

# Russia: Progressive Patriotism

Tuesday 13 October 2020, by [MEDVEDEV Kirill](#), [ZHURAVLEV Oleg](#) (Date first published: 21 September 2020).

**Translated from the Russian original on [Colta.ru](#) by Maxim Edwards. LeftEast publishes this text not by way of unreserved endorsement but rather in an effort to initiate a debate about leftist strategy. In our editorial discussion at least, it generated plenty of questions: Do we need to limit our imagination of political community to the form of the nation-state? Can we meaningfully expect to control the meaning of the notoriously shape-shifting ideology of nationalism? Hasn't the progressive patriot niche in Russia been already occupied by forces that are not all that progressive, ranging from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation to red conservatives (kraskony) on- and off-line? How applicable is the authors' version of progressive patriotism beyond Russia, or put another way, what has been the experience of leftist political formations based on it in Hungary (the Fourth Republic) or Latin America? [Some of these questions](#) have already been debated on Russian-language social media. What we hope to do with this translation is to broaden the debate around Kirill and Oleg's very important and clearly articulated strategy proposal.**

In her remarkable book *Patriotism from below. How can people live so poorly in such a wealthy country?* Karine Clément writes that "social-critical patriotism could become the basis for a renaissance of the left movement. This has not yet happened for several reasons — among them the fact that there is no political force that can collect the shards of left ideology scattered throughout the ordinary consciousness and articulate them." We share her belief and believe that our country needs a progressive patriotism: namely a left-wing patriotism. Below, we will set out how we see this project of progressive patriotism, starting with Karine Clément's study and our view of the current socio-political situation in Russia.

We believe that in Russia today, and throughout the world as a whole, the growth in patriotic sentiments is inevitable. Therefore, the task will inevitably fall to left-wing, democratic forces to develop their own, progressive versions of patriotism and defend them in the fight against right-wing patriotism — the patriotism of statism, nationalism, and traditionalism.

## The frustrated hopes of cosmopolitanism

Why is this growth in patriotism so inevitable? The growth in this patriotic sentiment and the widespread right and left populism inspired by it are, first and foremost, a response to the equally widespread exhaustion of two traditional internationalist, cosmopolitan discourses: the liberal and the orthodox-Marxist. Simply put, both are now seen as discredited.

In the Marxian sense, the internationalism of the proletariat must organically flow first from the general conditions of existence (namely, industrial production) and secondly from the unity of those subordinated under these conditions. Today, we are faced with a radically different situation. Wage workers comprise the vast majority of society and occupy the most diverse positions within it. As they are extremely socially stratified, the commonality requisite for an internationalist ideology. It is not surprising that for most people today internationalism, in spite of the obvious globalization of the world economy and information networks, is little more than an abstraction. Generally speaking,

the concept is most valued among three relatively small groups: firstly, among the intelligentsia and the “creative classes” in metropolises, secondly among those leftists (socialists and anarchists) for whom internationalism is part of an inherited ideological tradition shared with comrades across national, ethnic, and linguistic barriers, and thirdly among the international trade union movement. Alongside multinational corporations, the international trade union movement has also developed supranational networks and organizations which protect workers in different countries through pressure on the top directors of multinationals in large European capitals. Paradoxically, it actually seems as though Russian workers who have joined an independent trade union are by far the most obvious subjects of this “practical” internationalism — even while they often do not know foreign languages and have no experience travelling abroad. [1]

On the whole, the progression of global capitalism — which, according to liberal internationalists was supposed to usher in the dissolution of national borders — unleashes economic insecurity. Rather than the disappearance of national boundaries, this insecurity has led instead to a revival in demands by underprivileged social groups on their own nation states — hence, a new patriotic ideal. These conceptions of patriotism today may be national conservative (directed against migrants and for the “local” community and its values) or social democratic (demanding protection from the ravages of the free market). But in any case, liberal cosmopolitanism has turned out to be a value, and a privilege, of a small minority.

### **The crisis of ideology and patriotic “specificities”**

This growth of patriotism can also be attributed to the crisis of faith in big-picture ideologies and ideological narratives as such. Once people no longer believe in “big words” they come together around “concrete deeds” and “shared spaces” instead. This is why more and more people today are becoming receptive to patriotism, which promises to unite them not only on the basis of abstract ideas, but also around specific material realities and everyday practices.

In southern Italy, locals come together to prevent a bridge being built across their valley. In St Petersburg, city residents band together in defence of their “unique skyline” which is threatened by the construction of the Gazprom Tower. Both of these are examples of how post-ideological patriotism is mobilized in practice. In other words, during a crisis of ideology, patriotism offers new forms of political certainty — people respond to “specifics” rather than “politics.” Thus cutting down the trees in a park, an integral shared space for any community, is an invasion of a familiar and cherished space. The need to confront it is obvious to those involved, and does not require any arcane ideological rationalizations. Nevertheless, it is on the basis of struggles like these that political ideas are being rejuvenated or even developed anew today — ideas which could ultimately tend towards the left or the right. So it seems that, consequently, the left faces an ideological struggle for a role in seemingly non-ideological protests. Today, this struggle is already underway: sociologists from different countries are already writing about the threat of right-wing populists hijacking the struggles of ordinary people for “shared spaces” in their local, “small homelands.” [2]

### **Patriotism in Russia: the authorities and the opposition**

Putin’s “stabilization” has proven to be the basis for the emergence of a new patriotism in Russia. In the atomized Russia of the 1990s, attempts to forge a new national identity from above failed. It was, to use Margaret Thatcher’s notorious phrase, a time in which there was no society but only individuals and families. But at the start of the 2000s, that situation began to change. The new regime put the formation of a new patriotism at the top of its political agenda. During that decade, a new connection with the state arose, as did a certain pride in its accomplishments. Those feelings have reached a fever pitch since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Due to an increase in living standards, security, and stability compared to the 1990s, a new feeling of shame also arose — a

shame for the parlous state of the country over the previous decade. Thus the request arose for a new collective identity, a new form of patriotism to take the place of the pro-Soviet revanchism of the 1990s. It is important to note that in Russia at the time, cosmopolitan ideologies were seen as discredited; Marxism was identified with the collapsed Soviet project, while liberalism was associated with neoliberal reforms which plunged most ordinary people into poverty and despair throughout the 1990s. These were fertile conditions for a new, popular, and more attractive patriotism to take root.

With the success of the Putinist form of patriotism came a second stage in its development, which we are witnessing today. It is characterized by a growing irritation with and alienation from official patriotic rhetoric, and accusations of hypocrisy against senior government officials and oligarchs. Yet this irritation has not led to the reemergence of the old liberal talking points from the 1990s, such as “Russia must abandon its ambitions towards exceptionalism and become a normal member of the civilized world.” Instead, it has led to demands for yet another form of patriotism. The specter of this patriotism looms over the usual arguments between opposition liberals (who believe the country is deteriorating due to pressure on businesses, constraints on democratic freedoms, and an expansionist foreign policy), and pro-Putin loyalists who demand allegiance to the regime on the basis that Putin’s rule has helped Russia “get up off its knees.” One of the messages of this new patriotism is that while we must acknowledge the improvements in living standards since the 1990s, we are not ready to forgive this government its wrongdoings, and we are not prepared to endure them, or it, forever. We are ready to embrace modern Russia as our own country and be proud of it, says this new patriotism, but doing so requires a reassessment of relations between the government and society, namely democratization and a social policy which operates in the interests of the majority.

An interview with a 13-year-old opposition supporter in St Petersburg is particularly illustrative:

*“So, you want to work in publishing when you grow up. Will you do that in Russia?”*

*“Yeah, it has to be in Russia. I’ve never seriously considered leaving, and I’m not going to. I’m proud of St Petersburg’s cultural wealth, our new metro stations, the new stadium. It’s fantastic. This is Russia, this is my city. I won’t leave it all behind.”* [3]

In other words, although this new patriotism is inspired by the successes of the Putin era, it is now transforming into a weapon against the Putin regime. Remember that Putin’s most memorable, and his most popular, political gestures were those which could be presented as attacks on the “liberal”, “comprador” sectors of Russian big business, supposedly in favor of the shared values of the urban middle class. The trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003 is one such example; his appeal to the workers of the Ural Train Car factory during the Bolotnaya Square protests is another. Sociologists and political scientists studying Russia have increasingly noted that Alexey Navalny represents a similar ideological project as Putin — namely, an anti-elitist patriotism. [4] Like no other, he can call into question the anti-elitism of the ruling elite and whip up protest.

However, as in the rest of the world, in Russia, oppositional patriotism, or populism of a right-wing or left-wing kind, is based on the forms of political authenticity characteristic of our “post-ideological” era. Presented as “speaking for themselves” things—Navalny’s broadcasts, which show [ex-deputy PM and current head of Rosneft state corporation] Sechin’s fabulous wealth, video recordings of villas and dachas with palaces and fur storage facilities, “objective” facts, documents and figures — better than any political appeal prove the lie of the imaginary patriotism of the ruling elite. Thanks to the opposition, but also to state-run media, people are increasingly feeling the distance — not so much ideological as existential — that separates them from those who look at the world of ordinary people from the windows of their cars, advise school teachers to earn extra money

in business, and students to buy small apartments in their first year instead of living in dormitories. This is a distance both in relation to the government and to the elite as a whole, including its liberal part. As one of Karine Clément's interviewees notes of these elites, "they've stuffed themselves <...> and are so far away. From the people. Well, not that from the people — far from life <...>. I don't understand such people." Another informant says: "I haven't seen a single poor liberal."

Thus, the extreme unevenness of economic growth led to the "interception" of the patriotic idea by the opposition. Patriotism has become one of the discourses of protest.

At the same time, the 2011-2012 protests and the consequent politicization of society gradually shifted oppositional common sense to the left: from criticizing the Putin regime as dictatorial to criticizing the Putin regime as oligarchic, usurping not only power, but also national wealth, which should justly belong to everyone. Simultaneously, there was a broader "normalization" of patriotism in popular discourse — for example, among liberal opinion-makers. Yuri Saprykin, writes about them in the following terms: "< ... > looking at people who accumulate mass online following, you can understand something about the nature of this following. It's not that Monetochka, for example, sings best, and [the blogger] Yuri Dud is so good at interviews — there are things much higher in the nature of their success. So, Dud. In addition to asking his guests what they haven't been asked in public for a long time — about money, sex, or Putin — there is also a new feeling behind him, and it again has to do with Russia. Russian music and Russian movies are interesting to him, among other things, because they make up some kind of community with him and are most noticeable in this community. His attitude to this community is cheerful, honest and sober, but still it is, first of all, acceptance. In Dud's Instagram, which is itself an influential media outlet, there is a constant hashtag #za\*\*\*s, where the author notes praiseworthy phenomena of Russian life. The list of these phenomena never overlaps with the "reasons for pride" of the Ministry of Culture or Channel One." To be a liberal cosmopolitan, and even more so to share anti-populist, elitist views has become a matter of bad taste. Finally, as the study by Karin Clement and her colleagues shows, patriotism has become a mass mood of unprivileged social groups who use patriotic rhetoric to criticize the elite and the government.

### **Patriotism and activism: what to do?**

Claims against the rich, who keep funds in Western banks, buy real estate abroad, send their children there to study, that is, who see their future outside of Russia, are gradually eroding the general foundations of liberal cosmopolitanism, raising the question of a new civic and activist ethics. On the one hand, it is impossible to deny the right of any person to live and realized themselves where they like. On the other hand, there is some ethical inconvenience and contradiction in criticizing patriotism as a harmful illusion and pursuing your individual interests, including career, interests, only to use the benefits (social protection, etc.) won by generations of patriotic activists who made certain sacrifices and hardships. Therefore, it turns out that the decision to live and fight in your country for the sake of the future of your community, even for a person with cosmopolitan views (and that includes most of the Russian left) is also a patriotic choice. As Karine Clément's research shows, this approach also responds to the moods of ordinary people. In the words of one of her informants, "It is not necessary to pour shit the country in which you live. If you are dissatisfied with something, then take it and change something, work." Thus, understanding and building an activist ethic in the new Russia cannot do without talking about the patriotic component.

In our view, progressive patriotism should now become a weapon of the left in its struggle for hegemony. At the same time, the political meaning and ideological content of patriotism today is what is being fought over in different parts of Russian society. Therefore, the constituents of the left-wing movement—activists, intellectuals, and politicians—should, in our opinion, defend the

progressive-patriotic agenda within the framework of specific political movements, ideological discussions, and civic practices.

If you look at contemporary Russian grassroots politics, you can see that patriotic ethics is embodied in the newest and most progressive forms of collective action. Left-wing patriotism could become an organic ideology of local activism. The recent rise of local and municipal activism is the beginning of the formation of a new Patriotic project of the local community with a high degree of autonomy and inclusiveness. Inclusivity here, however, is sometimes a big question: local activists are often driven by the desire to protect themselves not only from the arbitrariness of the authorities and businesses, but also from “outsiders”, potentially “dangerous” elements — migrants, marginals, and the homeless. In other words, the development of local activism creates at the same time a contradiction between the rather petty-bourgeois, private-property idea of community and the idea of an inclusive community, which, of course, has an incomparably large social horizon. Local activism is a field of struggle and an opportunity for the left to promote universalist egalitarian values through new forms of local patriotism.

“It is quite obvious that a variety of regional patriotism and identities will emerge as a reaction, on the one hand, to the vulnerability, uncertainty, insecurity, atomization that are produced by the neoliberal economy, and to the false and aggressive state patriotism, on the other. And it is very important to connect them with the universalism of labor, social, and civil rights, as well as with the progressive lines of national history.

For example, Meshchansky district is historically the most international district in Moscow, its name itself going back to a Polish word. Why not use this argument against reactionary cosplayers, xenophobes and isolationists? But to do this, it is important to be inside the process, and not to come from outside with ready-made schemes, even if the latter are as progressive as possible” [5].

Not unlike a populist protest like Bolotnaya in 2011-12 and the more recent anti-corruption rallies, today’s local activism that is a major trend in grassroots politics, which, being organically patriotic, does not have a clearer ideology. What will this activism be like?

Progressive left-wing patriotism, in our opinion, is able to redraw the lines of the ideological struggle in today’s Russia. The cliché “left — patriotic forces” is well known, as it unfortunately recalls the 1993-“red-brown” alliance, and today refers to a bloc of left-conservative and social-imperialist forces based around the Communist party. Unifying for this block, as well as for the conditionally left and right wings of the Communist party, is the figure of Stalin. The main public discussion concerning history, the dispute between Stalinists and liberals, is still based on a strong contradiction about Stalinism. This is quite acceptable to the authorities, since a dispute between two minority groups-ardent fans and ardent denouncers of Stalinism (with the participation of the authorities, including the President personally, as a sane arbiter who suppresses extremes) – negates the possibility of uniting the majority on a different ideological basis. And such a basis can and should be left-wing patriotism, which accepts the Soviet project as a whole, based on its main symbolic milestones (the October revolution, the victory in the second world war, Gagarin’s flight into space) as the achievements of the people and peoples, but does not obscure the reverse side-repression, deportations, suppression of rights and freedoms, censorship, etc. In general, the project of new patriotism is anti-imperial, appealing to the traditions of self-organization and grassroots democracy, but not anti-etatist a priori, in contrast to its anarcho-liberal, as well as libertarian counterparts.

Indeed, attempts to form a new patriotic discourse on the part of the national liberals also take place. “Hello, my beautiful Russian people!” — this is how Mikhail Svetov, a well-known blogger and member of the Libertarian party, begins his speech at a rally against raising the retirement age. In

his patriotic concept, the Russian people are the eternal victim of the state. The tsarist Empire suppressed entrepreneurial initiative and free individuality from above, then Soviet " multi-nationalism "took away bread from hard-working peasants, crushed entrepreneurs, dispossessed well-to-do workers, imprisoned and shot the best—that is, the freest and most enterprising, whose descendants are, according to a strange assumption, the " beautiful Russian people " present at the rally. The descendants of the Soviet executioners are, by the same assumption, the modern Russian government and law enforcement agencies.

Articulation of the project of left-wing patriotism is impossible today without rethinking the role of the state. In the left movement there is, on the one hand, a rejection of the state associated with the anarchist and alter — globalist tradition, on the other hand, Stalinist conservative statism, and on the third—the Orthodox-Bolshevik idea of the need for the capture of the state by the proletarian party vanguard. The lack of understanding of the state as a field of struggle and as a potential agent of redistribution in favor of the majority, that is, an agent of both the interests of workers and national interests, is associated with the lack of a social-democratic tradition in Russia. Accordingly, the development of left-wing patriotism should be associated with its understanding, with talking about the possibility of democratizing the state in spite of conservative-statistic and ultra-liberal, libertarian trends.

One of the differences between today's political movements is related to the attitude towards migrants. The national democrats, who focus on the modern European right, have a clear anti-migrant orientation. Traditional Soviet patriotism, despite the rhetoric of "friendship of peoples", often carries a Stalinist understanding of the Russian people as the first among equals. This side of Soviet patriotism became evident during the conflict in the Donbas, when the openly right-wing, nationalist essence of the "Russian spring" campaign (unconvincingly dissembled by internationalist, anti-fascist rhetoric) did not prevent almost all Stalinists from supporting it. And it is precisely because of the dominance of conservative and nationalist forces that the grassroots, independent component of protest in the Donbas and in Eastern Ukraine as a whole has been turned into an appendage of the Kremlin's Imperial policy.

In general, both domestic and political xenophobia (let us recall the anti-migrant antics of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation) is a natural manifestation of this political trend.

The new left-wing patriotism, which is based both on the best aspects of the Soviet internationalist heritage and on the mixing and coexistence of peoples as a structural factor in Russia's development, is the most real opportunity to create an inclusive civic nation, which includes migrants from Central Asian countries.

Women's and queer people's equality in today's Russia should also be articulated not through discredited and abstract concepts of tolerance and "European values", but through an appeal to the progressive side of national history associated with the early Soviet transformations in the gender sphere.

*"There are achievements and shameful pages in the history of every nation. The larger the nation, the more influential its politics and culture. And often these are inseparable things. The October revolution, Lenin, Trotsky, Kollontai — all this is our magnificent legacy, it is they who are still interesting to the world, and their rejection turns us into sad provincials with an inferiority complex before the West and East. Victory over fascism, the Soviet flag over the Reichstag... And you don't need to tell us about European values — neither with a plus, nor with a minus sign. We were the ones who gave women the right to vote before most so-called civilized countries and decriminalized homosexuality after the revolution — to the horror of both Western governments and Russian patriots [6].*



In general, progressive patriotism is based on the concept of “people’s history”, which assumes a view of it from the point of view of the social and class struggle of the lower classes, the involvement of oppressed groups in management, in cultural and intellectual production. The nation-building aspect of the revolutionary projects and evolutionary social-democratic transformations of the XIX — XX centuries is also fundamentally important—from the Paris commune through the October revolution (which, contrary to the widespread left-wing stereotype, very quickly began to combine internationalist ambitions with patriotic rhetoric — “the Socialist Fatherland is in danger!”) to the Cuban revolution of 1959, to the narratives of “English socialism”, Swedish social democracy, and so on.

*“Let us recall 1917 — the monopoly of the tsarist government on patriotism as loyalty to the Emperor was destroyed, but the bourgeoisie and the liberal intelligentsia failed to consolidate the idea of the nation as a democratic unity of all classes, because the classes were irreconcilable — the people demanded socialism. As a result, the Bolsheviks promoted their idea of a nation without the bourgeoisie — as a unity of workers of all nationalities. Remember this apocryphal story? “We are for Russia!”- shout cadets-cadets. “Russia is us!”- answer the Red Guards. They were right. The Bolsheviks created a new Russia, the USSR, and formed the nation that lives in Russia today, we have no other.*

*But sometimes there are no revolutions — for example, the Swedish Social Democrats, who were in power for many decades, also created a new model of the Swedish nation, combining Protestant traditions with socialism. It is based not on Vikings with horns that little boys rave about, but on protected labor, social and gender equality, and support for the weak” [7].*

In the future, progressive patriotism, in our opinion, should become an important part of the ideology for a left-democratic political project in Russia, directed both against the neoliberal cult of the free market, and against ethno-nationalism and state protection.

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**P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[1] Independent trade unions such as the United in the Confederation of Labor of Russia have gone furthest in this respect. For example, recently the workers of one Omsk ice cream factory,

part of a multinational corporation, were able to conduct a successful campaign for higher wages thanks to the help of the international Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), which operated as part of this campaign in Switzerland.

[2] Tuukka Ylä-Anttila. [“Familiarity As a Tool of Populism: Political Appropriation of Shared Experiences and the Case of Suvivirsi.”](#) *Acta Sociologica*.

[3] [Fontanka.ru, 12.09.2018.](#)

[4] Lassila Jussi. “Aleksei Naval’nyi and Populist Re-ordering of Putin’s Stability.” *Europe-Asia Studies*, February 2016.

[5] From an interview with K. Medvedev: [“Stanet li minutsipal’nyi sotsializma al’ternativoi dlia levogo dvizheniia?”](#)

[6] From an [interview with K. Medvedev’s “Novaya Gazeta”, 23.12.2017.](#)

[7] Ibid.