been transformed. The struggle for autonomy/independence, once framed in anticolonial terms, is now mired in low-intensity and localized conflicts that link corrupt state organs, private militias and mafia groups, and Islamist movements (Kuchins, Malarkey, and Markedonov 2011).

Traditional ethnic diversity as represented by the autonomous republics is no longer in play, as new, unexpected ethnic diversity brought about by labor migration has become the engine of the debate on national identity. In the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, Russia's ethnic diversity was expressed in three well-defined and generally agreed upon frameworks: (1) diversity was territorialized (minorities lived in a relatively compact way in certain regions of the country); (2) it was culturally integrated (the modes of expression of ethnic identities were well articulated within the national whole and integrated into a larger framework of the "friendship of peoples"); and (3) it was politically controlled (the mechanisms of subordination were well established, even if interethnic tensions could suddenly erupt at the local level).

Ethnic diversity brought about by labor migration does not fit into any of these preestablished frameworks. It is not territorialized and instead spreads across the entire Russian territory, including regions in which ethnic diversity had been previously unknown. It is not culturally accepted because, although most of the

migrants are former Soviet citizens speaking at least some Russian, they are no longer included in the national imaginary (Pain 2007). Even supporters of a Eurasianist reading of Russia, a distinct minority, have a difficult time developing pro-migrant narratives (Laruelle 2008). Finally, it does not benefit from any political mechanisms that frame it. To the contrary, labor migration puts the dysfunctions of Putin's Russia on full display in terms of the corruption of state organs and the lack of a legal environment conducive to legalizing migrants and integrating them into Russian society.

In this context, xenophobia, especially against migrants (*migrantofobiya* in Russian), has become one of the new discourses of Putin's Russia, creating broad consensus among a population otherwise split by ideological, lifestyle, income, social, and age differences (Laruelle 2010). This rhetoric was common to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (*Liberal'no-demokraticheskaya partiya Rossii*, LDPR), but it was then taken up by Rogozin's Motherland (Rodina), which largely contributed to its normalization. The roles of United Russia and pro-Kremlin youth movements such as Nashi also have helped to render anti-migrant speech politically correct (Kozenko 2006; Dafflon 2009; Levintova and Butterfield 2010). Since the mid-2000s, sociological surveys carried out by the Levada Center have shown regular increases in xenophobic sentiment and fear of migrants, peaking in 2007–2008. Contrary to Western European patterns, xenophobia in Russia is more frequent among people with higher levels of education and considerably above average income. The groups expressing xenophobia are mostly educated urbanites, as well as youth (Obshchestvennaya palata 2011). Today, support for introducing a visa regime for Central Asians and Azerbaijanis is at an all-time high – 84% of all respondents in a July 2013 Levada Center poll (Otnosheniye 2013).

The latest ROMIR survey, dating from May 2013, confirmed that Moscow city displays the highest levels of xenophobia, opposes the lifting of quota restrictions on the hiring of immigrant workers and assesses that immigrants represent some kind of a threat to Russia – because of terrorism and theft, risk of interethnic and religious hostility or violence, and undermining the Russian economy (NEORUSS-ROMIR 2013). The rise of Islamophobia is also a totally new phenomenon in Russian history. In the ROMIR survey, 74% of Muscovites agreed, fully or to some degree, that Islam represents a threat to Russian culture and to social stability in the country. Since the 1990s, Moscow has been a theater for virulent anti-migrant propaganda, which former Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov used as a tool to bolster his legitimacy – for example, via the publication of a much discussed “Muscovite's Code” in 2010–2011 (Pyatiletova 2010). The nationalist riots on Manezhnaya Square in December 2010 also dramatically raised the population's sensitivity to migration-related issues (Kozhevnikova and Verkhovskiy 2011). Racist skinhead violence as well as riots between “Russian” and “Caucasian” groups of youths are growing. Everything that happens in Moscow has a high level of significance for the entire country, be it anti-Putin protests or anti-migrant violence. Moscow continues to “set the tone,” and the

visibility that Navalny has acquired in the capital illustrates well the xenophobic mood of the new middle classes.

Navalny, the embodiment of nationalists' new strategy?

New generations of nationalist activists have also changed both their strategies and narratives, and found with xenophobia an area of large consensus with the population. Nationalists' room for maneuver had been diminishing over the years, and they had to learn to negotiate the reduction of their civil liberties, in particular constraints on associations. However, many of them have managed to maintain privileged links with some members of the security services or politicians who guaranteed them protection (a *krysha*), and some have even gone beyond the control of their protectors (Kozhevnikova 2010). They also have been successful in maintaining their presence via street activism and have invaded the blogosphere (Zuev 2011; Yudina 2012). They additionally have had to evolve their ideologies in order to respond to the Kremlin's occupation of the discursive field of nationalism via state-backed patriotism. The more the Kremlin has taken control of different themes once linked to the "nationalist brand," the more the nationalist movements have had to find new discursive niches – and anti-migrant discourse has been one of the most successful. Finally new generations of nationalist activists have emerged: younger, speaking foreign languages, able to travel abroad, with connections to their Western European and American counterparts, and wanting to anchor their own narrative within more globalized ideological trends, they increasingly advocate for a Europeanization of Russian nationalist values (Laruelle 2010).

Two precursor movements to *Natsdem* illustrate these multiple evolutions: the anti-Putin strategy of the *Limonovtsy* and the DPNI's calls for European populism. The *Limonovtsy*, supporters of Eduard Limonov and his National-Bolshevik Party until it was banned in 2007, represent a unique case in the history of nationalist movements in Russia. Contrary to the position of other groups that endorse one or another form of nationalism, the *Limonovtsy* present themselves at the extreme left of the political spectrum, not the right. Since the creation of the movement in 1993, their collective *mise-en-scène* and repertoire of actions have barely changed: they remain dominated by leftist revolutionary narrative, rituals of belonging, worship of sacrifice, violent street activism, and clashes with the police (Rogachevski 2003). However, under the personal influence of Limonov, their tactics have evolved. While the movement still claims to be fighting against the crimes of European liberal thought, Limonov was one of the founding members of the political coalition Other Russia back in 2006. Limonov and another Other Russia founder, Garry Kasparov, closely collaborated in the Marches of the Discontented (or Dissenters' Marches) and the Strategy-31 protests² that inaugurated the wave of civic protests (Golyenko 2012), even if Limonov later became an ardent denouncer of Navalny and of the protests in general. The *Limonovtsy* never endorsed a liberal or democratic nationalism – two antithetical adjectives to their political conceptions. However, they were the first, within the

nationalist camp, to give prevalence to tactics over ideology and to consider that the fight against Putinism necessitated an alliance with the so-called liberals and democrats.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum is Aleksandr Belov, the former leader of the DPNI, which throughout the entire decade of the 2000s grouped under its banner many skinhead groups (Laruelle 2009) before being banned in 2011. In 2008, he announced a change of strategy by moving away from far right radicalism to transform the DPNI into a “respectable nationalist movement with European tendencies” (Kozenko and Krasovskaya 2008) on the model of the French National Front or Jörg Haider’s Alliance for the Future of Austria. In several interviews, Belov has continued to clamor loudly and clearly for this change, stating that there is no future for nationalism in Russia without its Europeanization. He thus embodies a growing part of the Russian far right that desires to ally with Europe and the USA in the name of defending the “white world” in its civilizational war against “peoples of color” (Laruelle 2010).

Belov entertains close and ambiguous relations with some Kremlin and state security circles, particularly thanks to his contacts with former Rodina leaders Dmitry Rogozin and Andrey Saveliyev. However, his main means of visibility, the 4 November Russian March, has now become politicized, with its anti-Putin tone growing in pitch (Verkhovsky 2012). The first political slogans, mainly directed against the security services and in favor of releasing prisoners of conscience, emerged in the 2007 March. But the real turning point dates back to 2010, when the March Steering Committee released more structured slogans against Putin’s political system, and appeals for bottom-up changes emerged: “Putin, Leave”; “End the Power of the KGB”; “Down with Sovereign Democracy”; “Down with the Police State”; and “Freedom to Political Prisoners.” The character of these appeals is not surprising, given that many nationalists and the *Limonovtsy* have had their brothers-in-arms jailed and convicted. The Russian March thus has contributed, even if indirectly, to formulating and mobilizing a distinctly anti-Putin atmosphere.

Even if already a few years ago Belov presented a potential pro-European turn of the far right narrative, he was not alone in his desire to join the anti-Putin protests in 2011–2012 alongside the liberals. The majority of the extreme-right groups were quick to participate in meetings in the hope of overcoming their marginal status and finding themselves in the media spotlight. This strategy bore some fruit: their visibility increased when they managed to reach the podium at the large demonstrations in Bolotnaya Square. But the masses of the movement did not follow their leaders and only several hundred young nationalists regularly marched with the liberals, while the majority rejected the idea of compromising with them. The highest-ranking nationalist figures were successful in integrating themselves into two opposition coordination councils, each with ideological quotas for three groups: liberals, leftists, and nationalists (Verkhovsky 2012). The nationalists thus had their own quota, but some were also elected in other groups – for instance Ilya Lazarenko, founder of an Aryan pagan church, the Nav Church, as part of the liberal curia (Yudina and Alperovich 2013). The

legacy of these protest activities for far right groups is essentially: (1) their multiple attempts to create new political movements, such as “The Russians” (*Ruskiye*), which succeeded in developing an overarching structure for diverse nationalist trends; and (2) their entry onto the stage of “big politics,” at least for a time.

The nagging question of transforming the *Natsdem* movement into a political party has been in the spotlight since its inception, and even more so since the 2011–2012 protests and the changes to legislation on political parties that followed.³ In practice there are many, almost impossible to fulfill, requirements for launching such a party: the legal registration requirements of the Ministry of Justice and the capacity of different leaders to cooperate, not to mention electoral success. In March 2012, Konstantin Krylov of the Russian Civic Movement, Anton Suslov of the Russian Civic Union, and Vladimir Tor of the DPNI announced the creation of a National Democratic Party. The party program was very moderate in its nationalist discourse, which prompted the departure of more radically oriented thinkers. However, the ministry denied the party’s application for registration (Zheleznova 2013).

Articulating “nationalism,” “democracy,” and “liberalism”

The terminological ambiguities used to describe the ideological space occupied by Navalny and the *Natsdem* movement does not contribute to clarifying the debate. Linking a nationalist-oriented narrative to calls for a more democratic Russia existed in the dissidence of the Soviet era and during the *glasnost*’ and *perestroika* campaigns, but was a largely nonexistent ideological combination on the Russian political scene in the 1990s. At that time, the “liberals” were reluctant to address the national identity question; they saw it as a heavy legacy of the Soviet regime on which it was better not to dwell, and adhered to a Yel’tsin-era discourse of the Russian civic nation (*rossiyskiy*) framed among others by Valeriy Tishkov, director of the Miklukho-Maklay Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology (Tishkov 2013). Within it, debates on ethnic identity were considered the domain of backward-looking political groups, whether Communist or nationalist, or reserved for discussing the status of republics (especially those in the North Caucasus and the Volga–Urals) within the Federation.

The situation changed fundamentally in the 2000s. The “liberals” of the Yel’tsin era had disappeared from the political scene, discredited by the Putin regime’s ability to garner significant increases in living standards. To appear “liberal” in Russia today no longer means the same thing as it did at the fall of the Soviet Union. If a majority of Yabloko voters continue to consider that nationalism is unacceptable to their convictions, many of the anti-Putin opposition figures of recent years have neither taken a clear antinationalist stance nor condemned the support they have received from extreme right-wing movements. A leading example in this regard is Garry Kasparov, who has never concealed his sympathy for some nationalist slogans, allied with Eduard Limonov during several years, and has come out in defense of the conspiracy theories of alternate historian Anatoliy Fomenko (Laruelle 2012).

As stated by Verkhovsky (2012):

The opposition has no selection criteria: if someone is in favor of free and fair elections and democracy (in whatever form – no one goes into the details), and against Putin, there are no grounds for throwing them out, since these three points make up the entire opposition agenda.

Obviously some historical references like the Black Hundreds, or Stalin’s “great Russian chauvinism” and its anti-Semitic policies are viewed very negatively by liberals. But for the majority of them, just like their fellow citizens, a certain level of patriotism and, more importantly, an anti-migrant stance, do not fall under the category of “nationalism.”

The economist Mikhail Delyagin, known for his social-democratic positions, attempted to create a nationalist-populist party “Motherland–Common Sense” (*Rodina–Zdravyi Smysl*) with Maksim Kalashnikov, a radical publicist claiming a National Socialist ideology (Delyagin 2010). Even in one of the bastions of liberal thought, radio station *Ekho Moskvy*, some antiliberal journalists such as Yuliya Latynina, who in 2008 was awarded the American Freedom Defenders Award, published very strong arguments against what she sees as “the de-Russification of Russia” (Kolsto 2013). One of the opponents of Vladimir Putin in the 2012 presidential election, oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, was unambiguous about the necessity to introduce a visa system for Central Asian countries. Among the Russian opposition movement Democratic Choice, headed by Vladimir Milov, numerous liberals, such as Kirill Rodionov, a Research Fellow at the Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy who has published in *Forbes Russia*, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, and *Vedomosti*, professes that Russia is “self-liquidating” by accepting too many migrants from Central Asia, since they threaten its national and European identity (Rodionov 2013).

Outside observers as well as the *Natsdems* themselves seem to use the terms “nationalist democrats” and “liberal nationalists” interchangeably. Apart from the nuances entailed by the choice between a proper noun and an adjective (nationalists/nationalist), the indiscriminate use of *democrat* and *liberal*, common for many years, presents more problems than it solves. Democracy is a form of government in which citizens participate equally, which recognizes the majority opinion as its driving force, the need for public participation, and alternation in power between different political forces as a normal process. Liberalism is a political philosophy, not a form of government, which presupposes that individuals – and not collectivities or social groups – ought to have their own political and economic rights (right of representation, of expression, and of thought; right to private property; etc.).

Navalny’s democratic engagement in the current context cannot be doubted, and can be “evidenced” through his practices. But his liberal convictions are formulated essentially around the topic of the right to free elections and the government’s accountability toward society, less about free speech, tolerance, or equality. The other aspects of liberalism as a political philosophy, in particular the notion of a social contract and that of citizenship, remain largely absent from his

repertoire. Moreover he regularly uses the term “liberals” (but not “liberalism”) to criticize liberal groups that refuse to discuss national identity, and associates them with human rights activists and other advocacy groups in a disdainful manner (see for instance <http://navalny.livejournal.com/142157.html>). His nationalist stance is compatible with his democratic commitment, as in both cases preeminence is given to the majority statistic. But Navalny’s nationalism does not seem to be articulated with his liberalism: the former identifies groups endowed with their own identity (“Caucasians,” “migrants,” “Russians”...) whereas the latter believes only in individual rights. This fundamental shift of narrative from the individual to the collective prevents Navalny from taking his engagement in favor of “liberalism” to its logical conclusion.

Looking at it more closely, it seems that if “ethnic Russians” are endowed with rights of both a collective and an individual identity, “non-Russians” exist only through their collective rather than individual identities. Hence the total absence with Navalny of any discursive range about the violated rights of the Russian *citizens* of the North Caucasian republics or those of *individuals* in work migration. This undeclared dissociation between a “them” and an “us” has structured the understanding of alterity since Antiquity. The Roman world distinguished between two conceptions of the people. The *populus Romanus* is the only one – along with the Jews – to have a history and a constitutional nature, to be born of an act of political association, of enlightened consent, whereas the *barbarians* pertain to nature: they are what they are by essence, by birth. The Romans thus form the political *nation* par excellence, other *peoples* being understood as genealogical phenomena. If the complexity of its own society’s construction appeared as a self-evident thing, alterity continued to be understood in ontological terms. The difference between “civic identity” and “ethnic identity,” between *demos* and *ethnos* thus intersects often with that between identity and alterity, since one’s own group is defined as a *demos* but alterity is projected as an *ethnos*. Navalny’s stance and actions can thus be labeled democratic, but not liberal.

But this ideological deadlock is not necessarily a political one, to the contrary. The media focus on Navalny can be explained by his status as the most popular blogger and civic activist in Russia and the embodiment of the anti-Putin opposition; even if it is not justified in terms of his contributions to the “history of ideas.” Navalny is not a theorist, and does not claim to be one. His ability to organize various principles into a logical whole is weak. Without passing judgment on the intrinsic value of the arguments being advanced, they are inconsistent and poorly articulated. Navalny’s nervousness in response to delicate questions posed by some interviewers illustrates his distaste for ideological approaches. That the *Natsdem* movement does not have an ideologue worthy of the title is not in itself a problem for political action. The public opinion is not searching for theories, and Navalny’s comments on the North Caucasus and migrants do not need theoretical sophistication in order to gather popular support. Very many persons who do not share his nationalist beliefs provide him support as an anti-system symbol. Moreover, it is likely that Navalny’s political experience must be studied as a process: he seems to have matured over the last year and today is trying to

make his statements much more structured. But he remains above all oriented toward political action, and wants to mobilize the largest number: his ideological malleability will thus remain an indispensable element of his political success.

Conclusion

Russian society remains socially diverse and stratified according to geography, generation, and access to culture. In this context, “nationalism” can only also be polyphonic. To each their own nationalism: nationalism for the losers of post-Soviet reforms, who express themselves with protest votes for the Communist Party or Zhirinovskiy’s LDPR; nationalism for political elites, who backed United Russia’s call for a patriotism combining Soviet nostalgia and post-Soviet realities; nationalism for the young lower-middle classes who express themselves via skinhead violence. The Kremlin’s capacity to manage the masses through the nationalist narrative has never been monopolistic and now is increasingly challenged. In such a context, the birth of a new movement, the *Natsdems*, simultaneously pro-European and democratic, but also xenophobic, and targeting an audience among the urban middle classes, responds to a fundamental shift in Russian society.

However, the *Natsdems* are not the sole competitors in this arena. A personality such as Dmitriy Rogozin, who links the old generation of “official nationalists” (Sergey Baburin, Natalia Narochitskaya) and far right movements, also tries to occupy a relatively similar niche, based on a modernizing nationalism defined by anti-migrant xenophobia, but rejecting pro-European liberalism, arguing for very modest domestic reforms, and the pursuit of a great power status on the international scene.

With or without Navalny as their flagship, the *Natsdems* have the potential to contribute to Russia’s political debate, but they cannot, at least for now, offer innovative solutions to the issues they flag. Advocating for a unitary Russian national state in which minority ethnic groups would be relegated to folk status may be possible for the Siberian populations, but not for Russian Muslims and even less so for the North Caucasians. To openly advocate for the abandonment of the republics of the North Caucasus is a political gesture that few are willing to take – even if it is increasingly popular.⁴ In practice, it would leave little hope that this region could avoid disaster scenarios that would force Russia to remain involved there. Diluting the ethnic republics by merging them with “Russian” oblasts – a strategy employed in the mid-2000s in the name of economic and administrative rationality – also seems difficult to implement. On the immigration issue, the *Natsdems* are again unable to provide a structured policy with realistic outcomes. It is not enough to stop the process of Eurasian integration (Customs Union, Eurasian Economic Space) and turn to the European Union. It still is necessary to define the long-term interaction between the neighboring countries whose people are looking for jobs and a Russian economy that lacks a sufficient workforce. What visa policy in a country with no functional guarded borders, what methods of calculating quotas, what type of battle against illegal economies and their undocumented workforce, and what policy for the tens of thousands of North

Caucasians who leave their troubled homelands for other parts of a country of which they are citizens?

Although *Natsdems* argue rightly that the overthrow of the Putin regime is a precondition for change, they have not really articulated how a parliamentary republic and a democratic system would regulate the “interethnic” relations that they continue to understand in an essentialist mode. To their credit, they can point to their contributions in reintegrating the national theme in political debates, especially among the liberals. As the European Union countries are currently rediscovering, the social contract cannot be shaped without including the topic of “belonging” to the nation. There will not be a civic identity in Russia without *also* discussing the defining line between those who belong and the others (migrants), without defining which intermediary bodies are legally recognized and which are not (ethnic groups), and without a broad consensus on the cultural framework that allows society to operate on a daily basis (the use of a common language and a minimum set of shared cultural and historical references).

However until now, and despite their declarations of intent, the *Natsdems* have failed to offer a concept of civic belonging to the nation that does not reproduce the classic clichés of Russian nationalism. They have failed to articulate a liberalism that is founded on individual rights and a nationalism that believes in essentialized collective identities. They continue to assert their solidarity toward extreme right-wing movements that deny all legitimacy to democracy theories. They are, however, self-consistent in negating Russia’s specific path and anchoring the country within a fully assumed pan-European framework. As in Western and Central Europe, these new formulations of the social contract, which rely on xenophobic populism, have ideologically failed to elaborate a new doctrinal corpus, but are a tactical success in conveying the identity anxieties of a relatively large segment of the population. “Nationalism” is thus not a product of the Putin regime, but a flexible, ideological instrument that can be a part of almost any political toolkit. It has its place in an anti-Putin political context, as well as in a post-Putin Russia, and anti-migrant nationalists will remain legitimate actors of the “big politics” scene in the years to come. The Russian *Natsdems*, just like some of their counterparts in Western and Central Europe, confirm that democracy can be intolerant.

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Notes

1. The Russian March is an annual mass demonstration by nationalists across Russia, held on 4 November (the date of the Day of National Unity in Russia).

2. This refers to Article 31 of the Russian Constitution, which guarantees the right to peaceful assembly.
3. A new Law on Political Parties reduces the number of members needed to form a party from 40,000 to 500 (Herszenhorn, 2012).
4. In 2011, 51% percent of the population indicated that they would not care if the country's borders were redrawn to exclude Chechnya (Schwartz, 2011).

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