Anti-Migrant Riots in Russia: the Mobilizing Potential of Xenophobia

Marlene Laruelle, Washington

Abstract
October’s ethnic riots in Birulyovo, a working-class district in southern Moscow, can be seen as a turning point in the history of xenophobia in Russia. The watchdog group SOVA classifies violence against people identified as foreigners, which also includes legal Russian citizens of North Caucasian origin, as the third-most common type of violence in Russia. This comes after violence toward new religious movements (NRM) and people belonging to the LGBT community. However, the political significance of ethnic violence outweighs that of actions against religious and sexual minorities, which remain marginalized and without the capacity to garner collective reaction. Ethnic violence is most important in terms of its role in reshaping Russia’s national identity, even if in this domain, the three categories of violence have followed similar trajectories. Religious, sexual, and ethnic minorities are explicitly excluded from the national community, which is implicitly defined by affiliation with Orthodoxy, moral values symbolized by heterosexuality, and Russian ethno-cultural identity.

The Opening of Pandora’s Box…
Violence with a racist character (I exclude here ethnic violence that happens in quasi-civil war situations, as experienced several times in the recent history of the North Caucasus) has been on the rise in Russia since the second half of the 2000s. It grew rapidly—from 219 attacks in 2004 (of which 50 were fatal) to 623 in 2007 (of which 93 were fatal)—with virtually no repressive or preventative responses from the Russian authorities. Then the situation changed in 2007. The ethnic riots in Kondopoga, Karelia, in the fall of 2006 emboldened nationalist movements, which celebrated them as the ‘awakening of the Russian people.’ The fact that they brought several thousand people into the streets worried the political elites. At the same time, the rise in skirmishes between skinhead groups and security forces in Moscow city and region resulted in the local authorities adopting a more repressive policy. They abandoned the laissez-faire attitude toward skinhead groups that prevailed among the special services and police, and improved the legal tools at their disposal—particularly Penal Code Article 282, which concerns incitement to interethnic hatred (разжигание межнациональной розни). Racist violence fell considerably in Moscow and St Petersburg, then in the rest of the country. Yet this drop should be interpreted with caution. Report of such incidents, especially among migrants who do not want to draw the attention of the policy, remains low and many acts of racist violence are still classified as hooliganism.

However, one category of violence replaced the other. Although skinhead violence (usually defined as small groups of radical youth beating up one or more victims) is officially in decline, interethnic skirmishes between young groups defined at “ethnic Russians” and “North-Caucasians” are on the rise. Larger incidents with xenophobic undercurrents are also on the rise. In 2010, around 5,000 nationalists with racist banners and chanting occupied Moscow’s central Manezh Square, an incident sparked by the killing of a soccer fan. In 2011 in Sagra, a small village near Yekaterinburg, locals forced Azerbaijani and gypsy mafia figures out of the town. And in 2013, following the murder of a “Russian” by someone identified as “Chechen”, a crowd of hundreds of people went to the Chechen district in Pugachev, a small town in the Saratov region, to brawl. This was followed by an unsanctioned rally demanding that the authorities ‘liberate’ the city from North Caucasians.

Birulyovo is therefore not such an unusual case. It started as a settling of scores between a victim identified as ethnically Russian and a group of perpetrators identified as Caucasians, with public opinion fanning the flames. Using social media, groups of youths orchestrated street fights to settle scores, alongside looting nearby shops, especially those seen as belonging to ethnic minorities.

However, the political atmosphere around Birulyovo was markedly different, making this latest incident a particular turning point for several reasons.

First of all, it involved local residents—rather than just nationalist activists—taking to the streets. Not only does this confirm the xenophobic sentiments that prevail in Russia today, which are not new, but it also signals that citizens no longer necessarily condemn violence—and may even support it to some extent. It also suggests that xenophobic skirmishes are no longer confined to small provincial cities, but can also take place in the Moscow region, the political heart of Russia.

Secondly, although demonstrators denounce the fact that ‘migrants make the laws’ and ‘locals no longer feel at

1 This article comes from the research project NEORUSS “Nation-building, nationalism and the new other in today’s Russia,” funded by the Research Council of Norway.
The Eurasian Union Against the Tide of Russian Society

In this context, the response capacity of the Russian authorities is limited and ambivalent. They have adopted a schizophrenic discourse on the migration issue. Indeed, there is no unity among the ruling elites towards Russia’s migration policy. The government and the presidential administration see the continuation of the 1992 agreement on visa-free travel for citizens of CIS countries as a sign of Russia’s pivotal role in Eurasia. More recently, they have also begun to advocate the development of a Eurasian Union in which the citizens of member states would have freedom of movement, and have supported the accession to the Customs Union of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (two major sources of labor migrants) soon after that of Armenia. However, most politicians, members of United Russia, and officials at the local and regional level oppose such policies, instead calling for the introduction of a visa regime for citizens of Central Asian and South Caucasian states.

The Kremlin envisages several solutions in order to square this circle. One of them would be to distinguish the right to visa-free migration according to country. Members of the Eurasian Union would be privileged, but non-member CIS countries would lose their status – thus embarrassing two other major providers of migrants, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, which do not want to be involved in the Russian-led Eurasian Union project. However, this decision would require Moscow to recognize its reduced regional ambitions within the post-Soviet space and to be satisfied with a more limited role in countries that do not accept a greater degree of economic and political reintegration. It would also hurt Russia’s relationship with Kiev. Ukraine is not likely to ever join the Customs Union, yet it also has large migratory flows into Russia. However, this particular group of migrants does not arouse the ire of Russian public opinion, which continues to see Ukrainians as a “brother” people. Kazakhstan is also likely to raise objections to this decision, as Astana does not want to invest huge amounts of money and political energy to block migrants from its Central Asian neighbors in the name of a policy made in Moscow.

However, the Kremlin seems to have decided to make another distinction, not one by country, but by the migrants themselves. The stated goal is to welcome legal migrants and seek to integrate them, while pursuing the deportation of illegals. Yet this legal division cannot be carried out without fighting administrative corruption, in particular among the law enforcement agencies. It will shine an unwanted light on the total inefficiency of the Russian administration, which, in practice, is incapable of establishing a boundary between legal and illegal. The extortion of migrants, whatever their legal status, is part of police culture at all levels, the issuance of ‘real fake’ documents (nastoiashchie podelki) is a well-known practice, and the businesses that employ migrants have no interest in normalizing their status. This distinction is therefore a populist ploy that the authorities use in order to curb the anti-regime mobilization potential of xenophobia and to remain in tune with the population. Moscow Mayor Sobyanin has aggressively implemented this strategy. He has organized and received media coverage for several massive round ups of migrants (up to 1,200 migrants in August) and promises weekly raids of markets and some ethnic neighborhoods.

The Kremlin’s objective is to regain control of public opinion and to appear to be spearheading the fight against illegal migration—all the while calling for a greater Eurasian Union. However, this policy is destined for failure. First, anti-Putin political forces—whether classic nationalists or national-democrats like Alexei Navalny—have at least as much legitimacy, if not more, from their condemnation of migration. Second, the authorities will fail in changing the negative role played by a corrupt administration, which prevents any nor-
nalization of migratory flows. Finally, the authorities cannot avoid the confusion between these different issues. In the mind of the Russian public, migrants are seen as problematic regardless of their legal status. Associated tensions are above all due to complex processes of the ghettoization of the urban landscape, segregation on the job market, and a lack of social policies for greater cultural integration of the migrants into Russia (Russian language training, education for children, aid to community associations, etc.)

Conclusion
With approximately 13–14 million foreign migrants and a growing number of North Caucasians, in particular Dagestanis, moving to other regions in search of a better life, Russia cannot afford a badly calibrated migration policy. This is becoming an issue on which the Putin regime may fail in terms of its popular legitimacy. Xenophobia is just the tip of the iceberg of a larger social malaise linked to socioeconomic transformations, a diffuse feeling that living standards are no longer on the rise, and a growing resentment of state’s systemic inefficiency on all levels, especially locally. Thus future debates on Russia’s national identity are likely to be increasingly shaped by its relationship to migration, rendering the prospects of a Eurasia under Russian leadership increasingly uncertain—and confirming the necessity of bringing forth major structural reforms of the Russian state.

About the Author:
Marlene Laruelle, Research Professor of International Affairs at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES), Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University, is currently working on a book project on Russia’s identity debates.

Figure 1: Right-Wing Violence 2004–2013
