THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN NATIONALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON ETHNIC AND RACIAL MINORITIES, 1991–2026

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The development of Russian nationalism since the collapse of the Soviet Union demonstrates a significant transformation in both its character and its relationship with the state. During the political and economic instability of the 1990s, aggressive ethnic nationalism was most visibly associated with nationalist political movements, skinheads, neo-Nazi organizations, and street violence directed against Jews, people from the Caucasus and Central Asia, Africans, Asians, and other individuals perceived as non-Russian or non-Slavic. During the 2000s, racist violence became particularly severe, while people from the Caucasus and Central Asia were simultaneously subjected to racial profiling, police harassment, employment and housing restrictions, degrading treatment, and recurring physical attacks. Although the Russian government periodically prosecuted violent nationalist organizations, nationalism did not disappear. Instead, elements of nationalist ideology were increasingly incorporated into a broader state-centered conception of Russian patriotism, political loyalty, cultural conformity, and national power.

The wars in Chechnya, the 2008 war with Georgia, the deterioration of Russian-Ukrainian relations after 2014, progressively strengthened the relationship between nationalism, militarism, and state policy. Moscow increasingly promoted Russian language, history, and culture as instruments of national cohesion while reducing the institutional space available for independent expressions of regional, Indigenous, and minority identity. Policies affecting minority-language education, restrictions on regional political autonomy, pressure on minority

activists, and the designation of certain Indigenous and anti-colonial organizations as extremist illustrate this development. Although Russia continues officially to describe itself as a multinational state, its political system increasingly demands that ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity remain subordinate to a centralized, Russian-centered conception of national identity.

Official political discourse increasingly emphasized military sacrifice, historical grievance, territorial expansion, traditional values, loyalty to the state, and defense of the so-called "Russian world." At the same time, Buryats, Dagestanis, Tuvans, Yakuts, Kalmyks, and members of other minority communities became highly visible among Russian forces, while antiwar organizations representing some of these communities faced increasing government pressure. This development exposed a fundamental contradiction within contemporary Russian nationalism: members of ethnic minorities may be incorporated into the state as soldiers and citizens, while independent expressions of their ethnic identity, opposition to the war, or criticism of Moscow's policies may be treated as evidence of disloyalty, separatism, or extremism.

The period beginning in 2024 marked another significant escalation in xenophobic hostility and abusive treatment of ethnic minorities. Following the March 22, 2024, terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall, for which Tajik nationals were accused, Central Asians and other visibly non-Slavic individuals experienced intensified police raids, ethnic profiling, arbitrary detention, deportation measures, public hostility, and nationalist violence. Human Rights Watch documented widespread harassment and abuse of Central Asian migrants following the attack, while SOVA recorded a substantial increase in ideologically motivated violence during 2024. The activities of nationalist organizations such as the Russian Community are particularly concerning because members of these groups have participated in anti-migrant operations, including activities conducted alongside law-enforcement authorities. Such cooperation has

increasingly blurred the distinction between private nationalist intimidation and official enforcement, further undermining the ability of vulnerable minorities to obtain effective protection.

Developments during 2025 and 2026 indicate that these patterns were not merely a temporary reaction to the Crocus City Hall attack. Racist and xenophobic violence continued, including attacks against Central Asians and Russian citizens of visibly non-Slavic appearance. SOVA documented continuing hate-motivated violence, while Human Rights Watch reported ethnic profiling, arbitrary detention, police harassment, abusive raids, and attacks by far-right groups. Buryats and other Asian-appearing Russian citizens remain vulnerable because their physical appearance may cause them to be perceived as foreigners or migrants despite their citizenship. Black Africans and other people of African descent similarly remain readily identifiable racial minorities within this hostile environment. Contemporary xenophobia therefore frequently operates through visible racial and ethnic categorization rather than formal citizenship, exposing individuals to intimidation, degrading treatment, physical violence, and abusive policing.

Russian nationalism between 1991 and 2026 should therefore be understood as an evolving phenomenon rather than a static ideology. It developed from fragmented, frequently violent neo-Nazi and ethnonationalist movements into a more complex combination of societal xenophobia, organized far-right activism, state-centered patriotism, militarism, cultural Russification, anti-migrant politics, and demands for political loyalty. Although the Russian government has prosecuted certain extremist nationalist organizations and does not uniformly endorse every manifestation of ethnic nationalism, exclusionary nationalist narratives have

increasingly overlapped with official policies concerning migration, national security, traditional values, territorial integrity, and the preservation of Russian civilization.

This historical transformation is particularly important when assessing the vulnerability of ethnic and racial minorities. The danger does not arise solely from organized neo-Nazi groups or isolated acts of racist violence. Members of minority communities may face multiple, interconnected sources of harm, including hostility from private individuals, intimidation by nationalist organizations, racial profiling, arbitrary detention, abusive police practices, restrictive migration policies, social exclusion, pressure toward cultural assimilation, and official suspicion toward independent minority or Indigenous political activities. The severity of these risks varies according to ethnicity, physical appearance, religion, citizenship, political activity, geographic location, and individual circumstances. Nevertheless, the broader historical pattern demonstrates that visible ethnic or racial difference can substantially increase exposure to threats, violence, degrading treatment, and other serious abuses.

The evolution of Russian nationalism from the collapse of the Soviet Union through 2026 demonstrates a persistent and increasingly consequential interaction between societal xenophobia, organized nationalist activism, authoritarian governance, and restrictive state policies. The violent street nationalism of the 1990s and 2000s has not disappeared but has survived and reemerged alongside newer forms of anti-migrant mobilization and state-centered nationalism. As a result, individuals identified as ethnically, racially, culturally, or religiously different from the dominant Russian majority may encounter hostility not only from private nationalist actors but also, under certain circumstances, from law-enforcement agencies and other state institutions responsible for protecting their fundamental rights. This convergence of nationalist hostility, official suspicion, and inadequate accountability creates a political and social

environment in which vulnerable minorities face continuing risks of intimidation, physical violence, arbitrary detention, coercive treatment, and other serious forms of mistreatment, often without meaningful access to effective state protection.

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