
Original Article

Russia as a nationalizing state: Rejecting the western liberal order

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Abstract Russia's government has become increasingly nationalistic, defensive, and vocal in rejecting elements of the Western liberal order. The Kremlin has attempted to mobilize and channel Russian nationalism into an antiliberal discourse to achieve selected foreign and domestic policy goals, but contending nationalisms complicate the government's ability to control and direct these potent forces. This article draws on official documents, presidential speeches, and recent Russian political writings to assess how Russia's governing elite has adopted and utilized a specific Eurasianist form of Russian nationalism to promote an aggressive foreign policy while marginalizing domestic opposition. Protecting Russian compatriots abroad, restoring historic lost territories, and confronting the Western world strengthen Putin's popularity among the Russian people and legitimize his hold on power, while alienating non-Russian minorities and isolating Russia internationally.

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Introduction

Writing just prior to Vladimir Putin's appointment as a Prime Minister, Anatol Lieven explored the factors contributing to the weakness of Russian nationalism, and argued that Russian national identity for centuries 'has been focused on non-ethnic allegiances – imperial, religious and ideological' (Lieven, 1999, p. 55). Threats to Russian speakers outside Russia's borders had been minimal, the government in Moscow had provided little verbal and no military support for Russian compatriots abroad, and there had been no spontaneous mobilization of Russian nationalists to combat threats or grievances against Russians by hostile ethnics. As Lieven presciently observed, while serious ethnic conflict had been



avoided in the first decade after the breakup, if Russia lost its historic imperial role and self-perception as a leader of other nations, the result could be a new form of virulent patriotism based on an isolated, strong state, and ethnic identity (Lieven, 1999, pp. 63–69).

This is very close to what is taking place in Russia today. Since the start of Putin's third presidential term in 2012, the Russian government has become increasingly nationalistic, defensive, and vocal in rejecting elements of the Western liberal order. Russian unease with liberal values originated in the chaotic 1990s, evolved under Putin's leadership, and peaked with the conflict over Ukraine. During the same period, a variety of nationalisms developed in Russian society, from moderate or liberal antiauthoritarian strains, to imperialistic Eurasianism, to neo-fascist xenophobic forms of nationalism. The Kremlin has attempted to mobilize and channel Russian nationalism into an antiliberal discourse to achieve selected foreign and domestic policy goals, yet the government's ability to control and direct the forces of nationalism is problematic. Ukraine's Euromaidan movement, the annexation of Crimea, and separatist violence in southeastern Ukraine have fractured Russian nationalism and generated extremist currents not fully responsive to the government (see Horvath, 2015).

This paper draws on official documents, presidential speeches, and recent Russian political writings to assess how Russia's governing elite has adopted and utilized an Eurasianist form of Russian nationalism, constructing the Western liberal order as an enemy Other. Russian nationalism has diverse elements and is difficult to categorize. To simplify the task, I examine official nationalist discourses, rather than broader currents of nationalism in Russian society. In this article, I focus primarily on the external manifestations of Russian nationalism, rather than considering domestic dimensions, though of course it is impossible to completely separate the two. In addition, I discuss how social conservatism, suspicion of liberal economic regimes, and resistance to eroding national sovereignty have made Russia an outlier in global society.

State Constructed Nationalism

Benedict Anderson defines nationalism as a powerful emotive willingness to sacrifice for an imagined political community, a community that is bounded and sovereign (Anderson, 2006). The nation as imagined community has its roots in culture – in the history, language, religion and symbols that call forth loyalty to the group, and a sense of boundaries between the group and others. Nationalism is a complex social phenomenon that takes many different forms. Nationalism can be advocated by dominant groups in opposition to established political orders, by majority movements seeking independence or minority movements seeking autonomy, and by elites already in control of the state attempting to mobilize the



dominant ethnos for political goals. National mobilization can take place along various dimensions that resonate with populations – language, culture, history, religion, and territory call forth the most emotive elements of nationalist behavior. Ultimately, national identity is subjective, which explains why there are so many varieties of nationalism. Still, elites who ‘construct’ national communities do not do so from scratch, but build on and shape the objective dimensions of nationalism.

The political aspect of nationalism seeks to safeguard the survival of the nation, and to exercise sovereignty and self-determination. For an existing state, sovereignty is the core means of protection in international society and, not coincidentally, the concept of sovereign authority emerged parallel to the development of the nation-state concept following the Treaty of Westphalia. Sovereignty empowers states to designate and enforce legal boundaries, regulate movement across these boundaries, exercise exclusive authority over internal affairs, and combat the potential erosion of domestic control from abroad. Few states possess the full attributes of sovereignty – powerful states are far better positioned to defend their national sovereignty than weaker states, and the more powerful can violate other states’ sovereignty when it serves their national interests (Krasner, 1999). But the sovereignty norm remains the single greatest defense of the nation, for both the weak and the strong.

State security and sovereignty are enhanced when national unity is strong. Few contemporary studies adhere to a primordialist interpretation of nationalism – virtually all acknowledge that national identities are social and constructed, though they cannot be constructed out of a vacuum. Elites have widely variable degrees of national consciousness within which they work, from strongly nationalist environments to weak and inchoate varieties of nationalism. Within the former Soviet Union, the Baltic nations, Armenia and Georgia fit the former category; Central Asia and Belarus may be included in the latter. Russia is unique owing to its former imperial, multinational, and ideological forms of identity that, together with the totalitarian state penetration of society during the Soviet period, have impeded the evolution of a Russian nationalism as a permanent and unifying ideology (Tuminez, 2000; Lieven, 1999).

Nationalism consists of establishing boundaries – rules of inclusion and exclusion – between an in-group and an out-group. These boundaries are fluid to a certain extent, but generally identities and boundaries will change and evolve over time. Far less common is a radical break in national identity, as happened with the overt rejection of Soviet communism in the early Yeltsin era. Rejection of a previous identity must be followed by attempts to craft a new one, generally in a tumultuous environment, since by definition a radical break will lead to a period of contesting identities. If a new national identity does not emerge from society, the state may proactively seek to shape nationalism in accord with the priorities and interests of governing elites.

According to John Breuilly (1994, p. 8), state-led nationalisms arise in two specific situations: (a). when governments use nationalism to extend their territory



beyond existing boundaries into areas claimed as belonging to the nation and (b) when the government mobilizes nationalism against specific groups or individuals within the country, accusing them of subverting national unity. Hitler used both strategies to realize his goals of imperial expansion and totalitarian domestic control; Russian President Vladimir Putin has used a similar approach, albeit with far more modest results. Moreover, in the Russian context, state-led nationalism has taken place in response to a third pattern – consolidation of power domestically and internationally by directing nationalist outrage against perceived infringements on national autonomy and core societal values.

For elites concerned with the defense and promotion of state interests, constructing a workable identity is requisite for popular mobilization, for national projects, for social cohesion, for national defense, and for legitimizing the existing regime and its form of governance. Nationalism and religion are the two most powerful forms of identity, and are often found in combination. Elite manipulation of national identities is less constrained when there exist fewer alternate sources of information – that is, in more closed societies. Nationalism may be powerful in pluralist, democratic societies, but authoritarian systems can more easily inhibit critical examination of elites' nationalist rhetoric. In both authoritarian and democratic systems, elites can mobilize nationalism around an enemy Other, feeding into popular fears and insecurities.

In stable, non-threatening situations individuals may hold multiple identities (religious, ethnic, regional), and generally do not need to choose among them. But as David Laitin has observed, in the event of a conflict, such as a border war, high levels of antagonism among groups often force people to choose which identity is dominant. Identity choices are influenced by the number of people giving priority to one or another identity, creating a tipping point (Laitin, 1998, p. 23). As the tipping point is reached, and individuals are forced to choose, identity boundaries harden and can become the locus for violent conflict. Under these conditions, a benign nationalism can quickly degenerate into a more aggressive form. Under Putin's leadership, the Kremlin has framed post-Cold War politics as a threatening environment by pointing to the eastward expansion of NATO, the proliferation of mass-based antiauthoritarian movements (color revolutions), and most recently, civil conflict in the most populous and most important of the former Soviet republics, Ukraine. These challenges have heightened Russians' sense of nationalism, but in place of ideological unity the result has been varied nationalisms that have created new strains in the social fabric.

Russian Nationalism Under Putin

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a wide-ranging debate on Russia's true national identity. The initial orientation toward the West lasted only a



few years, dissipating among most segments of the population as it became clear that Russia would not soon transform itself into Western-style liberal democracy, nor would Europe and the United States accept Russia as a fully equal partner. Varieties of Russian nationalism emerged shortly after the breakup, as expressed in Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's misnamed Liberal Democratic Party, in the nationalist Bolshevik movements, and in the various Eurasian philosophical currents. In a rather unique instance of conscious constructivism, Boris Yeltsin commissioned a group of academics led by Georgy Satarov to come up with an official 'Russian idea.' After struggling for months to define Russia's national identity, the commission abandoned the task as futile (see Hill and Gaddy, 2013, p. 43).

Finding consensus on norms and values is difficult in a large, diverse society. As Margaret Moore has argued, nationalism is inherently normative, attributing value to membership in the nation, the right to a homeland, and seeking the good of the nation (Moore, 2001, p. 5). Nationalism may be contested when there are salient ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions within a state. When territorial boundaries have shifted, and identity groups become divided, as happened in the Soviet era and during the breakup of the Soviet Union, the concept of homeland becomes contested. Divided identity groups may challenge the legitimacy of new boundaries, and conflicting historical interpretations may lead to conflict.

Russia, to use Rogers Brubaker's term, is a 'nationalizing state,' a state that is of and for an ethnocultural core nation, but in which a number of smaller nations reside and (as happened in the case of Yugoslavia) a large number of co-ethnics become stranded in the successor states. In the absence of a strong civil society to advance national interests, the nationalizing state becomes the protector and promoter of the nation, defending its cultural, economic, demographic, and political position (Brubaker, 1996, pp. 103–106). Nationalism, then, becomes an elite project. Russia's 'homeland nationalism,' which asserts the state's right and duty to protect ethnonationals in neighboring sovereign states, clashes with the 'nationalizing nationalisms' of the newly independent former republics, since virtually by definition the latter nationalizing projects are held to deny full rights to Russians and their compatriots (Brubaker, 1996, pp. 4–7).

In Russia, the Soviet experience of suppressing Russian nationalism in favor of class solidarity created a sense of victimization among Russians that found open expression after the collapse of the USSR. Russians remained a majority of the population in the Soviet period (albeit a very slim one), and while Russian language and history were privileged in official policy and discourse, more explicit forms of Russian nationalism were prohibited. The resurgence of Russian nationalism has resulted in a new fascination with the past and with religion, and has reinforced a sense that Russians sacrificed much for other groups in the empire – with massive human and material losses in WWII, in rebuilding the devastated Eastern European countries and then subsidizing them throughout the post-war period, in



modernizing the backward regions of Central Asia, and now by pouring money into the Caucasus.

This same dynamic appears to be at work in Ukraine. The Kremlin's accusation that Kyiv's entire ruling elites are fascists in league with foreign intelligence agencies seems absurd from a Western perspective, but it sounds plausible to Russians who remember stories of Ukrainian collaboration with the Nazis. Ukraine's central government is not only dysfunctional and unresponsive to the Russian-speaking population in the east, but Ukrainian nationalists (with American and European assistance and encouragement) are also perceived as threatening the identity of ethnic Russians and their compatriots through restrictive language policies and punitive military operations. Putin has referred to Ukraine as 'Little Russia' (*Malorossiya*), the paternalistic Russian imperial nomenclature that is offensive to Ukrainian nationalists (Marson, 2009).¹ Ukraine's sovereign boundaries are not accepted as legitimate by the Kremlin, or by many Russians in Russia and Ukraine, a result of the closely intertwined history of the two nations. Under these circumstances, historic 'right' trumps international law. In April 2014, one month after Russia absorbed Crimea, a Levada Center survey found that 54 per cent of Russians believed Russia had the right to annex the territories of former Soviet republics if Russian people living there suffer discrimination or infringement of their rights (Munich Security Report, 2015, p. 21).

History is of critical importance to Russian nationalism, as it is to any form of national identity. Putin himself is an avid reader of Russian history, and has done much to rehabilitate strong rulers, whether from the tsarist or Soviet eras. Rebuilding churches and monasteries and restoring Russian Orthodoxy to a special place in Russian society have also played a major role in reinvigorating Russian pride. The emphasis on Russian nationalism, Orthodoxy, and autocratic rule through President Putin recalls the policy of Official Nationality formulated under Nicholas I (1825–1855), a form of state-led and highly conservative, or reactionary, nationalism.

Contemporary Russian nationalism is indeed reactionary in the sense that many prominent intellectuals, nationalist groups, and the Orthodox Church seek to restore elements of the prerevolutionary tsarist era. This ideology incorporates antiliberalism, mysticism, a rejection of democratic institutions, and promotion of the concept of Russia as unique and spiritually superior to Western decadent materialism. Reactionary nationalism rejects change as undermining the stability and true identity of the nation, and seeks salvation in a return to a purer earlier era (Breuilly, 1994, p. 288). Although Russian nationalists are hardly monolithic, many regard the communist period, Gorbachev's perestroika, and the chaos of Yeltsin's Westernizing reforms as destructive, and idolize strong leaders from the past who rejected foreign cultural influences while expanding Russian territory (including Nicholas II, Ivan IV, and Joseph Stalin).



For Eurasianists like Aleksandr Dugin, the elevation of Russian historical tradition is inherently conservative, preserving national culture and Russian Orthodoxy, focusing on the positive, and is based on the premise that the people and the state have an historic mission (Dugin, 2014, pp. 145–149). The Eurasianists promote an inclusive cultural concept of Russian-ness that accepts non-ethnics who speak the Russian language and adhere to Russian values, a position that aligns with the term *Rossiyane* favored by Putin. However, as Marlene Laruelle has argued, it is more accurate to speak of Eurasianists and nationalists having their programs selectively appropriated by Putin, rather than viewing nationalists as interest groups with significant influence over Russian foreign policy (Laruelle, 2015).

In contrast to the Eurasianists, the more extreme nationalists advocate Russia for the Russians (that is, *Russkii*, or ethnic Russians), and warn of Jewish and Masonic conspiracies abroad and in the Russian government. Both the extreme right-wing nationalists, and the more liberal nationalist wing, have been critical of Putin, leading to their marginalization and repression. The Eurasianists' more inclusive perspective on Russian identity, their emphasis on geography and power politics, and their defense of Russian compatriots abroad tend to align them closely with President Putin's goals. Radical nationalists, who are more confrontational toward non-Russians (Chechens and Ukrainians, for example), and frequently express anti-Semitic attitudes, advocate a Russian identity that is more exclusive, less expansionist, and less attuned to Kremlin priorities.

The various currents of Russian nationalism complicate official policy, as exemplified in the Ukraine crisis of 2014. In his speech on Crimea's annexation, Putin referred to Kyiv as the 'mother of Russian cities' and ancient Rus' as a common origin for both Russians and Ukrainians; he cited survey evidence to show overwhelming support that Crimea should be a part of Russia (Putin, 2014). According to opinion surveys most Russians do appear supportive of annexing Crimea, and the broader idea of a Russian national renaissance (the so-called 'Russian Spring'), but the Ukraine conflict has divided nationalists between those supporting the Kremlin (most of the Eurasianists), national democrats who are critical of Putin's dictatorship, national Bolsheviks (who were divided over Ukraine), pan-Slavists critical of the intervention, and ultra-rightists who tended to align with conservative Ukrainian forces like the Right Sector (Horvath, 2015; Iudina and Al'perovich, 2015; Titov, 2014).

Similarly, the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) faces a dilemma between its support for Kremlin policies, and Patriarch Kirill's goal of preserving solidarity with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The Russian church initially avoided openly expressing support for separatists in southeastern Ukraine, but pro-Russian rebel leaders including Igor Strel'kov collaborated with Russian Orthodox priests in fighting the Ukrainian army, and persecuting competing Christian denominations (Higgins, 2014). Kirill's eventual support for pro-Russian



separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk fractured Orthodox unity in Ukraine, though the main branch of the Ukrainian Orthodox church has remained loyal to Moscow.²

Putin's speeches and actions in his first two terms as president offered contradictory views of Russia's identity, on some occasions portraying his country as a European nation, and other times as a Eurasian nation, but by his third term his thinking and programs had evolved toward the ideas of classical Eurasianists (Klubkov, 2015). These include state centralization rather than genuine federalism, the idea of Russia as a unique civilization, an emphasis on space, and an expansive view of Russia 'from the Carpathians to Kamchatka.'³ Putinism (and Eurasianism) celebrate Russia as a multinational and multiconfessional state, but one with a special role for the Russian people, Russian culture, the Orthodox Church, and Russian language as unifying forces. Geopolitically, consolidating Russia's place as the heartland involves revitalizing Siberia and the Russian Far East (a key priority of the Kremlin since the Vladivostok APEC summit in 2012), and promoting the Eurasian Economic Union. Restoring Moscow's control over the Eurasian space enhances economic development and locates Russia at the center of the continent.

The national concept of state–society relations that emerge from Putin's statements, and his actions, is neither the civic model of the state and emphasis on the individual embodied in liberalism, nor the ethnoterritorial federalism developed in the Soviet period. The Western civic melting pot model is seen as sterile and divorced from Russia's communitarian traditions. Soviet nationalities policy generated separatist movement among the national minorities and neglected the leading role of the Russian nation, while Boris Yeltsin's radical devolution of power created nation-states within the federation. Instead, according to Putin, Russian nationalism should provide common values, a sense of patriotism and a larger identity for all ethnic groups within the state, without asking minorities to lose touch with their religious or ethnic roots (Putin, 2012, 2013a).

Putin's nationalism incorporates select elements of prerevolutionary Russian history, while rejecting the monarchists' idealization of tsarist rule. Hill and Gaddy (2013, pp. 68–71) claim that Putin's reformulation of Sergey Uvarov's doctrine of Official Nationality, adopted by Nicholas I, avoids the reactionary and exclusionary elements of the original, but the President's political inclinations are highly conservative and have much in common with his tsarist predecessor. As one Russian academic has argued, this attempt to revive an 'obsolete cultural civilizational paradigm' will likely prove no more effective in its third iteration than it was during the 19th century or in its Bolshevik totalitarian version. Focusing Russian identity along an authoritarian, civilizational dimension, Raskin suggests, will lead to stagnation, historical and spiritual inertia, and a chauvinistic sense of Russian superiority (Raskin, 2008).

In foreign policy, Putin, much like Nicholas I, prefers authoritarian stability in neighboring states to chaotic democratic movements. Nicholas had sought to



contain the virus of European radicalism and republicanism through the Holy Alliance; Putin resists grassroots democracy movements by coopting or repressing civil society, while collaborating with authoritarian neighbors through the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Eurasian Economic Union. Domestically, Russian paternalistic conservatism advocates traditional gender roles, respect for authority (secular and ecclesiastical), and it is intolerant of imported Western values such as liberalism, gay rights, feminism, and cultural relativism.

This is not to say that present-day Russian nationalism is uniformly chauvinistic. It is important to distinguish between Russian ethnic nationalism ('Russia for the Russians' is a popular slogan among the skinheads) and the promotion of Russia and its Russian compatriots (*sootvetchestvenniki*). The former is divisive internally, racist, and critical of people from northern Caucasus as well as migrant laborers from Central Asia and elsewhere. Ethnic chauvinists use the exclusivist term *Russkii*, while the Kremlin prefers the more inclusive *Rossiyane*, which accepts those who adopt Russian culture as citizens. Putin and his supporters in the Kremlin have promoted this broader concept of identity among Russian compatriots—those who are united by Russian history, culture, language, and a loose Russian identity (see Zevelev, 2008). This policy fits with Russia's soft power strategy in neighboring states, and has the advantage of appealing to minorities who identify with Russian culture, yet are not technically Russian ethnics. It is also critical for restoring Russian power given extremely low birth rates among ethnic Russians and other Slavic groups.

However, the Ukraine conflict has complicated Putin's efforts to portray his version of Russian nationalism as genuinely multiethnic. Following the annexation of Crimea, the Crimean Tatars faced discrimination and intimidation, raising fears among people who suffered deportation and repression in the Stalin era. The peninsula's new leaders closed the Tatar television station ATR, accused Tatar activists of 'extremism,' and arrested or exiled those loyal to Kyiv or critical of Moscow. Putin himself on a visit to Crimea in August 2015 warned activists not to destabilize the situation, and blamed foreign non-governmental organizations and human rights supporters for exploiting ethnic tensions (RFE/RL, 2015). Crimea's annexation and Russia's hybrid war in southeastern Ukraine likewise ignores the preferences of ethnic Ukrainians who might otherwise be favorably inclined toward Russia, and who could be considered true compatriots. The Kremlin's bloody conflict has solidified fault lines among a population with traditionally close relations.

Given Putin's emphasis on stage managing politics, civil society, and the party system, it is not surprising that the Russian government seeks to control and channel nationalism to promote the Kremlin's agenda (MacFarquhar and Roth, 2014). The officially acceptable form of nationalism stresses unity among compatriots, avoids anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, reflects the



conservative values of the Russian Orthodox Church, selectively interprets history to accentuate the positive, and glorifies the accomplishments of Russian culture. Under pressure from massive waves of migration, Putin has asserted that Europe's multiculturalism, in contrast with Russian patriotism, leads to closed ethnic and religious communities that resist assimilation and encourage a xenophobic backlash (Putin, 2012).

According to commentaries by Russian politicians and reports in Russian newspapers and on television, the United States and Europe are the source of many evils that threaten Russia – immoral cultural relativism, lack of spiritual values, disregard for Russia's national interests, a determination to spread internal democracy while violating democratic principles in international relations, and so forth. Conspiracy theories blame the U.S. and the CIA for everything from the Arab Spring to the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the AIDS epidemic. A popular view holds that the internet is controlled by the CIA, so providers should be based on Russian territory and content censored to prevent harm to Russia. Andrei Sinitsyn characterizes this Kremlin propaganda against the West as 'quasi-Soviet rhetoric' designed to provide a psychological justification for Russia's increasing isolation (Sinitsyn, 2014).

Russian Nationalism and the Western Other

Russia's nationalism has been shaped by a reaction to the West as Other, and by the Russian elite's interpretation of the West's efforts to contain, marginalize, and weaken Russia. Perceived slights to Russia's national interests and disregard for Russia's greatness are integrally linked to power considerations. Resentment of Western military operations in the Balkans, particularly NATO attacks on Serbia in defense of Kosovo in 1999, followed by NATO expansion eastward and American missile defense plans, created a siege mentality and deepened the division between Russia and Europe. Confrontation between Russia and the West spiked with the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, and reached its apogee in 2014 with the Ukraine conflict, but its roots can be traced back to the 1990s.

In December 1999, shortly before he was elected President, Putin sketched out his vision for Russian in the next century in an article published in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. Russia's weakness, he argued, was not only simply economic, but was also political, spiritual and moral. Russia needed an ideology, he contended – not an official state ideology as in Soviet times, but rather a cultural idea of Russia centered on four traditional, primordial values: patriotism – feelings of pride in the Fatherland, its history and achievements; great power status (*derzhavnost'*), to preserve Russia's security and defend its interests in the international arena; statism (*gosudarstvennichestvo*) in place of Western liberal pluralism, to guarantee order; and social solidarity, or a collective mentality rather than Western-style individualism. But Putin stated that Russia would follow the same developmental path



taken by the rest of the world, and apparently saw no contradiction in asserting that these unique Russian values could be organically fused with universal, human values (Putin, 1999).

As Russia's economic and military capabilities expanded in the 2000s, the Kremlin leadership increasingly emphasized Russia's unique civilizational attributes. The color revolutions were perceived as a Western – largely American – inspired project to promote a culturally based type of democracy alien to Russian experience. Vladislav Surkov's 'sovereign democracy,' crafted in response to the upheavals in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, rejected Western forms of liberal democracy in favor of a uniquely Russian type of governing, free from foreign interference and having strong authoritarian and culturally Russian features (Surkov, 2008; Ziegler, 2012).

From Putin's accession to the presidency up to the Ukrainian crisis and annexation of Crimea, Russia had been one of the world's staunchest defenders of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. The Kremlin was adamant that the United Nations, and more specifically the UN Security Council, where it had a veto, take a leading role on issues that might result in the violation of these key international norms. Disillusionment with the Western liberal order's perceptions of human rights as trumping national sovereignty had been building since the late 1990s, starting with NATO's intervention in the Balkans to protect Kosovars from Serbs. The Euromaidan demonstrations and Western-supported ouster of Viktor Yanukovich triggered a fundamental shift in the Kremlin's position on sovereignty. Russia blatantly violated Ukraine's territorial integrity, contravening both the Helsinki Accords of 1975 and the Budapest Agreement of 1994 to which it was signatory. Appeals to Russian nationalism were used to justify the annexation of Crimea, which was immensely popular with the Russian people. An October 2014 poll by the respected Levada Center found that 86 per cent of Russians definitely or mostly supported Crimea's unification with Russia (Crimea, 2014).

In Putin's March 2014 address on to the Federal Assembly on Crimea's annexation he referred to the 'vital, historic significance' of the region, and the 'shared history and pride' of Russia and Crimea. Crimea was the place where Prince Vladimir was baptized in 988, marking the beginning of Russian Orthodoxy's long and close association with the Russian state (Putin, 2014). By asserting that Crimea was Russian, and not Ukrainian, Putin expressed Russia's claim as the leading center of Eastern Orthodoxy. In early 2015, the city of Moscow followed up on this claim as Vladimir's legitimate spiritual descendant by announcing plans to erect a giant statue of the 10th century leader overlooking the city center (25-Meter Statue, 2015).

In justifying Crimea's annexation, Putin also referenced important historic events, including Russia's frequent battles with the Turks and Germans. The Russian President recognized the different cultural traditions of Russians,



Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Tatars living on the peninsula, and acknowledged the past mistreatment of Tatars, but he dismissed their plight by claiming that all groups had been treated unfairly under Soviet rule, including ethnic Russians. Former General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's decision to transfer Crimea to Ukraine in 1954, Putin asserted, was 'a clear violation of constitutional norms' (Putin, 2014).

Putin's characterization of Khrushchev's decision to transfer Crimea to Ukraine as unconstitutional referenced a violation of law, in this case the supreme law of the USSR, to justify the annexation. The March 16 referendum on Crimea's status used the more legally problematic rationale of national self-determination for ethnic Russians and Russian speakers to legitimate Moscow's actions. In Putin's speech he stated that the right to national self-determination exercised by the Crimean Supreme Council was guaranteed in the UN Charter, though conveniently ignoring that this provision referred to former colonies and contained the caveat that self-determination could not be used to disrupt the unity or territorial integrity of a country (UN GA Resolution 1514, 1960). Putin also claimed Crimea's unilateral separation from Ukraine was no different from Kosovo's unilateral separation from Yugoslavia, which was promoted by Europe and the United States and upheld by the UN International Court in 2010. The Western argument for Kosovo's independence referenced the territory's status as a 'special case' due to the history of ethnic cleansing and extended period of UN administration. Crimea, Putin asserted, was threatened with massive casualties, and only the decisive action by Russian troops prevented a bloodbath (Putin, 2014). By equating Crimea with Kosovo, Putin sought to expose the West's double standards, incorporate compatriots stranded abroad under Moscow's authority, and legitimize the reacquisition of historic Russian territory.

Putin argument was also based on considerations of great power politics. The Russian President admitted that in 1992 Russia had been too weak to protect its interests – it did not have the capabilities to oppose the handover of Crimea and the Sevastopol base of the Black Sea fleet to Ukraine, or to protect the rights of millions of Russians who instantly became minorities in the newly independent, nationalizing republics. Putin's reference to interests and power reflects a fundamentally realist perspective – Russia had to accept the loss of Crimea because it was weak. Putin claimed that in the early 2000s Russia had negotiated with Ukraine and was willing to demarcate the boundaries and recognize Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea. But Ukraine, with Western assistance, engaged in forced assimilation, depriving Russians of their rights to language and historical memory. The West had been trying to contain and marginalize Russia for centuries, Putin claimed, invoking a largely imagined history (Putin, 2014). Russia's right to be an active, independent participant in global politics deserved international recognition.

The Kremlin and its supporters have described certain elements of Ukraine's Euromaidan movement and the current Kyiv government as neo-Nazis,



Russophobes, Banderites (supporters of Stepan Bandera, the Ukrainian who collaborated with Hitler), and anti-Semites. Framing the discourse in highly emotional terms discredits the Euromaidan movement, and conjures up memories of the Nazi aggression in World War II (see Bunin, 2014). It also seeks to construct Ukrainian nationalists as an enemy Other, linked to their Western supporters. Significantly, patriotic movies, including many Soviet-era WWII movies, were broadcast repeatedly on Russian television in the months following the annexation of Crimea, whipping up nationalist fervor.⁴

Officially sanctioned anti-Americanism finds widespread support among the various currents of Russian nationalism. Moreover, the concerted media campaign against America, its European allies, and Kyiv over the Ukrainian crisis has had a significant impact on Russian public opinion. The Pew Research Center found that favorable views of the United States declined from 51 per cent in 2013 to 23 per cent in 2014. A Levada Center poll taken in July 2014 found only 18 per cent of Russians holding a favorable opinion of the United States, down from 43 per cent favorable in January 2014. Those holding negative views of the U.S. increased from 44 per cent to 73 per cent over the same period, while those having a negative opinion of the European Union increased from 34 to 60 per cent. Positive feelings toward Ukraine declined from 66 to 33 per cent in the same six-month period, and only 1 per cent of respondents blamed Russia for tensions with Ukraine (Quinn, 2014).

In the wake of the Ukraine conflict, Putin and other officials have made frequent references to ‘fifth columns’ and ‘national traitors’ within Russia, creating a besieged fortress mentality that sharpens divisions between those supporting the Kremlin and those in opposition. This more strident state-sponsored nationalism is intolerant of any criticism of Russia, or of President Putin and his policies. Individuals prominent in the nationalist opposition movement have been singled out as traitors or troublemakers – Alexei Navalny, the anticorruption blogger; Andrei Zubov, the MGIMO professor fired for comparing Putin’s annexation of Crimea to Hitler’s Anschluss; and Dmitry Demushkin, leader of the ultra-right group ‘Russians.’ One theory holds that pro-government nationalists incited by Kremlin propaganda may have been involved in the death of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who was assassinated as he was planning to release a report indicting the Kremlin for operations in southeastern Ukraine (Yaffa, 2014; Economist, 2015).⁵

Kremlin officials fear nationalism as a force not completely under their control; this includes large numbers of armed extremist nationalists returning from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions who could threaten the Putin regime. The activities of radical social organizations and groups espousing nationalist and extremist religious ideologies were sufficiently alarming to be identified as a threat to state and society in the latest National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (Ukaz Presidenta, 2015). The Russian Supreme Court banned five nationalist Ukrainian



groups as extremist in November 2014, restricted the activities of some Russian nationalist groups, and banned a range of xenophobic and extremist materials as a threat to social stability (Iudina and Al'perovich, 2015; Sinelschiikova, 2015).

State-Managed Nationalism

The Kremlin seeks to manage nationalism as it claims to be managing democracy, but it is unclear to what extent the government can fully control Russia's radical nationalists. Just as Mikhail Gorbachev's reform movement quickly spiraled out of control, so too Putin may lose control of the Russian nationalism his regime has mobilized. Already the regime's construction of Ukraine and the West as enemy Others has limited the Kremlin's room for maneuver – having denied the existence of Russian troops in eastern Ukraine, Putin cannot easily take responsibility for winding down this brutal conflict. Notwithstanding Kremlin denials, NATO and Ukrainian intelligence and authoritative reports have presented conclusive evidence that the uprising in eastern Ukraine was a crisis manufactured by the Kremlin to establish permanent influence over this 'frozen conflict' (Czuperski *et al*, 2015).

The Kremlin is also promoting a conservative, militaristic, and anti-Western cultural program, illustrated through the efforts of Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky. Medinsky, appointed by Putin in 2012, is an ardent supporter of World War II movies, defender of 'patriotic culture,' critic of experimental art, and proponent of the slogan that forms the basis of Russia's cultural policy: 'Russia is not Europe' (Izvestiya, 2014). Medinsky's official cultural policy elaborated ideas presented in Putin's 2013 address to the Federal Assembly, where he declared 2014 the Year of Culture in Russia – a time to emphasize cultural roots, patriotism, values, and ethics. The President emphasized the unifying role of Russian culture, history, and language for the country's multiethnic population. He stressed the importance of traditional values as the moral foundation of civilization: 'Of course, this is a conservative position. But speaking in the words of Nikolai Berdyaev, the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state.' This, Putin asserted, was what had happened in the Middle East and North Africa, as 'attempts to push supposedly more progressive development models onto other nations actually resulted in regression, barbarity and extensive bloodshed' (Putin, 2013b).

Under Putin's leadership, Russia has gravitated toward civilizational nationalism, which is manifesting itself as a clash of civilizations. Russia's recent expansion of soft power – in the form of promoting Russian language and culture thorough the Russkii Mir cultural foundation, Rossotrudnichestvo (Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), the RT news service, and the Institute for



Democracy and Cooperation – projects Russian values globally with a fair degree of sophistication, while sharpening the differences between Russia and the Western liberal order (March, 2011, p. 193). Regime-interpreted nationalism is also evident in the 2009 creation of a presidential commission to counter attempts to ‘falsify history’ by challenging the heroic interpretation of Soviet participation in WWII, treatment of the Baltic peoples, responsibility for the Cold War, or anything that might damage Russia’s international reputation (Bugajski, 2010, pp. 9–12).

Russia’s conflict with Georgia, like that with Ukraine, mobilized nationalist forces against an Orthodox people who had traditionally been close to Russia. Georgia’s alignment with the West constituted a threat to Russia, while separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia created opportunities for Moscow to exert control over Georgian territory and constrain Tbilisi’s options. As Luke March has argued, Russian–Georgian relations started to deteriorate as early as 2002, when Tbilisi first considered NATO membership. The Russian nationalist discourse of Georgia as aggressive and Western-oriented came to be shared by the political elite (and was likely reinforced by Putin’s personal antipathy toward Mikheil Saakashvili); it peaked with the anti-Georgia campaign of 2006–07, and Dmitri Medvedev subsequently used this discourse to justify military action against Georgia in 2008 (March, 2011). Russia’s use of armed force was deemed necessary to protect Russian peacekeepers and compatriots (Ossetians and Abkhazians), and was rationalized as justified by international law, specifically referencing the responsibility to protect.

Slavic Ukraine is more difficult to portray as a civilizational Other, but since Ukraine is civilizationaly divided between East and West, Russia’s strategy is to divide the country by portraying Western Ukrainians and Kyiv officials as fascists, oriented toward the aggressive United States and Europe, while praising Eastern Ukrainians as loyal Russians and Russian compatriots, part of Greater Russia. Nationalism involves the construction of boundaries between the in-group and the Other, but the Kremlin’s concept of greater Russia and culturally related compatriots makes these boundaries very fuzzy. Compatriots are not just Russian ethnics, but they include Russian speakers, those who are culturally Russian. Most importantly, Russian compatriots who reside in putatively sovereign states outside of Russia provide the Kremlin with a convenient pretext for expanding Russia’s territorial space, whether in Ukraine, Georgia, or Moldova (Grigas, 2016).

Kremlin leaders realize, based on the Soviet, Yugoslav and Czechoslovak experiences that politically distinct institutional and territorial differentiation can over time form separate identities. They are counting on the ‘frozen conflicts’ to embed an identity among these peoples distinct from Georgia, Moldova, and now Ukraine, an identity oriented more toward Russia (in the form of ‘compatriotism’). A Western consociational perspective proposes self-determination for minorities through crafted political structures (federalism) to integrate diverse populations into a single political framework, while the Russian perspective sees federalism as



a means of separating from the larger political entity. This explains why Putin and his supporters have called for a federal solution to Eastern Ukraine, while emasculating Russian federalism domestically.

Conclusion

Under President Vladimir Putin, Russian political discourse has emphasized the role of misguided liberals and their Western supporters during the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras in weakening Russia's economy, traditions, religion, and state power. Russian nationalism is stronger now, as is the Russian state, but that nationalism is fragmented and unable to serve as an effective unifying ideology for the Kremlin. Putin and his allies have tried to foment and manage nationalism, premised on Russia as the core ethnocultural entity within a multinational space. This nationalism is not merely social; rather, it is to be protected and promoted by the state. Putin's approach rallied support among certain Russian nationalist communities, but it has alienated others, and has created unease among the non-Russian minorities. Tellingly, the republic most demonstratively loyal to Putin and supportive of his Ukraine policy – Chechnya under strongman Ramzan Kadyrov – is also the region most clearly outside Moscow's control (Hille, 2015).

Putin's idea of Russia's identity and his brand of nationalism is closest to that of the Eurasianists, with Russia as a commanding cultural and political presence within a larger multiethnic territory. The government's approach to Russian nationalism resembles the Kremlin's general approach to society – centralized control, tolerating and encouraging supportive currents, while marginalizing and repressing those critical of the Kremlin. Conservative social policies mesh with most varieties of Russian nationalism, and nationalism serves Putin's great power aspirations, especially the expansionist Eurasian philosophy. However, the Eurasianists, like Putin, are vague about what constitutes Russia's 'natural boundaries,' feeding suspicion among neighbors that have substantial numbers of Russian speakers or Russian compatriots, or where Russia might have an historic claim to territory.

One of the most troubling aspects of Russian state nationalism is the practice of demonizing opponents, whether foreign or domestic, which recalls the political atmosphere of Weimar Germany. Putin's regime has to date been critical of Russia's ultra-right, but many formerly fringe nationalists now find their ideas embraced by the leadership. President Putin understands that protecting Russian compatriots abroad, restoring historic lost territories, and confronting the Western world strengthen his popularity among the Russian people and his hold on power. State-led nationalism is a powerful legitimizing force for any regime, but can easily lead to confrontation and violence when conducted in an authoritarian, militaristic environment like that of today's Russia.



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Notes

- 1 Ukraine derives from the Russian *krai* and translates as ‘the edge,’ implying a territory far removed from the cultural and political center.
- 2 The three branches are the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate, which has so far remained loyal to Moscow; the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyivan Patriarchate; and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. The latter two are not officially recognized by the Orthodox world (Ryzhkov, 2015).
- 3 Putin used this expression in his *Nezavisimaya gazeta* article on ethnicity in describing Russia as a multiethnic state, and in the context of Russia’s historical development. As Putin observed, this territory includes Ukrainians along with Tatars, Jews, and Belorussians (Putin, 2012).
- 4 Author observations, Vladivostok, May–June 2014.
- 5 The Russian government, however, charged several Chechen security officials with the murder.

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