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The Second Coming of Rodina: The Role of a Nonparliamentary Party in Putin’s Managed Nationalism

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Abstract

This article examines the unexpected revival of Rodina (Motherland), a nationalist party that had been suppressed in 2006 for its embrace of “orangist,” anti-Putin politics. Five years later, Rodina was relaunched in response to the crisis of the Medvedev–Putin “tandemocracy.” This article shows that Rodina played a central role in the Kremlin’s “managed nationalism,” which sought to direct the energies of Russian nationalists into loyalist channels. In particular, it illuminates three ways that Rodina facilitated collaboration between nationalists and the regime. First, it helped to integrate nationalists into the All-Russia Popular Front, the umbrella structure that was created as a vehicle for Putin’s return to the presidency. Second, it served as a counterrevolutionary force by drawing nationalists from the “white ribbon” protest movement into two Kremlin-supported initiatives: the “conservative turn” and a media campaign against non-Slavic immigration. And third, it acted as a proxy for the Russian state during the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in southeast Ukraine, recruiting nationalists to serve as separatists and cultivating the support of European radical nationalists. In these three ways, Rodina contributed both to Russia’s autocratization and to the growing influence of nationalist ideas in public discourse.

Keywords: Russian nationalism; Putin regime; Rodina party; Dmitrii Rogozin; Russia-Ukraine conflict

The resurrection of Dmitrii Rogozin’s Rodina party was one of the most remarkable reversals of fortune in post-Soviet Russian politics. Fabricated by Kremlin political technologists as an electoral bloc to weaken the Communist Party in the 2003 Duma elections, the original Rodina had been a classic demonstration of the dangers of integrating radical nationalists into systemic politics. Although Rodina contributed to the collapse of the communist vote and the departure of two liberal parties in the parliament, it proved a volatile and unreliable ally. In the aftermath of Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, the bloc’s dominant component, the Rodina Party, turned on Putin and positioned itself to lead an “orangist” uprising. To bring the party to heel, the authorities used a combination of court action, administrative coercion, media blockade, and violent intimidation. Despite its record of insubordination and its embrace of revolutionary politics, Rodina was relaunched during 2011–2012 under its old brand, with Kremlin blessing. Although it never regained the political influence that it had enjoyed during 2004–2005, Rodina became an important platform for Russian ethnonationalists in Russia’s circumscribed public sphere.

Rodina’s revival has attracted little academic attention. There is a burgeoning literature on the role of multiparty legislatures in authoritarian systems, but researchers have neglected the phenomenon of nonparliamentary parties like Rodina.¹ Nor has recent scholarship on Russian nationalism addressed the reemergence of Rodina.² Article-length studies have fixed a spotlight

on nationalist intellectuals like Aleksandr Dugin and Zakhar Prilepin, on discussion forums like the Izborskii Klub, and on the Movement against Illegal Immigration.³ New research has shed light on how “everyday nationalism” contributes to regime legitimation and how the influence of nationalism on elites is shaped and tempered by corruption and patronage.⁴ By contrast, Rodina has been left in the shadows. Although some scholars have noted the party’s status as an exemplar of loyalist nationalism (Laine 2017, 233), there is no detailed investigation of its place in Russian politics after 2011.

This article seeks to illuminate the revival of Rodina and its evolving role in “managed nationalism,” a set of measures employed by the Presidential Administration to manipulate and coopt nationalist militants. These measures consisted of three things: (1) direct funding through state grants and covert channels, (2) recognition through favorable media coverage and interaction with government officials, and (3) access to public space at a time when opposition demonstrations were harshly repressed. Both the Putin regime and its nationalist partners stood to gain significant benefits from this interaction. For the Putin regime, loyal nationalists were a counterweight to pro-democracy protest, evidence of the authenticity of the regime’s patriotic propaganda, and a mechanism for diverting potentially hostile elements into harmless channels. For nationalists, involvement in managed nationalism was an opportunity to promote their ideas, to infiltrate state institutions, and to attack their liberal and leftist ideological adversaries. Ties with officialdom also offered a degree of protection in an increasingly repressive political environment. There were, however, hazards for both sides. Nationalist actors were in danger of being discredited as puppets of the authorities. The regime risked building up political forces that could become a threat to the system and to social order. Rodina was a classic example of this problem, but it was not the only one.⁵

Rodina’s duality, as a defender of the regime and a standard-bearer of militant nationalism, exemplifies the opportunities that the Kremlin’s management of the public sphere created for Russian nationalists. This management owed less to the power vertical than to *Sistema*, a set of governance practices based on informal networks that functioned alongside the formal institutions and procedures of state administration (Ledeneva 2013, 2). According to the veteran Kremlin consultant Gleb Pavlovskii, *Sistema* was founded on two principles. First, major actions were undertaken as a result of a go-ahead signal (*otmashka*), which was “not so much an order as a license to act in a desired direction.” Second, implementation was entrusted to “curators,” who were “semi-official figures through whom state governance flows” (Pavlovskii 2016, 10–12). The challenge for researchers of managed nationalism is that *Sistema* leaves no traces in publicly available sources. One important exception is *Russkii Obraz*, the neo-Nazi organization, which played a major role in the Kremlin’s effort to undermine opposition nationalists during 2008–2009. After *Russkii Obraz* spiralled out of control and its founders were arrested on murder charges, the contents of their email and text message exchanges with their curators became part of the court materials (Horvath 2020, 5–6). What they reveal is that *Russkii Obraz* enjoyed considerable freedom of action in the implementation of instructions. It frequently tested the patience of its curators, and its proposals for loyalist actions were sometimes rejected. There is no comparable record for Rodina, but the fluctuations in its conduct fit this pattern.

As a pro-Kremlin party in an increasingly repressive political system, post-2011 Rodina operated within significant constraints. Unlike its prototype, it was kept on a short leash. It was never allowed to oppose the regime, to contest its core policies, or to collaborate with anti-Putin nationalists. Nor was it given the administrative support necessary to become an electorally successful systemic party in the State Duma. Instead, Rodina was relegated to the fate of a nonparliamentary party, which competed in national elections as spoilers but only acquired a presence in regional assemblies. Only its formal leader, Aleksei Zhuravlev, held a seat in the State Duma.

Despite its subordinate status, the new Rodina played a conspicuous role in the politics of managed nationalism. Pulled in different directions by the divergent expectations of the regime and nationalist militants, the party tried to serve both by finding common ground between them. As this

article demonstrates, Rodina helped the regime to confront three challenges: (1) the surge of nationalist protest during the leadup to the 2011–2012 election cycle, (2) the participation of anti-Kremlin nationalists in the protest movement against fraud in the 2011 Duma elections, and (3) the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine and the need to legitimize Russia's attack on that country. By drawing nationalists into the All-Russia Popular Front, by attacking nationalist supporters of the protest movement, by participating in Russia's invasion of Crimea and southeast Ukraine, and by cultivating European far-right politicians, Rodina served the Kremlin's interests. At the same time, Rodina used its position as a bastion of authorized nationalism to advance an array of nationalist causes. Testing the limits of an official anti-immigration campaign, it promoted xenophobic ethnonationalism by organizing raids on migrant hostels and by staging pickets outside local government buildings to demand action against illegal immigrants. It supported radical nationalist militants by challenging legislative curbs on hate speech and by offering them a legal platform.

The Kremlin Project That Ran Amok

The uncontrollability of the original Rodina was a product of the circumstances of its creation. When a team of political technologists drafted their first blueprints for the future bloc, the Kremlin had not yet subjugated the arena of party politics. Rodina was fabricated as part of the Kremlin's efforts to undermine the Communist Party in the 2003 parliamentary elections. Initially branded *Tovarishch* (Comrade), this bloc was conceived as a vehicle for Sergei Glaz'ev, the former "young reformer" who had been elected to the Duma on the KPRF list in 1999 (Wilson 2005, 261). Despite his left-wing credentials, Glaz'ev had close connections with Russian nationalists and the far-right (Shekhovtsov 2017, 53–54). His mixed loyalties were reflected in the design of Rodina as an amalgam of leftist and nationalist forces. The balance, however, was disrupted by the collapse of one of Rodina's founding organizations, the Russian Party of Labour, in the autumn of 2003. It was replaced by Sergei Baburin's *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will), a haven for radical nationalists (Mager and Veslo 2001). No less important for the bloc's ideological complexion was the presence of Dmitrii Rogozin, the creator of the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO), one of the most successful nationalist projects of the 1990s. According to Sergei Markov, Rogozin "was nominated by the Kremlin to be Sergei Glaz'ev's commissar, his controller" (Glasser and Baker 2003, A20). Official approval made it possible for Rodina to garner 9% of the vote and emerge as the fourth largest force in the Duma, behind United Russia, KPRF, and LDPR. This breakthrough contributed to the consolidation of the Putin regime in two ways. On one hand, Rodina's success contributed to the decline of the communist vote from 24% to 13%; on the other, the bloc displaced two troublesome liberal parties in the parliament.

Despite these achievements, the political honeymoon between the Kremlin and its nationalist surrogates was brief. Rogozin may have boasted that Rodina was the president's *spetsnaz* (special assignment elite troops), but Glaz'ev refused to cooperate. In a bid to capitalize on the bloc's success, Glaz'ev ran against Putin in the 2004 presidential election. Incensed at this reckless challenge to his Kremlin patrons, Rogozin appropriated Rodina's name for his own eponymous party. The damage, however, was already done. According to the Rodina deputy Andrei Savel'ev, Glaz'ev's candidature was interpreted in the corridors of the power as a sign of deception.⁶ The result was that the Presidential Administration ceased to regard the bloc as a potential ally. The cooling of relations left Rogozin's *spetsnaz* with little incentive to support Putin or his government.

The catalyst for Rodina's shift into opposition was Ukraine's Orange Revolution, which dramatized the mobilizing potential of nationalism in an antiauthoritarian uprising. In early 2005, when large demonstrations against social welfare reforms erupted in Russian cities, Rogozin and a group of Rodina deputies signaled their support for the protesters by staging a hunger strike in their Duma premises. The authorities retaliated by cutting the Internet connection that was streaming video of the strike (Rogozin 2008, 401). The rupture was formalized on February 19, when Rogozin announced that Rodina was no longer "the president's *spetsnaz*." In light of the

“virtually revolutionary conditions’ in the country,” it would become a coordinator of protests and the “leading opposition force” (Tkachuk 2005, 2).

Rodina’s embrace of orangist revolutionary tactics was symbolized by the change of the party’s colors from red to lemon yellow. This citrus rebranding provoked condemnation from former allies like Sergei Baburin, who complained that “they are preparing a revolution for us” (Moskovskii Komsomolets’ 2005). Central to those preparations was Rodina’s youth organization, whose militants travelled to Kyiv to learn Maidan technology (Redichkina & Falyakhov, 2005). This radicalization intensified during the summer, when Rodina held a congress that embraced “colored revolution” in its rhetoric and its symbolism. Extolling the gathering as a sacral event, Rogozin promised an “anti-corruption, anti-criminal” revolution that would slay the three-headed “dragon” of “the criminal oligarchy, the raw materials industry and corrupt bureaucracy” (Tukmakov 2005, 3) His revolutionary pathos was amplified by a troupe of Ukrainian drummers who had performed in Kyiv’s Maidan during the Orange Revolution (Tukmakov, 2005).

By flaunting his orangist techniques, Rogozin ensured that Rodina became a prime target of Putin’s “preventive counterrevolution,” a set of measures to mobilize loyalists and to liquidate the political and civic forces that might instigate a colored revolution (Horvath, 2013). The first blow was struck in Moscow, where Rodina was widely expected to emerge as the dominant opposition force in the December 2005 municipal Duma elections. The party’s campaign revolved around a racist election advertisement. It pitted a blonde mother with a pram against four supposed Caucasian immigrants, who tossed watermelon rinds in her path and complained that “they’ve come in large numbers” (*ponaekhali tut*). The litterers were castigated by Rogozin and the head of Rodina’s Moscow election list, who inquired whether they spoke Russian. The advertisement concluded with an exhortation: “Let us clean our city of rubbish” (Rodina 2005, video). This incitement to racial hatred provided the pretext for court action that led to Rodina’s disqualification from the election (Troitskii and Kostenko 2005).

This ruling signaled the beginning of a multipronged campaign to destroy Rodina. The Kremlin-aligned media publicized the party’s links to organized crime, and Rogozin and his supporters were barred from television. (Politov 2006; Zavtra 2006). Under varying pretexts, court rulings disqualified the party from seven out of eight regional elections in March 2006 (*Kommersant* 2006). Behind the scenes, regional governors advised local Rodina leaders to abandon Rogozin (Didenko 2006). The coup de grace was delivered by the discovery of extremist literature during a police raid on the premises of the party’s Rostov branch, which provided a pretext for the annulment of Rogozin’s own nomination to Rodina’s next congress (Tsygankov 2006). Recognizing the inevitable, Rogozin resigned on March 24 (Veretennikova 2006). The following day, Rodina’s party congress voted to merge with A Just Russia, the Kremlin project for a loyal social democratic party. The extirpation of Rodina from systemic politics was confirmed by the electoral commission’s refusal to register a successor party, Great Russia, in July 2007 (Zubchenko 2007). Six months later, Rogozin conceded that his career in party politics was finished and accepted appointment as Russia’s ambassador to NATO (Sorokina 2008).

Rodina and the Crisis of 2011

Five years after unleashing the arsenal of state power to destroy Rodina, the Kremlin facilitated the party’s return to the political arena. Instead of being treated as a threat, Rodina was now cultivated as a force for stability. This reversal was a response to the crisis of the Medvedev–Putin tandemocracy in mid-2011. Facing growing street protest, an increasingly united opposition, and dwindling popular support for United Russia, the Kremlin had good reason to fear a political crisis during the election cycle of 2011–2012. The dangers were aggravated by Putin’s decision to end Medvedev’s liberal experiment and return to the presidency.

What magnified the usefulness of Rodina as a loyalist force was the rise of the national democrats, a loose coalition of activists united around demands for democratization and controls

over illegal immigration (Kolstø 2014). The threat they posed to the regime was exemplified by Aleksei Naval'nyi, a regular participant in Russian Marches, who had exposed a series of corruption scandals on his popular blog and derided United Russia as “the party of crooks and thieves.” On the streets, nationalists were challenging the regime’s control of public space. On December 11, 2010, police were overwhelmed by thousands of football hooligans who rioted in Manezh Square under the walls of the Kremlin. Ominously, some nationalist leaders were beginning to collaborate with the left-liberal opposition in the Strategy-31 movement (Aksenov 2009). To ensure a smooth transfer of power, the regime needed to divert this anti-Kremlin nationalism into loyalist channels.

A framework for Rodina’s revival was provided by the All-Russian Popular Front (*Obshcherossiiskii Narodnyi Front*, ONF), a nonparty conglomeration of public movements and civic associations that had been created as an alternative support base for Putin. From the outset, it was clear that nationalists had a major role to play in ONF. Vladislav Surkov, the deputy head of the Presidential Administration, had argued that the main task of the new structure was to integrate “people who are not always, shall we say, calm and stable” (Bocharova & Vinokurova 2011, para. 19). This recruitment process began with a forum of far-right bloggers held under ONF’s aegis. The organizers included Aleksandr Bosykh, the coordinator of KRO’s youth wing, who boasted that Rogozin had personally authorized his participation (*Kommersant* 2011).

The regime’s overture to Russian nationalists was quickly exploited by Aleksei Zhuravlev, a veteran Rodina staffer and leader of the KRO. Zhuravlev announced his intention to run in the ONF’s primaries in Voronezh for selecting candidates to stand on United Russia’s Duma list (Regnum 2011). At the time, Zhuravlev was an obscure figure, who had followed Rogozin from the Komsomol into nationalist politics, but he was ideally suited to the role of a pro-Kremlin Russian nationalist. For the regime, his lack of charisma and his work on United Russia campaigns were reassuring. For Russian nationalists, his service as deputy head of staff for Rodina’s Duma faction and his leadership of KRO were evidence of patriotic credentials (Regnum 2011).

No less important for Rodina’s resurrection was Rogozin’s return to domestic politics. On September 29, 2011, three days before the announcement of Putin’s presidential candidacy, Rogozin presided over the congress of a new movement called Rodina-KRO (Rodina-Congress of Russian Communities), which combined the names of his two most successful political projects. From the outset, Rogozin emphasized the lineage connecting Rodina-KRO with the defunct party. He opened his speech with an exclamation—*ponaekhali tut* (they’ve come in large numbers)—that reminded his listeners of Rodina’s infamous 2005 election advertisement. He proceeded to endorse ONF and to exhort his listeners to collaborate with the regime. By supporting Putin, he argued, the nationalists of Rodina-KRO were positioning themselves for a leadership turnover. “Enough of freezing at Russian marches!” Rogozin concluded. “It is time to move into the offices where strategic decisions about Russia’s future are being made” (Rogozin 2011, 11).

Rodina as Counterrevolutionary Proxy

The December 2011 elections were a breakthrough for veterans of Rodina in two ways. On one hand, they carried Zhuravlev into the State Duma. Although he was elected on the lists of United Russia, Zhuravlev remained the chairman of KRO and could justifiably claim to be the main parliamentary representative of Russian nationalism. On the other hand, the postelection political crisis, triggered by mass protests against electoral fraud, became a catalyst for closer cooperation between the Kremlin and Russian nationalists. To restore order, the authorities unleashed a new “preventive counterrevolution,” which combined a crackdown on the protest movement, new controls over civil society, and the mobilization of a counterrevolutionary coalition.⁷ Neo-Stalinists like Sergei Kurginyan and Nikolai Starikov, conservatives like Nataliya Narochnitskaya, red-brown ideologues like Aleksandr Prokhanov, neo-fascists like Aleksandr Dugin, and the Right-Conservative Alliance were all enlisted in the Kremlin’s struggle against the protest movement.⁸ Rodina-KRO became the most important platform for the ethnonationalist segment of this

coalition. In practice, this resulted in the expansion of its mission. As mass protests continued, Rodina-KRO mutated from an exercise in electoral technology into a counterrevolutionary project.

What distinguished Rodina-KRO from its loyalist rivals was the patronage of Dmitrii Rogozin, who on December 23, 2011, was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, with responsibility for the military-industrial complex. At the time, Vladimir Pribylovskii, a prominent expert on Russian nationalism, claimed that “the appointment signifies the union of Putin and nationalists, or at least with their relatively moderate part” (Solov’ev, Safronov, and Zhuravlev 2011, 1). In fact, many moderate nationalists remained hostile to the president. Rogozin’s function was to neutralize their influence by becoming the principal mediator between nationalists and Kremlin. The Rodina project became a major platform for this mediation. In 2013, the leader of the revived Rodina party reassured a party congress that “Rogozin has not gone away” but “actively cooperates with us” and “suggests the space in which we work” (Rodina 2013d).

Rogozin’s new role was exemplified by his participation in the carefully orchestrated media discussion of a programmatic article about the national question that was published under Putin’s name in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in January 2012. By hailing the special status of ethnic Russians (russkie) as state-forming people and by acknowledging concerns about illegal immigration and ethnic crime, Putin made significant concessions to Russian nationalists. But he also warned against the “bacillus of nationalism” and criticized calls to restrict immigration from Central Asia (Putin 2012). In his response, which was published ten days later in *Izvestiya*, Rogozin praised Putin’s article as a historic overture that left nationalists with no choice but to defend the regime against the protest movement. Although Putin had removed the stigma that nationalist discourse was somehow seditious, the protest movement was led by treacherous Russophobic liberals. How, demanded Rogozin, “could Russian nationalists make common cause with those who hate and despise our Motherland and the Russian people?” The duty of the Russian nationalist movement was now to “boldly integrate itself into the regime and learn the management of such a complex organism as the Russian state” (Rogozin 2012, 1).

Two days later Rogozin took this case to a conclave of eminent Russian nationalists, which included supporters and critics of the protest movement. Rogozin’s address was both a critique of nationalist illusions and an exhortation to collaborate with the Kremlin against its ideological adversaries on the streets. Nationalists had failed in politics, argued Rogozin, because they had not found a common language with ordinary people. As a result, they were ignored by the regime until the current crisis, which had created a vacuum waiting to be filled. The path to power was by collaboration with the state, not with the left-liberal opposition. “If Russian nationalists prefer to scream at opposition rallies,” concluded Rogozin, “that means that someone else will come to power” (Mikhailov 2012, 13).

In an attempt to realize his vision of a broader nationalist coalition, Rogozin instigated the creation of a counterrevolutionary platform, the Volunteer Movement of the All-Russian Popular Front (*Dobrovol’cheskoe Dvizhenie Obshcherossiiskogo Narodnogo Fronta*, DON) in Support of the Army and Fleet. Although formally created under the aegis of the Popular Front, DON was built on the foundation of Rodina-KRO and coordinated by Zhuravlev (Bosykh 2012). According to Rogozin (2012, 1), DON was “a national-patriotic, rightist alternative to the chaos of street demonstrations” and “national self-defence against attempts to impose external rule on Russia.” The movement’s name, which alluded to the Volunteer Movement created by anti-Bolshevik generals in the Don region in 1918, was an obvious attempt to claim the legacy of the White movement (Rudakov 2012). The implication was that Rogozin and his allies were defending Russia from a revolutionary menace comparable to the Bolsheviks. The DON’s founding congress, attended by over a thousand delegates at Krokus Convention Center on February 26, 2012, became a platform for the rallying of conservative forces behind Putin on the eve of the presidential election. In his keynote speech, Patriarch Kirill raised the alarm about the threat posed to Russia’s sovereignty by information aggression that was undermining traditional values (Patriarch Kirill 2012). He was echoed by Rogozin, who vilified Sergei Kovalev, the Soviet-era dissident who had

campaigned against both Chechen wars, as the treasonous prototype of the liberal leaders of the protest movement. To oppose their white ribbons, “flags of capitulation,” Rogozin exhorted patriots to unite under Georgievskii ribbons (Tropkina 2012). Not without reason did one observer liken the congress to an anti-orangist demonstration. The DON was also an important step for Rodina-KRO, which devoted increasing attention to military affairs as it developed a symbiotic relationship with the new structure.

Rodina-KRO played a conspicuous role in the conservative turn that dominated Putin’s third presidential term. In particular, Zhuravlev and his colleagues helped to focus nationalist anger on Pussy Riot, the feminist performance art group whose activists had filmed a controversial anti-Putin “Punk Prayer” in Moscow’s Christ the Saviour Cathedral on February 21, 2012. By portraying this stunt as a deliberate act of blasphemy, the Kremlin-aligned media transformed it into the central grievance of a new morality politics, which stigmatized the protest movement as radical extremists who rejected mainstream values (Sharafutdinova 2014). In the process, this propaganda exacerbated the tensions between the liberal and nationalist sympathizers of the protest movement. Militants from Rodina-KRO were quick to take up the cause of offended believers. Less than a month after the arrest of the performers, Aleksandr Bosykh, the coordinator of KRO’s youth wing, led an attack on a group of Pussy Riot supporters outside the court that was hearing an appeal on the case. Bosykh punched one of picketers, a young woman, in the face. (Basharova 2012). Despite the circulation of disturbing images of this act of violence, Bosykh escaped prosecution. Flaunting its impunity, Rodina-KRO appointed Bosykh to head a committee on interethnic relations that was entrusted with briefing Zhuravlev for his participation in a new Presidential Council for Inter-ethnic Relations (Girin 2012).

As the political crisis deepened, Rodina-KRO’s network joined other Kremlin-aligned groups in promoting the idea that the Russian Orthodox Church and its hierarchy were under attack. According to a widely disseminated conspiracy theory, Pussy Riot’s stunt and media exposes about Patriarch Kirill’s luxurious lifestyle were part of a Western plot to subvert the authority of the church and destabilize the Russian state. In response, pro-Kremlin forces prepared a public show of force for Easter. Rodina-KRO’s Moscow office hosted preparatory meetings that were attended by 12 organizations (Frolov 2012). The result was the Car Rally in Defence of the Church, a motorized demonstration in Prospekt Sakharov on the evening of April 21, where activists from KRO and DON joined Night Wolves bikers and Christian militants from the Union of Bearers of Orthodox Banners (Valyaev 2012).

Action in the streets was reinforced by pressure in the State Duma, where Zhuravlev spearheaded the campaign to convert the hysteria around Pussy Riot into legislation. In a series of statements, he demanded the amendment of anti-extremism laws (articles 280 and 282 of the Criminal Code) to include the incitement of hatred toward religious believers (Litoi 2012). In the process, he cultivated the support of Russian Orthodox nationalists; he also addressed the grievances of radical nationalists, who claimed to be unfairly targeted by the legislation. Ultimately the law adopted by the Duma in June 2013 was an amendment to the Criminal Code’s prohibition on violations of religious freedom (Korchenkova and Samokhina 2013). But its draconian punishments—three years imprisonment for offending feelings—vindicated the demands of Zhuravlev and KRO-Rodina.

Rodina’s new counterrevolutionary vocation was on display at its “restoration congress,” which took place in tandem with DON’s first formal congress on September 30, 2012. Both events were chaired by Zhuravlev and held in the same hotel. The tone was set by Rogozin’s speech to DON in the morning. Calling for the defense of “our cultural values and our cultural DNA,” Rogozin claimed that Pussy Riot’s “blow was inflicted on the Russian Orthodox Church consciously” as part of “a policy to cast doubt on our faith in ourselves” (Doronina and Rubchenko 2012, 84). Rogozin did not stay for Rodina’s relaunching, but his presence overshadowed the proceedings. Unanimously elected as leader, Zhuravlev emphasized that the new Rodina would be the continuation of Rodina as it existed in 2004 and that old party cards would remain valid. Conveniently ignoring Rogozin’s orangist phase, he reaffirmed that Rodina was the president’s *spetsnaz* (Il’yashenko

2012). Two months later, Zhuravlev announced that Rodina would not participate in the annual Russian march because its organizers had collaborated with the protest movement. Instead, he marked the Day of National Unity with Rogozin at a military-patriotic exercise held under the aegis of DON (Rodina 2012a).

Despite Zhuravlev's emphasis on continuity, the new Rodina was a more explicitly radical nationalist project than its predecessor. Unlike in 2004, its xenophobia was not diluted by a contingent of socialists. Instead, representatives of far-right subcultures exacerbated its radicalism. The most important was Fedor Biryukov (b.1978), who was described in press-releases as the party ideologist. Under the name of Fedor Volkov, Biryukov was known as a singer and composer in the neo-Nazi musical subculture of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Many of his songs about Hitler, the swastika, and the white race were subsequently banned under anti-extremism legislation (Laruelle 2021, 94–95).

The presence of Biryukov facilitated Rodina's most important contribution to the regime's ideological renovation, a campaign against illegal immigration. Launched by an inflammatory documentary titled "Aliens" by the television propagandist Arkadii Mamontov in May 2012, this campaign complemented the regime's xenophobic vilification of the protest movement.⁹ It also testified to the extent of the regime's evolution during the seven years since Rodina had been barred from Moscow elections for anti-immigrant advertising. Now Rodina's inflammatory slogans were echoed by a chorus of Kremlin propagandists. Instead of harassment from the security forces, Rodina's militants now cooperated with police in raids on migrant hostels. They also tested the limits of the possible by staging protests outside local government offices.

For the regime, this agitation served to take the wind out of the sails of anti-immigration campaigners, like Vladimir Tor and Nikolai Bondarik, who had joined the protest movement. For Zhuravlev, it reasserted Rodina's nationalist credentials after his refusal to join the 2012 Russian March. Within a fortnight of the march, Zhuravlev had announced that vigilantes from Rodina's "immigration *spetsnaz*" were preparing for action in the district of Losino-Petrovskii (Moscow Region), where protests had erupted against immigrants who were employed by a local textile factory (Rodina 2012b). On December 5, Zhuravlev and his *spetsnaz* raided the factory in collaboration with officers of the Federal Migration Service. Rodina's squad consisted of militants of *Moi Dvor* (My Courtyard), an ostensibly ecological organization dominated by radical nationalists, whose Moscow region branch was headed by the football gang leader, Vladimir Laktyushin.¹⁰ This cooperation exemplified both the fluidity of the nationalist ecosystem and Rodina's special position as a systemic party. As a Duma deputy, Zhuravlev guaranteed a degree of protection for the local militants in his *spetsnaz*. He was also able to offer opportunities for their leaders like Laktyushin, who would soon become the leader of Rodina's youth organization.

These raids accompanied an intensification of anti-immigrant xenophobia in the Kremlin-aligned media. In December 2012, hostile coverage of guest workers seeped from propaganda talk shows to reports on the evening news (Tolz and Harding 2015, 467). Rodina exploited the shifting information environment with a spate of legislative proposals to restrict the rights of immigrant laborers (Rodina 2013j, 2013f). More encouragement came on April 14, 2013, when Rodina's patron, Vice Premier Rogozin, conducted an inspection of the Dushanbe-Moscow train on its arrival in Astrakhan. Accompanied by a television crew and the deputy head of the border service, Rogozin announced that the train, overcrowded with Tadjik laborers, was "a threat to the sanitary health of the entire nation" (Grishin 2013, 1). Widely publicized in the media, this inflammatory declaration signaled official encouragement for the anti-immigrant raids.

The result was a new surge of xenophobic aggression. On June 28, vigilantes from *Shchit Moskvy* (Shield of Moscow) stormed a migrant hostel, provoking a riot that resulted in 60 arrests (Dmitroshkin 2013). As the principal voice of legal ethnonationalism, Rodina tried to assume leadership of the agitation. In the parliament, Zhuravlev proposed a draft law requiring guest workers to pay a sum as surety for their stay (Rodina 2013h). In the streets, Rodina sent party patrols to investigate complaints about migrant workers and to put pressure on local officials (Rodina

2013g). On September 4, 2013, party activists staged individual pickets outside prefectural offices in five Moscow districts under the slogan “Bureaucrats, fulfill the instructions of Mayor Sobyenin. Get rid of rubbish and illegals” (Rodina 2013c). A few weeks later, Rodina joined Shchit Moskvyy in a campaign to catch illegal immigrants working as unregistered taxi drivers. Pretending to be customers, they hailed vehicles that were driven by suspected immigrants and ordered them to drive to a location where police were waiting to detain those without documents (Rodina 2013a).

What brought the campaign to an end was the eruption of anti-Caucasian riots in Biryulevo, a district in southern Moscow, in October 2013. Almost overnight, the Kremlin-aligned media altered the tone of its coverage of immigration. Instead of attributing the disorders to the clash of civilizations, ethnic criminality, and Islam, it criticized local residents for perceiving alcohol-fuelled brawls through the lens of ethnicity (Tolz and Harding 2015, 475). The leadership of Rodina clearly got the message. Although Zhuravlev continued to agitate for legislative curbs on immigration, the party’s vigilante actions and picketing actions were over. Nevertheless, it had consolidated its position as the principal voice of systemic ethnonationalism. In the elections in September 2013, Rodina won 80 seats in regional assemblies and municipal councils (Rodina 2013e). Two months later, Zhuravlev was invited, along with other representatives of nonparliamentary parties, to a meeting with Putin. In a gesture to the Kremlin’s new priorities, Zhuravlev used the occasion to repeat a call by Rogozin for Russia to “gather lands using a policy of soft power” (Rodina 2013i).

Crimea and Novorossiya

Rodina’s credibility as a loyalist force was strengthened by the anti-immigration campaign, which had demonstrated its capacity to mobilize nationalists. This capacity proved central to its next major assignment: the expansion of Russian influence in Ukraine. What began as an effort to draw Ukraine into Putin’s project for the reintegration of the post-Soviet space soon became a struggle against a new revolutionary upheaval, the Euromaidan. Rodina was uniquely well placed to assist the Kremlin in this endeavor. Unlike other loyalist nationalist structures, Rodina had real connections in the post-Soviet space based on KRO’s old networks. During 2013, Rodina had also worked closely with Rogozin to promote the Eurasian Economic Union. On the eve of the outbreak of the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv, representatives of Rodina traveled to Crimea, where they held talks with Sergei Aksenov, the former gangster who headed the tiny Russian nationalist party, Russkoe Edinstvo (Rodina 2013b).

When it became clear that the protests in Kyiv threatened the survival of the Yanukovich regime, Rodina escalated its intervention in Crimea. On February 3, 2014, Zhuravlev went to Simferopol’ to attend the launching of the Slavic Anti-Fascist Front (SAFF) which united the local branch of KRO and Russkoe Edinstvo. Although Zhuravlev was formally a guest, his crucial role was underlined by the decision to postpone the proceedings for several days because poor weather conditions had prevented his flight (Podosenov 2014a). On his return home, he presided over the creation of Rusintern (Russkii Internatsional’), a movement dedicated to uniting ethnic Russians across the former Soviet space and resisting the “liberal-fascist mutiny in Ukraine” (Rodina 2014a). To that end, Rusintern was soon recruiting volunteers to despatch to Crimea, where a sizeable Rodina contingent was operating. On February 27, as Russian special forces seized the Crimean parliament in Simferopol’, Zhuravlev was on the ground as a voice of Russian officialdom. In a speech to a crowd in Sevastopol’s Nakhimov Square, he vowed, “We do not intend to separate and we will not yield. We are a united people!” (Rodina 2014c).

Rodina was also active on the home front. As in 2012, it provided a channel for dialogue between the government and Russian nationalists. On February 28, 2014, Rogozin summoned a wide spectrum of nationalist militants to a meeting at Rodina’s Moscow headquarters. The guests included national democrats and far-right militants. What emerged from this encounter was an agreement to support “all the actions of the Russian Federation for the defence of the [ethnic] Russian population, the national minorities of Ukraine, and the guaranteeing of the special status of

Crimea” (Zayavlenie 2014). No less significant than these vague commitments was private discussion. In 2016, Dmitrii Demushkin, a leader of the outlawed Russkii movement, revealed that Rogozin had exhorted him “to assemble an army of passionate pro-Russia people and send them to the war in eastern Ukraine” (Volchek 2016, 21).

There is little doubt that Rodina itself helped to instigate separatist agitation in southeast Ukraine. In mid-April, Ukraine’s SBU security service announced the arrest of Aleksei Belous, an activist of the Russian nationalist organization Donetskaia Respublika, which had played a leading role in the storming of government buildings in Donetsk. According to SBU, Belous was coordinating his activities with Russia and had planned “a meeting with the leadership of Rodina to receive instructions and money for the organisation of further subversive activities” (Pravda 2014). In its retort, Rodina accused the SBU of “hallucinations” but affirmed its determination to support Russian communities throughout the world, “including in Ukraine” (Podosenov 2014b; RIA Novosti, 2014).

What is clear is that Rodina played a role in mobilizing Russian nationalist support for the two Russia-backed “peoples republics.” On April 22, ten days after Russian special forces seized the town of Slavyansk, Rodina’s St. Petersburg branch hosted the founding meeting of Za Rossiiu! (For Russia!), which declared its commitment to “the reunification of the Russian people” and “support for the Russian insurgents in Novorossiia” (Rodina 2014b). This was more than empty rhetoric. Rodina’s partner in Za Rossiiu! was the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), a radical nationalist organization with a military wing called the Imperial Legion. RIM legionaries were already on the ground in Slavyansk, and they went on to fight in several separatist formations during 2014–2015 (Popkov 2020).

As the conflict escalated, Zhuravlev served as a proxy for the Russian state in the two separatist statelets. On June 12, he traveled to Lugansk on a fact-finding visit with Oleg Tsarev, a figurehead of the Kremlin’s Novorossiia project for a large Russian ethnic state in southeastern Ukraine (Rodina 2014d). They were received by Valerii Bolotov, the paramilitary leader and self-proclaimed “people’s governor.”¹¹ During the next six months, Zhuravlev made no fewer than 15 trips to the separatist territories (Rosinform 2015). The most important was a monitoring mission to legitimize the November 2014 elections in the Donetsk People’s Republic, which were won by the paramilitary leader and acting premier, Aleksandr Zakharchenko. Although the poll was conducted without political competition or even lists of voters, Zhuravlev offered fulsome praise for the voting process. Addressing Zakharchenko’s inauguration ceremony “in the name of the multinational people of the Russian Federation,” Zhuravlev hailed “the foundation of a new state” and declared that this “democratic and honest election” should be envied by the West (Zhuravlev 2014, 0:32–0:48).

Unlike some of its rivals, Rodina survived the winding down of the Novorossiia project in the spring of 2015. While party functionaries continued serving as Kremlin proxies in the Donbass, Rodina reoriented its activism to two loyalist initiatives. The first was an exercise in soft power: the cultivation of European far-right extremists. The showpiece was an International Russian Conservative Forum, which Rodina cohosted with the Russian Imperial Movement in St. Petersburg in March 2015. Although shunned by electorally successful far-right parties like France’s National Front and Hungary’s Jobbik, the forum was a milestone in the Kremlin’s engagement with disruptive forces from the neo-fascist fringes. It was no accident that the proceedings were chaired by Rodina’s ideologist, the onetime neo-Nazi musician Fedor Biryukov, who welcomed an array of like-minded comrades. The most prominent were Italy’s Roberto Fiore (leader of the neo-fascist Forza Nuova), Germany’s Udo Voigt (MEP from the neo-Nazi German Democratic Party), and the American Jared Taylor (a leading white supremacist ideologue) (Filina 2015). Never before had so many foreign neo-fascists assembled in Russia in a show of solidarity with the Putin regime. An instant scandal, the forum provoked protests not only from leftist militants but even from World against Nazism, a pro-Kremlin platform (Mir bez natsizma 2015). Nevertheless, the event helped to consolidate Rodina’s status as a leading public interlocutor between the Putin regime and the European far right. The relationship was consolidated in July 2015, when Biryukov arrived in

Brussels at the head of a Rodina delegation. He had been invited by the Alliance for Peace and Freedom, the far-right bloc in the European Parliament, to participate in a press conference in the parliament's premises. When Martin Schultz, the chairman of the European Parliament, barred Biryukov from the building, Rodina retaliated with a mocking statement expressing concern for Schultz's mental health (Rodina 2015b).

Rodina's second loyalist initiative was the fabrication of political support for the regime's crackdown on the independent media and extrasystemic opposition. During 2015–2016, Zhuravlev repeatedly demanded that state agencies take action against "liberal fascists." His most publicized intervention was a submission setting out multiple alleged infractions by the Internet television channel Dozhd', which had already been driven from Russia's cable networks for its coverage of the Euromaidan. According to Zhuravlev, Dozhd' was "discrediting Russia's activity to manage the conflict in south-east Ukraine" (Zaks.ru 2015, 23). Three months later, the Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation of Dozhd' for extremism, terrorism, and violations of labor law (Gordonua 2015).

Rodina's campaign against liberal fascists coincided with a new effort to cultivate far-right youth. In August 2015, it unveiled a new youth wing, TIGR, an acronym for Tradition, Empire, State, Motherland. Its leader was Vladimir Laktyushin, the football gang leader who had joined Rodina's anti-immigrant raids. Unlike its predecessor, whose militants had traveled to Ukraine to learn revolutionary methods, TIGR was a counterrevolutionary project from the outset. At TIGR's founding conference, Laktyushin explained to his audience that they were assembled in a Cold War bomb shelter because this was not merely a refuge but also a place from which a counterattack would be launched. "We will go out," he declared, "to prevent the enemy from taking power, as thieves and traitors took power in fraternal Ukraine" (Rodina 2015a). At the time, experts of Sova surmised that TIGR's goal was to co-opt radical nationalists who supported the Novorossiia project (Alperovich and Yudina 2016). However, this effort soon became redundant because of the wave of repression that destroyed the main platforms of opposition nationalism and silenced its leaders.

Despite its reorientation and obsequious loyalty to the Kremlin, Rodina never broke out of the ranks of nonparliamentary parties. In the Duma elections of September 2016, it received only 1.48% of the vote, far short of the threshold for a share of the party list vote (*Rossiiskaya Gazeta* 2016). Zhuravlev's only consolation was his own reelection to a seat for Voronezh'. In the wake of this debacle, he embarked on a series of unsuccessful attempts to forge a new coalition of patriotic forces. His bargaining power was diminished by the demotion in May 2018 of Rodina's patron, Dmitrii Rogozin. One potential alternative was the oligarch Evgenii Prigozhin, the owner of the Wagner Group mercenaries, who bankrolled Rodina's St. Petersburg branch during 2020–2021. What derailed this promising collaboration was the fact that Prigozhin had powerful enemies in the city administration, including the new governor, Aleksandr Beglov. As a result, Rodina was barred from the municipal elections (Dilimbetov, Prakh, Rozhkova 2021). The effect of this setback was compounded by the concurrent Duma elections, where the party's vote slumped to 0.8%. A month later, Zhuravlev accepted defeat and joined the LDPR's Duma faction (RIA Novosti 2021).

By then, Rodina was little more than an accessory to Zhuravlev's new career as a ubiquitous propagandist on political talk shows. One website reported that he appeared on television screens so frequently "that it might be his second job" (Kozlova, 2022). Few loyalist pundits rivalled his capacity for inflammatory statements and incitements to violence. When Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Zhuravlev repeatedly tested the limits of the permissible. In May, he attracted international attention by promising two genocides. On one hand, he boasted that "there will be nothing left" of the east and west coasts of the USA after a Russian nuclear strike. On the other, he announced that 2 million Ukrainians were "incurable" and either needed to leave Ukraine "or be denazified, that is exterminated" (Pleasance 2022). Two months later, he threatened on Rossiya Channel's *60 Minutes* to kill a German journalist, who had objected to being called a nazi by Russian propagandists. Even the habitually indulgent presenter felt the need to caution Zhuravlev for making death threats in public (Kozlova 2022).

Conclusion

The withering of Rodina, from a potential parliamentary party in 2012 to little more than a propaganda platform a decade later, owed much to the devaluation of its brand under Zhuravlev's leadership and the demotion of Rogozin, its principal patron. But the party's decline also testified to the eclipse of the anti-Kremlin nationalists who had appeared to represent a serious threat to the regime during the Medvedev-Putin tandemocracy. By the beginning of Putin's fourth presidential term in 2018, this tendency had been weakened by a combination of internecine conflict, repression, and co-optation. As a result, Rodina had less to offer the supervisors of managed nationalism.

Despite Rodina's failure to become a parliamentary party, it would be wrong to dismiss it as irrelevant to the evolution of the Putin regime. As this article has demonstrated, the history of post-2011 Rodina exemplifies the bargaining process at the heart of managed nationalism. Both the Putin regime and Russian nationalists gained significant dividends from this interaction. By drawing some nationalists into loyalist channels, Rodina facilitated Putin's return to the presidency and the defeat of the protest movement. By serving as an instrument of Putin's hybrid warfare in Crimea and southeast Ukraine, Rodina helped to rally many nationalists behind the Russian Spring. By acting as an intermediary with the European far right, Rodina bolstered the regime's conservative soft power. In return, Rodina was granted access to public space and the opportunity to agitate for nationalist causes in an increasingly constricted political system. In the Duma, in regional legislatures, and on political talk shows, Rodina promoted traditional values, xenophobia, anti-Westernism, and aggression against Ukraine. Ultimately its leader became a propagandist of a genocidal war.

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Notes

- 1 On legislatures in authoritarian systems, see Gandhi (2008) and the special issue of *Comparative Politics* (2020, vol. 53, issue 9). One notable exception to the academic neglect of nonparliamentary parties is Sergei Shpagin's (2021) analysis of their limited prospects in the 2021 Duma elections.
- 2 The reemergence of Rodina was ignored in two major volumes on Russian nationalism. See Kolstø & Blakkisrud (2016) and Laruelle (2019). Far more scholarly attention was devoted to the original Rodina. See Titkov (2006), Laruelle (2015), Horvath (2013, 57–63, 154–60), and Wilson (2005, 260–264).
- 3 On these aspects of the nationalist scene, see Umland (2010), Fedor (2018), Laruelle (2016), Tipaldou & Uba (2014).
- 4 See Goode and Stroup (2015), Goode (2020), McGlynn (2020), and Knott (2024).
- 5 The most extreme case is the Kremlin-backed neo-nazi group Russkii Obraz, whose leader collaborated with the terrorist group BORN (Horvath, 2020). Also problematic was the Eurasian Youth Union, which instigated the first Russian March in 2005.
- 6 Andrei Savel'ev interviewed by Aleksandr Pyatkovskii (September 2013).
- 7 On the concept of a "Second Preventive Counter-Revolution," see Hall (2018).
- 8 Kurginyan, Starikov, Prokhanov, and Dugin all spoke on February 4, 2012, at the pro-Putin, anti-orangist demonstration at Poklonnaya Gora (Sevast'yanov, 2012). On the Right Conservative Alliance, see Horvath (2020, 234–238).
- 9 On the role of the Kremlin-aligned media in fanning the campaign, see Tolz and Harding (2015).
- 10 On Moi Dvor, see Verkhovskii and Kozhevnikova (2011); on Laktyushin's role, see *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (2015).

- 11 As early as March 2014, a masked Bolotov was interviewed in the Russian media as the potential leader of an armed insurgency against Ukraine (Kots and Steshin 2014). On Zhuravlev's visit, see Rodina (2014d).

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