

Ethno-nationalist at last? Scholarly views on the essence of Russian nationalism today

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Abstract:

The book *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-15* by Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud sets out to investigate a complex issue pertaining to the essence of Russian nationalism. It brings together twelve scholars from different countries to trace the vicissitudes of Russian nationalism over the last decade and a half from various angles – economic, political, religious, and societal. By consulting self-conducted public opinion polls, the book seeks to demonstrate a recent turn in Russian nationalism, which became more pronounced in light of the dramatic events in the Ukraine. The edited volume provides valuable, well-researched perspectives and could serve as a good introduction for those less familiar with the subject of Russian nationalism.

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Kolstø, Pål und Helge Blakkisrud: *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-2015*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. 436 pages, hardcover, 83.00 Euro, ISBN: 978-1-4744-1042-7

Numerous books and articles have been written about Russian nationalism. Despite a wide range of literature published targeting this topic, it is still not clear what exactly constitutes Russia's nationalism today, how it manifests itself, and what its socio-political and essentially historical roots are. The volume edited by Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud called "The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-15" brings together twelve well-established scholars to fill the gap by shedding light on the various strands of Russian nationalism that are often misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Western media. The authors provide a detailed and a well-researched account of the continuity and change in the meaning of Russian nationalism since the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the role that religion, the economy, and the state structures play in its variations. In light of the recent events in the Ukraine, the volume also commits itself to investigating whether and how the dramatic events may have prompted a reorientation on issues of nationalism among the Russian population. While what primarily underlies the analysis is a survey carried out both in May 2013 and November 2014, a few chapters have also made use of either interviews or media analysis. To make the argument more coherent and accessible the editors thematically divide the volume into two major parts – while the first section investigates Russian nationalism at a societal level, the second section turns to analyse state-level Russian nationalism under Putin.

The introductory chapter provides a comprehensive summary of the various strands of Russian nationalism. On the one hand, there is nationalism that focuses on a need to maintain a robust and strong, multi-ethnic state, represented by statist (*gosudarstvenniki*) or imperialists (*impertsy*). A different kind of nationalism, on the other hand, focuses on ethnic issues and racial purity, represented by ethno-nationalists defending the rights of the ethnically Russian people and, to a lesser degree, the state itself. In recent years, as Kolstø then states, nationalism that is present in Russian society has become increasingly politicised, focusing more and more on the ethnic issues. This argument becomes especially pronounced in the first chapter, also written by Kolstø, where, while tracing the historical development of Russian nationalism and examining recent public opinion polls, he concludes that Russian nationalism has undergone "a fundamental shift [...] from statist to ethno-nationalist positions" (p.

19). In his view, the new turn to ethnonationalism has been particularly spurred by a concern for Russian co-ethnics abroad and by a large influx of non-Russian migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia (p. 7). The so-called ethnification of Russian nationalism becomes then the point in the book from which all other chapters depart, whether they consider the persistence of the imperial legacy in the political life of Russia (Chapter 2), the media representation of ethnicity and nationhood (Chapter 11) or the role of economics (Chapter 12) in the national identity debates.

A few chapters in the volume indeed feed into the idea that Russian nationalism has become increasingly ethnified. For example, Blakkisrud (Chapter 9) demonstrates how the boundary between civic and ethnic has been blurred in Russian nationality policy and argues that the understanding of the national Self started taking place predominantly in ethno-national terms. Yet careful examination of the several other chapters puts the argument of “ethnification” of Russian nationalism rather under question. Verkhovsky (Chapter 3) finds no popular support among Russians for the radical wing in Russian nationalism, nor, as argued by Mitrofanova (Chapter 4), is there any evidence that the Church is promoting ethnic Russian nationalism. Kosmarskaya and Savin (Chapter 5), too, who analyse the perception of immigrants among Muscovites by means of interviews, insist that the migration issue should not be perceived in terms of ethno-cultural otherness but rather contextualised within a wider socio-political setting.

In stark contrast to the argument on “ethnification” comes a very convincing chapter by Laruelle (Chapter 10) on the state discourse about national identity. By offering an alternative reading of the Russian state’s use of motives for the annexation of Crimea through three civilisational grammars (European, anti-Western, and both simultaneously), she challenges the idea that Putin “has suddenly brought nationalism into the picture” and shifted towards ethno-nationalism during the Ukrainian crisis (p. 275). While many authors in the volume emphasise the term *russkii* (ethnically Russian) in the speeches of Putin as signalling the shift, Laruelle instead insists that the term is employed in a very blurry and ambiguous way. Had Russia’s presidential administration really shifted towards nationalism, as Laruelle holds, it would have been keen to annex Donbas.

In general, the authors in this volume stand in constant dialogue with each other by responding to, agreeing or disagreeing with the previous arguments. This is by no means a downside, as the book demonstrates the struggle among scholars to agree upon the essence of Russian nationalism and the strands that dominate in the current context. This, in turn, reinforces the need to avoid a simplistic description of the phenomenon. The introductory chapter of the book might, however, appear slightly misleading in that it overemphasises the growing focus of Russian nationalism on the ethnic issues. As it is, several articles in this volume would appear to show the diversity of the debate on the issue while presenting the theme of Russian nationalism in a more nuanced way.

Regardless of the shortcomings, the volume provides a good overview of the existing research on Russian nationalism from various angles – economic, political, religious and societal. While an expert in the field might find the book rather less captivating, it is certainly very insightful for non-specialists and a good introduction for those less familiar with the subject of Russian nationalism.