

Putin warns ethnic tensions risk tearing Russia apart
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MOSCOW, Jan 24 — Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has warned ethnic tensions could tear Russia apart, saying he would toughen migration rules on reassuming the presidency and keep a tight rein on Russia's regions to prevent it following the Soviet Union into oblivion.

Putin, in power since 2000 and favored to win a six-year presidential term in March, described a Soviet-style vision of a country in which the rights of ethnic minorities would be respected but Russian language and culture would dominate.

"With the collapse of the country (the Soviet Union), we were on the edge — and in some regions over the edge — of civil war," Putin wrote in an article published in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* yesterday, referring to two separatist wars in Chechnya since the 1991 Soviet breakup.

"With great effort, with great sacrifice we were able to douse these fires. But that doesn't mean that the problem is gone," he wrote in the second of a series of articles promoting his leadership goals ahead of March 4 elections.

A little more than a month before the vote, Putin appeared determined to denounce xenophobia without alienating members of the ethnic Russian, mostly Orthodox Christian majority, some of whom fear labour migration and higher birth rates among Russia's Muslims may leave them a minority in their own country.

Moscow is a flash point for ethnic tensions and the site of thousands-strong protests by nationalists angry over migration and government subsidies to the mostly Muslim North Caucasus.

Comparing nationalism to a disease, Putin took aim at ethnic Russian militants, who have been among the 59-year-old prime minister's most vociferous critics, joining in mass protests over disputed parliamentary elections last month.

"If a multiethnic society is infected by nationalism, it loses its strength and durability," Putin said. "We need to understand what far-reaching effects can be caused by attempts to inflame national enmity and hatred."

Russian culture

But he also emphasised that minorities in what he called a multi-ethnic society must live under the umbrella of Russian culture, and migrants must take measures to integrate such as passing exams in Russian language and history.

"The Russian people, the Russian culture is the glue holding together the unique fabric of this civilisation," Putin wrote.

Putin's most detailed proposals called for authorities to be given more power to vet migrants based on their professional skill level, for students to be asked to read some 100 national

classics and for the creation of a new government body tasked with inter-ethnic policy.

He also said the best way to stem migration was by creating favourable conditions for citizens to work in their native regions or nations, and argued in support of state spending on poor regions such as the mostly Muslim North Caucasus.

He also plugged his plan for a Eurasian Union linking Russia with other ex-Soviet republics including those in Central Asia, saying closer economic ties would help curb migration by helping to develop the economies of neighbouring states.

In a sign Putin has few plans to reverse a consolidation of power in Moscow, which opponents say has weakened political competition and turned regions into vassals, Putin said he could not allow regional political parties because some could be created along ethnic lines, calling it a "direct path to separatism."

"What is omitted is even more important than what is included (in the article)," said Nikolai Petrov, a political analyst with the Moscow Carnegie Center, told Reuters.

"There is no mention of federalism here and the idea here is that a centralised state should be stronger in order to prevent disintegration," he said. —Reuters

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