

Veera Laine

NATIONALISM AS AN ARGUMENT IN  
CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

*Four perspectives on language in action*





COMMENTATIONES SCIENTIARUM SOCIALIUM

80

**Veera Laine**

**NATIONALISM AS AN ARGUMENT IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA**

*Four perspectives on language in action*



*Academic dissertation*

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# ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses the uses of the concept of nationalism in Russia from a historical perspective. It is based on four empirical studies examining textual material produced between the years 2000 and 2020. During this time, and after the so-called “conservative turn” in particular, the state leadership in Russia adopted increasingly authoritarian policies vis-à-vis society, and started to portray Russia as being under an external threat. The annexation of Crimea and the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2014 solidified the way in which recent political changes in Russia were characterised as “growing nationalism”.

In this temporal context, the study suggests that nationalist discourses are currently shifting, and traces these shifts in scholarly and everyday language. The negative connotations of nationalism in everyday language affect its scholarly use, which is why the aspects of nationalism as an analytical concept, as well as the complex relationship between the concept and the term itself, are expounded in the study. Following the tradition of critical nationalism studies, the dissertation approaches the ‘nation’ as a political claim that results from a constructive process in language. The dissertation draws on the rhetorical tradition of conceptual history in analysing specific concepts, metaphors and narratives within nationalist discourses as a means of framing politics. The way language is used simultaneously defines the boundaries of actual policies. More specifically, the rhetorical choices of politicians map the conditions of belonging to a nation, duly having real implications for people’s lives.

The study contributes to the literature that challenges the view of nationalism as an instrument at the disposal of state leaders for the purpose of enhancing their legitimacy. To this end, the dissertation treats nationalism as a contested and continuously changing argument in the sphere of politics, showing that the state interpretation of the nationalist argument is not necessarily shared among the wider public. The publications that make up the dissertation contend that the state leadership produces a narrative of a holistic and homogeneous nation, unified by a shared victorious past, distinctive moral-traditional values, and historical multinationality, reinforced with a specific role for ethnic Russians. In this sense, the state authorities maintain a nationalist argument that depicts the “proper” borders of the nation as being simultaneously wider and more restricted than the state borders, based on the acceptance of traditional Russian values. The state leadership’s aim to dominate the social process of constructing a nation cannot be interpreted as having become “common sense”, and thus the nationalist contestation prevails.

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Väitöstutkimus tarkastelee nationalismin käsitettä nyky-Venäjällä historiallisena ilmiönä. Työ perustuu neljään tutkimusartikkeliin, joissa analysoidaan vuosien 2000–2020 välillä tuotettua tekstiaineistoa. Tämän ajanjakson aikana Venäjän politiikassa on tapahtunut niin kutsuttu konservatiivinen käänne, kun hallinto on muuttunut entistä itsevaltaisemmaksi sekä korostanut ulkoisia uhkakuvia. ”Nationalismin nousulla” on selitetty monia muutoksia Venäjän politiikassa erityisesti kevään 2014 jälkeen, kun Venäjä valtasi Krimin niemimaan ja Ukrainan sota alkoi.

Väitöstutkimusta perustele havainto siitä, että nationalismin kieli on Venäjällä muutoksessa: Venäjän hallinto pyrkii yhdenmukaistamaan tulkintoja kansasta ja sen erityispiirteistä samalla kun käsitettä käytetään selittämään Venäjän viimeaikaista politiikkaa. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on analysoida näitä muutoksia nationalismin käsitteen käytössä ja asettaa ne laajemmin ajan ja paikan kontekstiin. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa halutaan huomioida nationalismin sanan ja käsitteen moniulotteinen suhde, sillä nationalismia ylläpitävässä puheessa ei välttämättä käytetä itse sanaa. Nationalismi-sanan kielteinen kaiku arkikielessä vaikuttaa sen käyttöön tutkimusaihetta rajaavana analyttisenä käsitteenä sekä sen soveltamiseen politiikassa, ja nämä kielenkäytön tavat limittyvät.

Väitöskirja asettuu osaksi kriittisen nationalismin tutkimuksen perinnettä, jossa kansa(kunta) nähdään sosiaalisen luomisprosessin tuloksena. Koska tämä prosessi tapahtuu ensisijaisesti kielessä, tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään käsittehistoriallista lähestymistapaa. Sen avulla käsitteiden, metaforien ja narratiivien käyttöä analysoidaan kansakuntaa tuottavassa politiikan kielessä. Kieli rajaa myös käytännön politiikan mahdollisuuksia, sillä retoriset valinnat osoittavat kansaan kuulumisen ehtoja, jotka vaikuttavat konkreettisesti ihmisten elämään.

Tutkimus osoittaa, ettei nationalismin tulkitseminen politiikan välineenä täysin tavoita ilmiön luonnetta. Väitöstutkimuksen julkaisuista välittyi nykyhallinnon tulkinta yhtenäisestä Venäjän kansasta. Sitä perustellaan painottamalla voitokasta menneisyyttä, perinteistä henkis-eettistä arvopohjaa ja historiallista monikansallisuutta, jossa etnisillä venäläisillä on erityinen, kansaa kokoava rooli. Hallinnon nationalistinen argumentti piirtää kansakunnan rajat sekä nykyisen valtion rajoja laveammiksi että suppeammiksi sen mukaan, ketkä hyväksyvät hallinnon määrittelemät Venäjän perinteiset arvot. Tämän tulkinnan ei voi kuitenkaan sanoa päättäneen käsitteellistä kamppailua, sillä politiikan ylätasolla nationalismiin liitetyt merkityssisällöt ovat erilaisia kuin arkikielessä. Nationalismi pitäisi siksi ymmärtää enemmän poliittisena argumenttina, joka on luonteeltaan muuttuva ja vaatii jatkuvaa huomiota.

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A research study may appear as if it were written by an individual, but it always stems from the work of a community. This community is at the same time “imagined” and very real: we do not always encounter each other in person, but we build on each other’s thoughts. Personally, the most valuable result of this research has been the people I have engaged with during the process that started in 2016, and I would like to express my gratitude to the scholars whose work has educated me, and to everyone who has offered their insights, feedback, and support.

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Veera Laine, Helsinki, August 2021

# CONTENTS

Abstract.....	3
Tiivistelmä .....	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
List of original publications.....	10
1 Introduction.....	11
1.1 Nationalism between foreign and domestic policy .....	15
1.2 Conservatism as a temporal context for the study .....	17
1.3 Research problem and research questions.....	19
2 Conceptual history as an approach to language in action .....	25
2.1 Seeking precision, defining a concept?.....	28
2.2 The distance between a concept and a word .....	30
2.3 The position of the research and the researcher .....	35
3 Nationalism as an analytical concept.....	38
3.1 Ethnic, civic, imperial? .....	43
3.2 Civilisational nationalism as a “third way”.....	47
4 Research material and methodology.....	51
4.1 Media texts and the president’s speech acts.....	52
4.2 Rhetorical perspective on conceptual change .....	56
4.3 Limitations of the chosen methodology .....	62
5 Historical elements of the nationalist argument .....	65
5.1 The Russian empire: nationalism “emerging” .....	68
5.2 The Soviet Union: “nationalism” condemned .....	72
5.3 Post-Soviet Russia: new frames for the nation .....	77
6 Summaries of the publications.....	82

7	The nationalist argument in contemporary Russian politics .....	91
8	Conclusions.....	100
	References .....	103
	Publications .....	117

# LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

The dissertation is based on the following publications:

- I Contemporary Russian nationalisms: the state, nationalist movements, and the shared space in between. *Nationalities Papers* 2017, 45: 2, 222–37.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1272562>.
- II “Biggest nationalist in the country”: self-descriptive uses of “nationalist” in contemporary Russia. *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, forthcoming (accepted for publication on 30 May, 2020).
- III “Evolution of Russia’s ‘Others’ in Presidential Discourse in 2000–2020.” In Pynnöniemi, Katri (ed.): *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia: A Quest for Internal Cohesion*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 2021, 49–79.  
<https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-9-3>.
- IV New Generation of Victors. Narrating the Nation in the Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019. *Demokratizatsiya* 2020, 28: 4, 517–40.  
<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/771532>.

The publications are referred to in the dissertation by their Roman numerals.



# 1 INTRODUCTION

In February 2014, Russian soldiers without any identifying insignia arrived in Crimea, soon after which Russia conducted a “referendum” to justify the annexation of the peninsula from Ukraine. The tensions in Eastern Ukraine escalated into a war that continues to this day. These events marked a watershed in European politics and in the relations between Russia and the West. As a foreign policy manoeuvre, Russia’s actions in Ukraine demonstrated its willingness to discredit the Western-dominated liberal world order, but also its tendency to undermine the national sovereignty of the “near abroad” countries. From the Russian perspective, they also drew the boundaries of the nation anew. President Vladimir Putin had hailed the annexation of Crimea as rectifying the mistake of the past, welcoming the people living in the area to “return home”.

The annexation increased scholarly and media attention towards Russian politics and boosted interpretations of nationalism as a tool that political leaders had now decided to use. According to the instrumental perception of nationalism, in its simplified reading, the political leadership of the country persuaded the people to rally around the flag, hoping that national pride in Russia’s show of force would counteract the socio-economic grievances, and in this way secure the regime’s domestic legitimacy. In this dissertation, nationalism as a grand explanation for the change in Russia’s politics is critically re-evaluated. Instead of treating nationalism as an instrument, the dissertation contributes to the literature that studies nationalism as language that shapes political practices. The original contribution of this study lies in its approach to nationalism as a contested argument in political and in analytical terms. The study considers concepts to be a fundamental way of structuring the world, which means that the everyday connotations and uses of nationalism, for example, have an effect on scholarly uses as well. Through expounding nationalism as an analytical concept, certain gaps between various understandings of the concept can be detected, which helps to contextualise the uses of nationalism as a political practice in contemporary Russia. In this way, the dissertation combines rhetorical conceptual history with the study of nationalisms in contemporary Russia, which has thus far rarely been considered in this vast field of research.

The study argues that the state authorities’ nationalist argument is based on interlinked narratives about the nation that stress multinationality, ethnic hierarchy, a shared past and conservative values as key characteristics of “Russianness”, but also shows that the key concepts of the nationalist argument are not necessarily perceived similarly by the wider public. In this sense, the dissertation finds that making the assumption that either the state or societal attitudes are monolithic presents too narrow a view of the matter. Understanding nationalism as an argument acknowledges the diversity both

between and within actors and the constantly prevailing struggle for power over the “correct” uses of nationalism.

Given that nationalism is contested as an analytical concept, and avoided and rejected as an empirical one, the various disagreements over the meanings of the word are crucial elements of study. Thus, the key issue in this dissertation is not to find the most comprehensive or the most precise definition of nationalism in Russia. Nor does the study set out to ask whether nationalism has increased, or whether Putin is a nationalist. Instead, the publications in this dissertation analyse the changing content of the nationalist language produced both by the Russian state and the actors opposing it, and show how these have become pronounced in the field of Russian politics. In order to analyse the current “fermentation” of nationalist language, the four sub-studies, each based on their own empirical collection of texts, set out to map the shifts in understanding and in using the nationalist argument in Russian politics within the past decade. In particular, the dissertation analyses how the Russian state leadership have portrayed Russianness in the 2000s, and how their nationalist argumentation changed during and after the so-called conservative turn that preceded the annexation of Crimea.

Moreover, the study contributes to the wider debate on nationalism as an analytical concept, aiming to unpack some of the generalisations in that discussion. Nationalism is treated in different ways in different disciplines, and scholars do not always recognise the gaps between divergent analytical uses on the one hand, and between academic writing and everyday language, on the other. In the public discourse, nationalism is often seen in a negative light and as a feature of cultures other than one’s own. And yet researchers cannot separate themselves from society, which is why elaboration on the various qualitative gaps between the uses of nationalism may prove both appropriate and fruitful.

Among scholars of nations and nationalism, the broad view of nationalism as a general and taken-for-granted mindset of a world consisting of nation-states has become rather mainstream. This view differs from the narrow instrumental theorisations of nationalism that treat it as a means of fulfilling certain political aims, often connecting the phenomenon to national sovereignty or state legitimacy (Feldmann & Mazepus 2018; Özkırmılı 2010, 3). This understanding could be discerned, at least implicitly, in many of the accounts that described Russian nationalism as “rising” after 2014 (Ponarin & Komin 2018b; Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2018, 2–3). However, portraying nationalism as something that can simply be “used” undermines the political risks embedded in the strategy of “increasing nationalism” in order to enhance political legitimacy. The attempts to invoke national solidarity or pride from above are not always successful, and nor can they be carried out in a fully controlled manner. One can also detect a tendency towards a normative reading of nationalism in the literature, according to which authoritarian leaders “use” nationalism, whereas democratic leaders do not act that way,

although hardly any political leader worldwide avoids nationalist argumentation.

Finally, the instrumentalist view of nationalism does not necessarily acknowledge the complexity of politics as a social process. Political argumentation not only takes place in a specific cultural context but is shaped, informed and conditioned by it (Urban 2010, 5–6). The direction of “influence” in politics is, therefore, a much more nuanced phenomenon than individual actors merely trying and succeeding or failing to influence others. This is also the case at a more practical level: a certain vision of the nation can indeed be applied for lobbying one’s interests in politics, but the chosen interpretation of the nation may also influence the political agenda of those using it (Tolz 1998, 1017). Thus, I believe the approaches that focus on nationalism as a particular language are better equipped to grasp the complexities of and around the concept than those perceiving nationalism as a political instrument.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite these reservations, I would argue that most of the analytical uses of the concept of nationalism today share the same core idea: nationalism is a powerful “ism” in politics precisely because it is based on a naturalised, taken-for-granted but fundamental worldview, and because it evokes strong emotions, as described by nationalism scholars.

In this dissertation, nationalism theory is combined with intellectual and conceptual history traditions, as they help to connect the recent changes in Russian politics to a wider temporal and spatial context, and point to the inherent diversity in understanding key concepts. Kari Palonen, following Quentin Skinner’s rhetorical perspective on conceptual change, describes concepts as “strategic instruments for political action”. In this way, the political significance of concepts is seen in their ability to “shape the horizon of political possibilities” when a policy has to be formed, but they can also be used for revising the horizon of the possible itself, and altering the range of policy choices altogether (Palonen 1999, 47). Studying conceptual change duly entails studying the preconditions and frames of the “actual” politics, intrinsically connected to the social reality.

In the scope of this dissertation, the way in which language is used defines politics in at least two ways. The rhetorical choices of politicians or influential individuals map the conditions for belonging to a nation, which are then reflected in the rules for institutional membership of the nation which, for example, define certain benefits, responsibilities and rights that a citizen has or is entitled to (Knott 2017). In this way, belonging to a nation becomes justified in language but has real consequences in people’s lives. Moreover, studying the content, claims and ideas connected to contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Focusing on conceptual change could be seen as a mutually enriching approach to linguistically oriented political studies, such as, in this particular field, the work of Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (2012; 2014) on the national identity and language of Russian-speakers and in Russian politics from the sociolinguistic perspective, or Michael Urban’s (2010) analysis of elite political discourse in Russia.

nationalism(s) in Russia is important because they have concrete implications for the future politics in the country and abroad, even though they should not be assumed to translate into foreign policy decisions directly. The state leadership adopt decisions according to ideational and structural improvisation (Hale et al. 2019) but, when doing so, they also reveal the assumptions about popular moods that they make.

Ideas connected to nationalism in Russia are being developed in the global context, and nationalism has indeed been seen as “rising” elsewhere in the world as well. After the end of the Cold War, and still in the early 2000s, the optimistic interpretation was that the intensification of global interlinkages would serve as a counter-force to “archaic” nationalism: globalisation was considered to inevitably dilute the might of nationalism and render it obsolete. However, the neoliberal “globalism” facilitated an economic crisis, and the long waves of frustration and uncertainty that followed the financial crisis of 2008 throughout the Western world inspired illiberal movements in many societies. During the 2010s in particular, populist forces gained strength both within and outside of parliaments, justifying protectionist, xenophobic, or imperialist claims on the grounds of benefitting the nation, oftentimes successfully. Recently, ethnically motivated conflicts have broken out, and racist tensions have provoked violence and unrest. In this sense, nationalism is seen as a burning issue of our time.

This study, however, perceives nationalism not so much as a topical phenomenon of our time, but rather as a vigorous and perpetual one. Due to its undeniable political might, embedded in reproductions of the nation in everyday life and in its ability to evoke emotions (Billig 1995; Freeden 2005; Brubaker 2004), nationalism is constantly being contested. Like politics in general, this contestation takes place in language, which is why rising nationalism could be better understood as competing nationalist arguments that are currently being re-defined in many places around the world. Various actors take part in producing, maintaining and defending their definition of the nation and its boundaries (Breuilly 1994). As a result of this contestation, nationalism takes different forms in space and time: it emphasises some elements over others and fluctuates, but always prevails.

Contributing to the study of nationalisms in post-Soviet Russia but drawing on the tradition of conceptual history, one of the aims of the dissertation is to understand the uses of the concept of nationalism historically. Language is always layered, and the many continuities and changes in Russian history are reflected in the understandings of the nation today. In Russian history, political language has undergone two fundamental transformations: after the October Revolution in 1917, when the Marxist-Leninist doctrine was adopted to guide and determine the direction of the state and society, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s, before and during the collapse of the Soviet Union, when linguistic practices and public discourses started to seep through the ideological boundaries. Without undermining the drastic significance of both

of those changes as breaks in the continuum, however, they should be understood to some extent as partial and gradual, and definitely as influencing the connotations embedded in key political concepts today.

## **1.1 NATIONALISM BETWEEN FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICY**

When studied in the context of politics, and state power in particular, nationalism can be connected to foreign policy motivations and behaviours as well as domestic legitimacy. As Luke March (2018, 80) suggests, nationalism should not be understood merely as a “driver” for foreign policy but could rather be utilised in analysing the interlinkages between domestic values, regime structures and foreign policy discourses. In this sense, nationalism can be seen as merging the domestic and foreign policy aspects.

In the tradition focusing on the legitimacy of the nationalist argumentation in Russia, the concept of resentment (or ressentiment) is crucial. According to Astrid S. Tuminez (2000, 59–61; 280), resentment helps in conceptualising the relationship between nationalism and Russia’s foreign policy, starting from the defeat in the Crimean War in 1856. The defeat caused widespread national humiliation, which then imbued society with enthusiasm about “Pan-Slav propaganda”. Combined with the structural weakness of the state, resentment made the government turn to an aggressive foreign policy line in the 1870s. Similar patterns emerged after the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, as well as in the crisis leading to World War I in the summer of 1914. Tuminez’s key argument is that resentment nationalism – as such – did not evoke an assertive foreign policy until it was connected to the weakness of the political system. Moreover, the international system is seen as “a determining factor in the rise and impact of aggressive nationalism in Russia in the past”.<sup>2</sup>

Against this background, it is little wonder that the connection between nationalism and resentment has been intensively discussed since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The shared experience of resentment among the population has been presented as a key feature of and breeding ground for contemporary Russian nationalism (Malinova 2014; Gudkov 2014). In this recent literature, resentment stems from the experience of living through the hard times of the 1990s, combined with the reduction of the state’s status and

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<sup>2</sup> Writing in 2000, Tuminez concluded that post-Soviet Russia had maintained a moderate foreign policy line in regard to nationalist claims, mainly because this factor, the hostile and provocative international environment, had been missing. Therefore, she suggested that Western actors should give Russia “breathing space” by avoiding actions that would intensify Russian humiliation, but should not tolerate actions that “clearly encourage imperial thought and behavior” (Tuminez 2000, 283–284).

influence in world politics after 1991. Whereas the Soviet Union had been a respected (and in many parts of the world, admired) superpower, newly formed Russia had become handicapped in the international competitive arena. For example, in 1993, Russia, the successor to a country that had distributed global aid, had to accept aid from its former ideological enemy, the United States. As a concept, resentment is akin to that of (national) trauma. For example, Pynnöniemi (2021, 314) explains that the contemporary Russian state uses the trauma over the collapse of the Soviet Union to position “historical Russia” in opposition to the current “incomplete” Russia, which creates a conflict between Russia and its neighbours. Each of these conflicts produces a new trauma, resulting in increasing anxiety in society, and a strengthening of state-sponsored narratives and practices interlinking patriotism and militarism.

Many scholars have stressed the responsibility of Western countries in contributing to the national and political humiliation of Russia, to which the country’s political elite have been portrayed as reacting since the mid-2000s. The accounts are not presented to justify Russia’s actions but rather to show the drastic consequences of the fact that, since the end of the Cold War, Russian and Western foreign policy interpretations have been diverging (e.g. Sakwa 2017; Giles 2019). Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2019, 15) view resentment in Russia together with similar processes in Eastern Europe and the US and analyse these developments through the prism of imitation. They argue that the Kremlin, after imitating democracy in the 1990s – without creating an accountable government but securing economic privatisation – turned to a “resentment-fuelled policy of violent parody”. With this shift, the Russian political leadership wanted to “hold up a mirror” to the West, discrediting the Western-dominated international order by exposing its fundamental hypocrisy (ibid., 116). For example, in his address on the day of the “reunification” of Crimea in 2014, Vladimir Putin condemned the Western hypocrisy and “double standards” by lengthily juxtaposing the independence of Kosovo to the event at hand. Thus, resentment over the end of the Cold War and its long consequences remains an important “resource” for the Russian state leadership when re-defining the nationalist argument.

Despite the fact that the motivation to study this topic arises partly from Russia’s recent foreign policy behaviour, the publications analyse developments of nationalism mainly in the domestic sphere in the sense that the texts studied are intended primarily for domestic or Russian-language audiences. However, the distinction between foreign and domestic politics is not considered clear-cut, which will also be demonstrated in the study. The domestic circumstances frame and condition the foreign policy choices but do not dictate them – similarly, the prospects of foreign policy affect the way in which domestic matters are depicted and treated.

## 1.2 CONSERVATISM AS A TEMPORAL CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

Since the mid-2000s, and after 2012 in particular, the Russian political leadership has taken a decisive “conservative turn” that overlaps with the phenomena often described as nationalism. The turn towards conservative thought and politics has also motivated the selection of timeframes in the publications in this dissertation. In this sense, conservatism is a temporal and ideational context for the study, which is why I believe the relationship between the two concepts – nationalism and conservatism – deserves some attention.

The changes that constituted the “conservative turn” took place gradually. In the interpretations focusing on international relations, a clear signal of a “turn” in Russian politics was given at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. President Vladimir Putin’s bitter speech at the event marked the beginning of a new tense phase in US-Russia relations, and the following year, Russian military troops were dispatched outside its borders for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union to fight over the fate of South-Ossetia. In the domestic sphere, the change of attitudes within the state apparatus was, perhaps, less evident but started even before these clear foreign policy measures. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 influenced the domestic environment in Russia through the Kremlin’s interpretation that it was and had to be orchestrated from abroad, which meant that a similar risk of a popular uprising existed in Russia (Krastev & Holmes 2019, 111). After that, the political leadership’s suspicions towards “foreign influence” started to grow and direct the policies towards the media and civil society.

Comparatively speaking, Russia’s economy did not suffer as gravely from the 2008 financial crisis as that of many other countries, but the crisis did end the almost decade-long phase of economic growth that Russians had enjoyed. This amplified the challenges of state legitimacy, articulated in protests among the urban population in the winter of 2011–2012. In the wake of Putin’s third term in 2012, stricter authoritarian policies were introduced to control society and the media. The state authorities continued to work on issues such as patriotic education, unifying the teaching of history and safeguarding the “correct” interpretations of national history. Among the political elite, enhancing the traditional-conservative values of the nation as a key feature of national unity became a priority. In this way, the state interpretation of national cohesion rested upon conservative views, while the societal space where that interpretation could be challenged was heavily constrained.

Nationalism and conservatism share a certain ground when used as analytical concepts. According to Michael Freeden (2005, 205), nationalism is not a “full” distinctive ideology as it lacks a general public policy plan



expressed in terms of major political concepts, and is therefore best understood as a “thin-centred” ideology. It appears within established ideologies, such as liberalism or conservatism, and depending on this “host” ideology, different aspects of nationalism become pronounced. In all variations, however, certain core ideas prevail. First, nationalism is based on the priority of a particular group, the nation. As such, the nation is “a key constituting and identifying framework for human beings and their practices”. Second, positive values are attached to one’s own nation, and third, there is a desire to express the nation in political institutions. Fourth, space and time are considered to determine social identity, and fifth, the sense of belonging and emotion play a significant role in nationalism (ibid., 207). Freedén approaches ideologies as overlapping, fluid, and complex *languages*. In this dissertation, I have adopted Freedén’s view that nationalism, too, should be studied through the “morphology” it creates in combination with the host ideology.

Following Michael Freedén’s line of thought, Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner (2020, 10–12), deconstruct the core of conservatism – the “conservative minimum” – consisting of the notion that people are embedded in community and culture, and that the community is perceived as “organic”. Therefore, societal change should also be taking place “organically”, which is connected to the quest for tradition or religious belief guiding the change. Suslov and Uzlaner summarise that conservatism “emerged as an ideology of comprehensive rebuttal to the philosophy and Weltanschauung of the Enlightenment, and more specifically, to the ideas of rationalism, human perfection, and the capacity and necessity to interfere with and initiate social change in a desired direction”. Thus, conservatism does not resist change or modernisation per se, but these need to take place in compliance with the nation’s “natural” development. These views were intrinsic to the early Slavophile philosophy (see subchapter 5.1), upon which later forms of Russian conservative thought have been built.

Elena Chebankova (2015, 5–6) adds that the conservative positioning is based on the idea of the world being in a permanent state of danger. In the Russian tradition, this danger arises primarily from the struggle over political influence and natural resources in the world. The material collected for publications III and IV, consisting of presidential speeches, endorses the idea of the world as a dangerous place. Publication III quotes Vladimir Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2006 when, while referring to Russia’s military capabilities, he noted that:

*[...] we also need to build our home and make it strong and well protected. We see, after all, what is going on in the world. The wolf knows who to eat, as the saying goes. (kremlin.ru 2006)*



In her linguistic analysis of the speeches given by the presidential advisor at the time, Vladislav Surkov, Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (2012, 12) mentions his metaphor of the world as a spiderweb, where Russia's ability to maintain its sovereignty depends on whether it chooses to be "a spider or a fly". Such metaphors reflect the view of the world as a "natural" battleground. Thus, the "geopolitical fears" reproduced in the conservative language, combined with the threat of domestic unrest, motivate the need for a strong state that can sustain the national interests even when its sovereignty is challenged.

Regarding the conservative tradition in Russia, Freedén's notion of the nationalist language as homogeneous or pluralistic is illuminating. In a "holistic and homogeneous" reading of the nation, national diversity is rejected, and the ties between the group and its members are intense. In such cases, "the chances are that we are facing an organic theory in which the individual is subservient to a monolithic set of values attached to national wills and purposes" (Freedén 2005, 209). I would propose that the "conservative turn" in Russia, combined with the increasingly authoritarian policies of the state that aim to regulate the private lives of the people (see e.g. Makarychev & Yatsuk 2018), are indeed indicative of a holistic and homogeneous idea of the nation that intensified in Russia during the 2000s.

### **1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Based on these motivations, the overall research problem addressed by this study is the change in nationalist language in Russia during the 2000s and after the so-called "conservative turn" in particular. The problem is further defined in four main research questions, posed and answered in each of the publications included in the dissertation.

At the beginning of the research process, the object of interest was rather ambiguous: How, and why, has nationalism changed in Russia in recent years? As mentioned above, the events of spring 2014 solidified the way to characterise recent political changes in Russia as growing nationalism. However, the comments pointed in several directions: is the Russian political leadership aiming to restore the Soviet Union, or had the Russian state now, by definition, become "chauvinistic" or ethnocentric? (Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2019, 2–3). Moreover, what was meant by the suggestion that Russia had "risen from its knees"<sup>3</sup> – to cite a popular patriotic slogan? In media discourses

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<sup>3</sup> "Rossiya vstala s kolen" in the past tense, or "Rossiya podnimaetsya s kolen" in the present. The phrase has been connected to Vladimir Putin, who, as prime minister, used it as early as September 1999 after the apartment bombings in Moscow. Since then, the expression has surfaced repeatedly to describe

at the time, nationalism seemed to offer an overarching characterisation of the aggressive foreign policy move and its support from the people. Yet, in everyday parlance, the word itself is most often used to criticise and create distance, and its meanings are taken for granted, which is why nationalism as a label did not really explain recent developments in Russia's self-understanding. The scholarly uses of nationalism were also divergent depending on the focus (these will be elaborated on in chapter 3).

Hence, in order to tackle the complex topic, I chose to start by mapping various actors whose ideas could be, and often were, depicted with the concept of nationalism. Consequently, the relations between them would clarify the political contention in the field of nationalism. The starting point was that nationalism could be understood as a feature of the Russian state, as well as the actors who aim to challenge it. In an authoritarian context, state power both promotes its own nationalist argument and aims to master the space available for other actors to present their corresponding arguments. All of these actors, however, appeal to the general population, which is why they could be imagined as sharing a societal space. In order to make sense of this "shared space" between the state authorities and the various nationalist-minded groups and influential individuals, the first publication (I) set out to answer the following question:

1. How do the state and radical nationalist movements use nationalist arguments in contemporary Russia?

In addition, I was interested in how – and why – Russian state policies towards nationalist contention changed in 2014.

The publication shows that nationalist arguments hold strong appeal for many actors in contemporary Russia. These actors have different interpretations of what, exactly, they wish to achieve with nationalist claims, which creates a conceptual and political battle between them. The main dividing line occurs between the state interpretation of the nation and the arguments of radical nationalists, represented in the publication by those who gather annually at an event called the Russian March. The state leadership maintains the official rhetoric of the Russian nation as "multinational", even if ethnic Russians are perceived as the most important nation in this composition. The radical, oppositional nationalists focus on resisting migration, and use blatantly racist rhetoric to drive these messages home. In this sense, Russianness is understood in (narrow) ethnic terms, also treating Russian citizens from the "Southern republics" such as the Caucasus as

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various aspects of national wealth, pride, or military capabilities, also sparking criticism among liberal commentators. See e.g. Ryabov & Ryabova 2008, 250; Magarshak 2012.

immigrants.<sup>4</sup> The publication shows that the state policy towards radical nationalist movements had mainly been to “manage and monitor” them, but after 2014, the state authorities shifted to more direct control over the nationalists in order to ensure dominance in the struggle over nationalism.

In the process of answering the research question posed above, it became necessary to categorise the actors representing nationalist contention in a meaningful way, as state policies vary depending on the challenge that the nationalists pose to state power. Thus, distinguishing “consentful” actors who support the state line from “dissentful”, oppositional ones seemed appropriate for the purposes of the study. At the same time, there were other possible categorisations that sparked my interest. Among those identifying themselves as nationalists, the material revealed a tension between “good” nationalists and “bad” nationalists: stressing the distinction between them was a way to avoid the social stigma connected to the concept of nationalism. However, at the same time, the attitudes attached to the concept had been shifting: a Levada Center opinion poll, published in August 2015, demonstrated an increase between 2009 and 2015 in the proportion of respondents who viewed the word “nationalism” in a positive light – from 9% to 20%. The negative attitudes still formed a clear majority, but they had dropped from 75% to 64%, respectively (Pipiya 2015). Could it be that nationalism was gradually becoming more socially acceptable?

A possible indication of social acceptance, I thought, could be the ways in which the actors described their views publicly. The material collected for the study revealed actors who defined themselves as nationalists, and those who used nationalist argumentation but did not mention the word. Within the timeframe of the study, even President Putin referred to himself as “nationalist” (kremlin.ru 2018a), which I considered a strategy to disarm those who had previously proclaimed themselves nationalists. Yet, in my view, the conceptual battle deserved additional attention.

Reinhart Koselleck explained in 2003 that nationalism, unlike other modern “isms” such as liberalism or socialism, is seldom applied for self-descriptive purposes. According to Koselleck (2006, 218; 235–237), in those rare cases, the concept would only be used by the radical right.<sup>5</sup> Yet the

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<sup>4</sup> This framing is commonplace in other contexts, too. For example, it is customary to include Chechens or Caucasians in questionnaires examining xenophobic attitudes. See e.g. Pipiya 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Koselleck’s note appears in the context of his earlier lecture on patriotism, in which he had stated that “Nationalist kann man nach unseren Erfahrungen nicht mehr sein, Patriot zu sein bleibt akzeptabel”. Sixteen years later, in 2003, he returned to the idea: “Es bleibt ein semantisch aufregender Befund, daß das Begriffswort ‘Nationalismus’ - im Gegensatz zu ‘Patriotismus’ - nur selten, und dann nur von radikal Rechten, zur Selbstbenennung ihrer sozialen oder politischen Bewegungen verwendet worden ist” (Koselleck 2006, 218; 235–237). It should be noted, perhaps, that Koselleck’s view on the matter is not limited to discourses in Germany, but has a wider scope of transnational conceptual history.

material I had gathered seemed to paint a more complex picture. Moreover, not only the Russian president, but also US President Donald Trump referred to himself as a “nationalist” around the same time (Baker 2018). These cases hinted that nationalist language could be in flux – at least in Russia, and perhaps even globally. Thus, the observation made in the first footnote of publication I paved the way for the research question addressed in publication II:

2. Who uses the concept of nationalism as self-description in contemporary Russia? How is the concept employed in those contexts exactly, and has that changed during the past decade?

In this way, publication II focused more explicitly on the understandings of nationalism among those who identified themselves with the word nationalist – which meant studying a rather small amount of material but provided valuable insights into the conceptual environment of the topic. The material consisted of a limited number of newspaper texts where a wide variety of voices were represented (not only radical oppositional nationalists, even though they were indeed numerous), which in this way broadened the publication’s scope in comparison to publication I, while at the same time delving deeper into the conceptual battle over the meanings of “nationalist”.

An entire research problem is difficult to define without knowing where it is situated. Answering research questions that target a piece of the puzzle produces results that then help to define the next relevant question until, finally, the whole begins to take shape. In this sense, the process is like a detective following one promising lead after another. At the same time, defining a research question entails defining the context in which a certain phenomenon is understood – and this, too, is a choice that a researcher makes. The results presented in publication I explained state policies vis-à-vis other actors who use nationalist argumentation, but did not shed light on the actual content of “state nationalism”.<sup>6</sup> What was the specific substance of the nationalist argument that the state actors wanted to dominate the “shared space”? This was left for analysis in publications III and IV, which focused on nationalism explicitly in the context of state power.

In both publications, the emphasis was on the nationalist argument presented, preserved and defended by the state actors in their rhetoric. In this regard, I turned to study presidential discourse, mirroring it in some federal state-level key policy documents. This is not to say that presidential power equals “the state” in contemporary Russia, but rather that the formal state power is vested most visibly in the president’s character. The president is not

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<sup>6</sup> I have applied the term “state nationalism” here to refer to the nationalist argumentation of the actors who hold state power. In the scholarly literature, terms such as state-led nationalism, state patriotism and official nationalism have also been used to describe the phenomenon.

omnipotent, but his rhetoric reflects the dominant views within the state apparatus as long as his power remains the strongest authority.<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of the dissertation as a whole, it seemed appropriate to situate the assumed (and by now confirmed) change in nationalist language in the 2010s within a wider temporal context of shaping state nationalism. At the beginning of the 2000s, the leadership shift from an ailing Boris Yeltsin to a young and unknown Vladimir Putin signalled a new beginning. The state policies in several areas were redefined, and the authorities began to decisively shape their vision of the unity of the nation. Publication III is based on the president's annual address to the Federal Assembly during the years 2000–2020, tracing how state nationalism was shaped and consolidated in that discourse. The publication appeared as a chapter in the book *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia: A Quest for Internal Cohesion*, complementing the collection with an account of contemporary state nationalism in Russia. In order to focus the analysis on the actual content of state nationalism, an approach leaning on the portrayal of national “Self” versus “Others” was adopted. Hence, the publication was designed to map the changes and continuums regarding Russia's relationship to its multi-layered “Others” in both temporal and spatial terms by asking:

3. How did the state leadership portray Russia's “Others” in 2000–2020?

Methodologically, the research was guided by an additional question: Which metaphors are applied to describe the relationship between the “Other” and the “Self”? Avoiding the assumption that only other states could be Russia's “Others”, the analysis detected historical, internal and external others that the presidential discourse also conflates. For example, an external threat to national security is posed by both external and internal Others. The foreign policy context was primary in this publication because Europe, or “the West”, has functioned as the constituent “Other” in the long course of Russian intellectual history (Tolz 2001, 69), and featured as such in the presidential discourse as well.

Publication IV, drafted at the same time as publication III, proceeded to deconstruct the content of the nationalist argument in the presidential discourse but within a more limited time scope, and with more diverse material than that consulted for publication III. After the annexation of Crimea in particular, state nationalism was often discussed in the context of legitimacy: as has been described above, the move was mainly interpreted as an attempt by incumbent leaders to foster their legitimacy by enhancing national pride. Thus,

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<sup>7</sup> The debate on the development of state power goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the key issue is that presidential power is not unconditional, and that within the presidential administration, disagreements over certain matters may exist. On this topic, see subchapter 4.1.

the concepts of legitimacy and the “social contract” in the context of Russian domestic politics seemed to be a logical continuation of analysing the nationalist argumentation of the state leadership. At the same time, the “new” Russian nationalism, propagated by the state, could not be reduced to “ethnic” re-interpretations – the state discourse seemed more complex than that. Or, in other words, the “ethnic” component of “Russianness” could be explained in multiple ways. Focusing on the context of domestic developments, publication IV aimed to address the following question:

4. How did the Russian state leadership formulate their nationalist argument in 2012–2019?

More precisely, the publication aimed to probe the explicit character of the Russian nation in the narratives produced by the president. What, in these accounts, does “Russianness” consist of, and who is portrayed as belonging to the nation? Taken together, the research questions in each publication guided the dissertation work and provided results that contribute to the study of nationalism(s) in Russia from the perspective of political language.

When defining research questions, the researcher chooses the context in which to situate the topic, as well as the perspective for studying the issue. By gradually progressing from limited knowledge towards the stage where a certain topic becomes familiar, the limitations of the newly acquired knowledge are also unveiled. In this way, the research question determines the area within which the knowledge is produced. This dissertation aims to produce knowledge about the fluctuations in nationalist language within the context of Russian politics, to which end the research questions approach the problem from four different perspectives.

**Table 1**      *Research questions*

<b>Publication</b>	<b>Research questions</b>
<b>I</b>	How do the state and radical nationalist movements compete over nationalist argumentation in contemporary Russia? How and why did the state’s stance towards radical nationalists change in 2014?
<b>II</b>	Who uses the concept of nationalism as self-description in contemporary Russia? How exactly is the concept employed in those contexts, and has that changed during the past decade? Did the president’s self-descriptive statements in 2008, 2016 and 2018 inspire others to follow his example?
<b>III</b>	How were Russia’s “Others” portrayed by the state leadership in 2000–2020? Which metaphors were applied to describe the relationship between the “Other” and the “Self”?
<b>IV</b>	How did the Russian state leadership formulate their nationalist argumentation in 2012–2019? What is the explicit character of the Russian nation in the narratives produced by the president? What does “Russianness” consist of in these accounts? Who belongs to the nation?

## 2 CONCEPTUAL HISTORY AS AN APPROACH TO LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Conceptual history – or the history of concepts – can be understood in a strict sense as a tradition analysing the emergence and development of key concepts in the *longue durée*. In such accounts, the interest lies in the change of powerful yet contested basic concepts in the political and social lexicon (Ifversen 2017, 130–131). In a similar way, the history of ideas can refer in fundamental terms to the field of research that studies and interprets a canon of classic texts (Skinner 2002, 57–58). This dissertation does not analyse the history of any single key concept, even though the problematics arising from the wide range of references to nationalism are present in each publication. Nor is the focus on any canonical texts, and yet the work could be regarded as a contribution to the part of nationalism studies literature that appreciates a historical perspective, and is therefore close to the tradition of intellectual history. The interest in conceptual change has inspired the research questions posed, as well as spurred the interpretation of linguistic action as temporal. To this end, I see the publications as contributing to conceptual history.

In the studies on nationalism(s) in Russia, I believe conceptual history helps in bridging the qualitative gaps between the various understandings of the concept, as well as providing analytical tools for interpreting what the distance between the word and the concept actually implies. In effect, the discipline seems to be gaining ground at present. Timur Atnashev and Mikhail Belizhev (2018, 107–108) write that conceptual history (*istoriya ponyatii*) is “one of the most dynamically developing branches within the contemporary Russian humanities”.<sup>8</sup> The field, in general, experiences interesting changes. Recently, conceptual historians have developed their studies away from “national” or language-specific perspectives towards comparative and transnational conceptual histories, while the emergence of new digital archives, corpora and technologies has given the discipline renewed impetus.

At the heart of all branches of conceptual history is the idea of concepts forming an intrinsic part of our social reality, and constantly changing. Studying how concepts change over time duly means studying how society and the world around us change. As Kari Palonen (1999, 50; 54–55) has illustrated, conceptual history recognises at least two (alternative) views of the

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<sup>8</sup> Atnashev and Belizhev mention the European University in St Petersburg and journals such as *Logos*, *Polis* and *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* as significant outlets for the study of political languages. For example, in 2011–2012 the latter published a substantial edited volume, *Ponyatiya o Rossii: K istoricheskoy semantike imperskogo perioda*, studying key concepts in the Russian empire.



temporality of conceptual change: that of Quentin Skinner, where conceptual change is advanced by political agents in certain “sudden and successive” moments, and that of Reinhart Koselleck, where concepts are “navigational instruments” of historical movement. Thus, if Skinner is interested in *kairos*-like time, Koselleck embraces *chronos* history, focusing on medium- and long-term change. The selection of texts analysed in the publications that make up this dissertation already suggest that I lean towards Skinner’s (and Palonen’s) interest in conceptual change within political debates. The primary material for the publications in the dissertation derived from sources that appeared within the last 10 years or so, apart from publication III, which studies presidential addresses in 2000–2020. The choice of material is therefore highly contemporary with respect to any tradition of history. And yet, in a more “Koselleckian” way, I have tried to connect the analysis in each publication to the longer historical perspective by discussing, even if briefly, the “baggage” that the key concepts, expressions or metaphors carry.

Despite the different perspectives on the temporality of concepts, Skinner and Koselleck share an understanding of conceptual change as “not only inevitable, but also important, omnipresent, and, in principle, not something to be regretted” (Palonen 1999, 43). Following the rhetorical view of conceptual change, the publications in this dissertation analyse political change through the arguments, metaphors, and narratives in nationalist language. Nationalism is, thus, understood as a frame for political actions, and the linguistic choices of certain actors make those actions visible.

Thus, this dissertation is based on the theorisations that treat a nation “as a political claim rather than an ethnocultural fact”, as Rogers Brubaker (2004, 115–116) writes. In Brubaker’s view, the fruitful question is not “what is a nation” but “how does the category of ‘nation’ work” because it directs scholars to go beyond the substantialist and everyday understandings of nations as naturally existing entities, and to focus instead on the “nation” as a category or term that is used in political language to meet certain ends. In my view, the conceptual history tradition provides solid ground for analysing nationalism “as a way of using that word or category” (*ibid.*, 116), that is, as rhetoric (Calhoun 2007): it encourages an analysis of specific uses of language and how they change over time.

The publications in this dissertation are interested, first and foremost, in the uses of the arguments by which ‘nation’ is produced, explained, and maintained in contemporary Russia. These arguments compete and develop in the sphere of politics and, as depicted above, the research process started with the aim of mapping the space of nationalist contention in politics. To this end, the analysis has benefitted from John Breuilly’s theory of nationalism as a form of politics:



*[t]o focus upon culture, ideology, identity, class or modernisation is to neglect the fundamental point that nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics and that politics is about power. Power, in the modern world, is principally about control of the state. The central task is to relate nationalism to the objectives of obtaining and using state power. (Breuille 1994, 1)*

In order to fulfil this task, Breuille suggests a framework of analysis for studying particular cases of nationalism. He describes nationalism as a “political movement seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with nationalist arguments” – where the nationalist argument, for its part, rests upon three key assumptions: that there exists a nation with an explicit and peculiar character; that the interests and values of this nation take priority over those of others; and that the nation must be as independent as possible (Breuille 1994, 2–3). The approach is state-oriented, acknowledging that the nationalist argument is advanced by actors that already have state power as well as those who aim to obtain or challenge it.

Breuille’s understanding of the nationalist argument is intrinsically connected to political action or mobilisation (*ibid.*, 19–20), and his empirical work focuses on the development of nationalist movements from this perspective. Therefore, the idea of nationalist argumentation is complemented here with Brubaker’s (1996, 16) interpretation, which draws on sociological and institutionalist traditions of research and perceives nationalism as a political practice in a somewhat wider sense. Brubaker breaks down different settings in which claims to nationhood are presented, and argues that these can be used, for instance, to challenge the existing territorial and political order; to create a sense of national unity within a given polity; to assert ownership of the polity on behalf of the ‘core nation’ vis-à-vis the whole citizenry of the state; or to mobilise solidarity among the members of ‘the nation’ (Brubaker 2004, 117). In this reading, the nationalist argument has a broader range than when it is perceived merely as a political goal of a certain nationalist movement, and can, in my view, also be applied when the actors are not consciously aiming for political mobilisation.

Building on these approaches, I perceive nationalism as a political act when it appears as an argument, which does not require those using the argument to consider their claims as political. Nationalist arguments can take various forms, as will be shown in the separate publications, but the basic assumption of this research is that language constitutes political action. In his essay on conceptual change, James Farr (1989, 25) writes that “politics as we know it would not only be indescribable without language, it would be impossible”. Embracing Farr’s notion that politics takes place *in* and *through* language, I interpret that the nationalist argument becomes, likewise, visible in the political discourse.

## **2.1 SEEKING PRECISION, DEFINING A CONCEPT?**

Conceptual history as a theoretical approach shows that attempts to define concepts in an exhaustive manner are not only difficult but also unnecessary for the most part. However, as Michael Freeden (2017, 120) notes, the “quest for precision” is different in nature for the scholar who aims to offer a well-thought-out solution to a problem that a certain concept addresses, compared to the political producer of language, for whom the exercise of semantic control signifies ways to shape and direct society. Similarly, attempts to define nationalism or its key components in public speech (studied in publication II) should be approached without aiming to find a “correct” definition. Instead, they provide evidence on the ideas to which the concept is connected in society. In other words, instead of seeking or outlining the explicit meaning of a given concept, the focus of conceptual history is on the changing ways to interpret, contextualise and use key concepts.

The publications comprising this dissertation analyse nationalism in contemporary Russia by mapping the conceptual battles or re-definitions that take place within the nationalist discourse, or the language dealing with the nation and its boundaries. As hinted above, the work follows the theorisation of Quentin Skinner or the so-called Cambridge school, which is interested in the pragmatic and political aspects of concepts. As Ifversen (2017, 130) puts it, “the history of concepts is therefore also a history of what actors do with concepts”. In Skinner’s writings, the sensitivity towards the relationship between language and power is essential, which brings the analytical approach closer to the rhetorical studies:

*As we have increasingly been made to see, we employ our language not merely to communicate information but at the same time to claim authority for our utterances, to arouse the emotions of our interlocutors, to create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and to engage in many other exercises of social control. (Skinner 2002, 5)*

All of these cases of linguistic action are crucial in respect of nationalist language, and the publications in this dissertation depict processes of actors claiming authority, including “us” and excluding “Others”, and aiming to evoke emotions in their audiences. For example, publication I, which studies the conceptual battle between radical nationalist groups and the state authorities, exposes the struggle over the “correct” understanding of nationalism as a concept and the “monopoly” over its ownership in politics. In a similar manner, publication II, analysing self-descriptive uses of “nationalist”, demonstrates the struggle to redefine nationalism. In the material collected for the publication, the speakers – not all of whom represent any specific nationalist movements – use various rhetorical means to escape

the social stigma caused by nationalism's negative connotations. For example, some of those describing themselves as nationalists apply the classical rhetorical manoeuvre, paradiastolic redescription, placing a certain concept in a different moral light, usually either "devaluating virtues" or "revaluating vices" (Palonen 1999, 48).

Thus, concepts change through their uses and, perhaps more to the point, there *is* no history of concepts without their uses in language. I would like to add that this applies not only to empirical concepts, but also to the analytical concepts used in scholarly language. In this sense, my own use of nationalism in publication I offers a chance for self-reflection. In this publication, I describe nationalism as an analytical concept by combining the theory of nationalist argument with Emil Pain's and Aleksandr Verkhovskii's understanding of nationalism as a political tendency that rests upon the "recognition of people as the source of state power and the main agent of the political system". I do not find the chosen definitions problematic as such, as they still seem valid for the purposes of the study. But before presenting them in the publication, I stated that in order to understand the phenomenon better, nationalism as a concept should firstly be defined (p. 223). After the intervening years spent on the topic, I would omit this imperative, as in retrospect it would appear to be "mission impossible". I now believe that formulating a strict definition of nationalism does not necessarily add to our understanding of the phenomenon – rather, that it is possible to broaden and deepen understanding by studying the analytical and empirical applications of nationalism, mapping both the slowly and rapidly changing elements of the concept. Revisiting this publication has shown how, as Freedon (2017, 119) writes, ambiguity, indeterminacy, vagueness, and inconclusiveness "all fly in the face of the precision-seekers".

Focusing on conceptual change in politics, the intention of the actors producing the language is crucial. I have not explicitly deconstructed intentionality at the level of certain speech acts in any of the publications, but it is recognized that the political aspirations of actors shape their nationalist argumentation. In publications III and IV, I analyse how the presidents of Russia have used language to portray the Russian nation. The focus is on the metaphors and conceptual choices that mark Russia's "Others" in relation to the "Self" (III) and on the narratives about the Russian nation, produced in the presidential discourse (IV). Both publications argue that these linguistic strategies are used with a specific intention. Ultimately, all state leaders aim at preserving and strengthening their position in power, which is not always visible at the linguistic level. However, when studying the references to the nation or the othering strategies, more particular goals can be detected. For example, the state leaders wish to enhance national unity among the audience by portraying the nation in a certain way rhetorically, by addressing them with specific concepts or greetings, reminding them of the formative events in the

national past, or condemning what they see as tensions or divisive actions within society.

When studying the narratives about the nation or the “Others” presented to it in language, one cannot measure whether these strategies are actually successful in the sense that they would be intuitively accepted by the people. Nationalist ideologies, like any ideologies, aim at becoming “common sense” – unnoticed, naturalised knowledge. In this way, the actual “influence” of the political language on its audience falls outside the scope of this dissertation project, but the strategies employed by politicians as well as how they change over time can be analysed. Moreover, this inevitably reveals something about the assumptions that politicians make about the mindset of their audience, as they aim to choose the persuasive strategies accordingly.

## **2.2 THE DISTANCE BETWEEN A CONCEPT AND A WORD**

When studying manifestations of nationalist language in a certain temporal and spatial context, the complex relationship between a concept and a word (or term) needs to be taken into account. Following Reinhart Koselleck, a concept may be described as having three dimensions: its reference in the mind, or the concept itself (*Bedeutung* or *Begriff*); its reference in the language, or the word (*Wortkörper*); and its reference in the world, or the object (*Sache*). Concepts are expressed in words, which is why conceptual history focuses on their uses (Ifversen 2011, 69). However, the ways in which concepts become expressed in words are complex to say the least. According to Quentin Skinner (2002, 161–162), the use of words does not equate with understanding concepts, or vice versa. Therefore, he suggests, we should accept that the possession of a concept is “standardly” – but not necessarily or sufficiently – akin to understanding the meaning of the corresponding term. Simply put, a concept may exist in someone’s mind even though they do not employ a certain word to describe it, or there may be words that many have learnt to use in a similar way but cannot explicate their meanings.

Following from this, disagreement about the “meaning” of a concept is actually disagreement about one to three aspects of how the word should be applied: the criteria for applying the word (the “sense” of the word); whether these criteria are evident in a given set of circumstances (the “reference”); and what range of attitudes can standardly be attached to the word (range of “speech acts”). When focusing on nationalism, these three aspects of the meaning of a concept or the application of a word may be helpful. For example, in publication II, which focuses on the term “nationalist” in self-descriptive contexts, I have traced the criteria for applying the word as well as the

circumstances in which it is used in the newspaper material. The speakers aim to give the concept “novel” meanings or, to paraphrase Skinner, to widen the range of criteria for using the word. In this way, they also link non-standard attitudes to the word “nationalist” and avoid the negative connotation or even social stigma connected to it.

The strong negative connotation of nationalism in everyday language further complicates studying the relationship between the word and the concept because the actors who participate in the shaping of nationalist discourses in society may not perceive their role that way. Pauli Kettunen (2018, 342) notes that “those who use nationalist language often fail to recognize it”, explaining that “nationalism is the rhetoric of nation, yet this rhetoric is often vigorously opposed to ‘nationalism’”. Thus, discourses that are vital for studying nationalism may not include the word at all. This is often the case when political actors create, maintain and defend the boundaries of belonging to the nation in their parlance. For example, publication IV studies the development of narratives about “Russianness” in presidential speeches, analysing the references to the nation (or “us” as a nation, or “Russians”) in the years 2012–2019. I approach these texts as evidence of the contents of state nationalism, even though the word “nationalism” is basically absent from the material. The more complex question is actually how the vocabulary of nationalist language is formed, which words can be included, and what the internal logic between those words is.

Drawing on all the material gathered for the publications, I have compiled two sketches of semantic networks of nationalism to illustrate the broad scope of nationalist language. These sketches are by no means explicit or definitive, but they demonstrate a way of organising words when the analytical key concept does not necessarily feature in the research material. Semantic networks (or semantic fields) provide analytical tools for mapping relationships between concepts. Jan Ifversen (2011, 71–72) categorises these relationships as syntagmatic or horizontal, and paradigmatic or vertical. In the former case, the words are associatively interlinked, whereas in the latter case, words can replace each other according to the linguistic rules (for example, an *ism* can replace another *ism* in a sentence that is still linguistically correct). This means that the words are chosen by *combining* and *selecting*, respectively.

In Figure 1., I have depicted examples of syntagmatic concepts that have an associative relationship to nationalism. In this sense, mapping the syntagmatic concepts may shed light on the contexts in which the concept of nationalism is used. For example, nation or nationalism appears together with the names of nationalities and states (Russia, Russian, Ukraine, Ukrainian), with certain adjectives that describe its value (healthy, harmful), or with words that describe the position of the speaker in relation to the nation (we, us, our). Identifying words connected associatively to each other – with nationalism at

the core – helps in cultivating an understanding of nationalist language even when the word nationalism is replaced with another paradigmatic word.



Figure 1. Examples of syntagmatic concepts of “nationalism”.

Here, I have merely visualised the words connected to nationalism but semantic networks could prove valuable in other ways, too. When applying digitally assisted studies that trace how frequently certain words appear with each other (see subchapter 4.3), “manually” or intuitively conducted semantic networks could help in formulating the hypothesis.

Figure 2. demonstrates the paradigmatic concepts – in this case, other isms. I have positioned the concepts roughly according to the attitudes related to them, placing the positively loaded concepts above the negatively loaded ones. In addition, they are organised temporally, from left to right (very approximately) according to their presence in the Russian language. The underlining depicts the break from the Soviet discourses to the post-Soviet era: for example, internationalism as a concept is no longer in use since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the official discourse has adopted a concept of multinationalism – as publication IV shows. Paradigmatic concepts feature strongly in the analysis in publication II: the speakers in the material often chose to explain the meanings of nationalism by referring to parallel or opposite ism concepts.

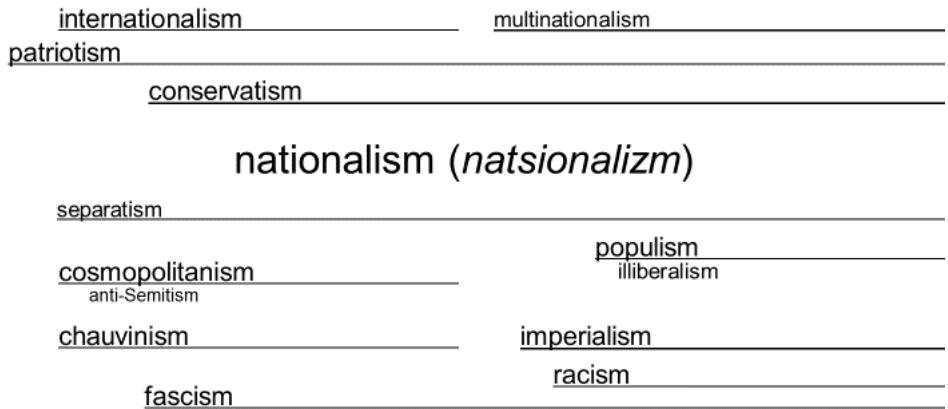


Figure 2. Examples of paradigmatic concepts of “nationalism”.

There is no standard way of drafting a semantic network, and the overall aim is to better understand the scope of nationalist discourses. Yet more importantly, when analysing the data, I have benefitted in large part from the “traditional” conceptual history of the words that appear in the vocabulary of nationalism, of which nation is the most important.

For a long time in Russian history, words like nation, national and nationality were more commonplace than the “ism” – which was the case elsewhere in Europe too (Kurunmäki & Marjanen 2018, 263–264). Aleksei Miller, who has studied the history of the concept of nation in the Russian empire, has shown how the two words describing the nation – *narod* and *natsiya* – emerged in the Russian language, and how the nouns *narodnost’* and *natsional’nost’* were first introduced as equivalents of the French *nationalité* (Miller 2012, 23–25). Of these words, *narod* has a longer history, and as Oleg Kharkhordin (2005, 93) notes, the Russian words nation (*narod*) and nature (*priroda*) are both related to the verb *rodit’*, to give birth. In many Romance languages, too, there is an etymological connection between natural, natality, and nation.

In one of the most well-known manifestations of Russian state nationalism, the doctrine that later became known by the label of “official nationality”, the three pillars of Russian national ideology were Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality (*pravoslavie, samodержavie, narodnost’*). The wording introduced by Count Sergei Uvarov, the minister of education after the Decembrist uprising in the 1820s, aimed to stress the national consolidation, and to simultaneously condemn the calls for constitution and national representation that had been made by the liberals (Miller 2012, 24). Serhii



Plokhly points out that Uvarov, like his contemporaries, wrote his programme in French, using the word *nationalité*, which his clerks then translated as *narodnost'*. In Uvarov's triad, "nationality" stood for "*the traditional way of life* that was supposed to ensure the continuity of the other two key elements of Russian identity – religion and autocracy – in an age shaped by new European ideas" (Plokhly 2017, 83, italics added). In this way, *narodnost'* was not arguing for popular representation of the nation, as in the European discourses of the time, but for supporting the tsar's authority (ibid., 83–84; see also subchapter 5.1).

At the time of the "official nationality" policy, liberal ideas were often expressed with the words *natsiya* and *natsional'nost*, which is also why those particular terms were heavily censored until the 1880s. After that, however, they became more popular than the parallel terms *narod* and *narodnost*, but as they were still connected to the idea of reforms, these concepts were pushed to the margins by the end of the century (Miller 2012, 24; 40). Partly for the same reasons, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, nationalism was an explicitly negative term. Philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (cited in Miller 2012, 39) compared the difference between nationality (*natsional'nost'*) and nationalism (*natsionalizm*) to that between "personality and egoism". In a similar way, the early uses of nationalism elsewhere in Europe were as words of abuse, often targeted at political opponents (Kurunmäki and Marjanen 2018, 264).

Hence, the negative connotation of *nationalism* is deeply rooted in Russian history. Records of the evolution of this vocabulary after the October Revolution and during the Soviet years are more fragmented, but the censorship of *natsiya* as well as the negative connotations of the concept remained until the very end of the Soviet era (Miller 2016, 89). In the official Soviet parlance, nationalism and cosmopolitanism figured as the negative counterparts of the desired modes of thought and action, patriotism and internationalism (Kettunen 2018, 349). In this way, the coupling of nationalism with cosmopolitanism – which carried a clearly anti-Semitic meaning – reinforced the completely negative attitudes connected to it.

All language is historical and the way we understand concepts today is influenced by previous uses of those same concepts, even if this influence is not necessarily direct. For this reason, familiarizing oneself with the history of key concepts is essential in order to grasp the way in which these concepts are used in the present. In chapter 5, I will discuss the historical context of nationalism in Russia with the help of prior research literature, in order to contextualise the changes in the contemporary language temporally.



## 2.3 THE POSITION OF THE RESEARCH AND THE RESEARCHER

As discussed in this chapter, the dissertation at hand draws on the traditions of contemporary and conceptual history. Such branches of history are multifaceted but, at the same time, the dissertation with its four publications falls between several disciplines. The emphasis on political changes in a contemporary society suggests that the studies could contribute to political science. This is particularly visible in publications I and IV, where the former discusses dissentful and consentful political contention between the state and nationalist actors, while the latter pays attention to the concept of legitimacy in relation to the nationalist argumentation of state authorities. Analysing the means of “othering” in the context of defining the nation, which is conducted in publication III, and perhaps the dissertation as a whole, has relevance for the study of international relations: understandings of nationalism in Russian politics have practical implications for the foreign policy measures that the regime takes.

The interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation project is also demonstrated in the choice of journals: *Nationalities Papers* publishes multidisciplinary work on nationalism, migration, and ethnic conflict with a geographical emphasis on Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Eurasia; *Demokratizatsiya* deals with a wide range of political, economic and social issues in the area; *Contributions to the History of Concepts* has a clear focus on empirical and theoretical studies within conceptual history, and is not limited to any particular region. The edited volume *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia: A Quest for Internal Cohesion* (Pynnöniemi 2021), for its part, combines social and political sciences with cultural studies to analyse different dimensions of patriotism and militarism in contemporary Russia.

Clearly, the dissertation can be read as a contribution to area studies. Russian studies (or “post-Soviet” or Eurasian studies) has developed into a distinctive discipline since post-war Western academia recognised the need to analyse the Soviet Union in a more systematic manner. The Cold War climate created a concept of “Kremlinology”, referring to Western scholars interpreting the limited sources of information on Soviet politics and society. Thus, the “outside” researcher has had a specific role in Russian studies, not always free from moral undertones. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many scholars, particularly in the West, perceived the former Soviet republics as struggling “on their way” from a communist system to a democratic and market-oriented liberal one. By now, scholars in area studies have generally rejected this transition theory with its normative and linear presumptions. Recent decades have also shown that the reality in many of the former Soviet Union countries has developed along different lines.

Selecting a topic and positioning it within a certain research tradition is always a subjective decision guided by the researcher's expectations. Being a "foreign" researcher vis-à-vis the research topic is not an impediment and should not be approached as such, but nationalism is a phenomenon often detected "somewhere else" and it is therefore important to recognise the criticism and distance embedded in the concept. As Michael Billig (1995, 55) has pointed out, practices, utterances or policies that "we" easily condemn as nationalism in another cultural context appear as healthy patriotism in our "own" context. Moreover, nationalism is connected to intuitive and unconscious patterns of thought, which is why, for example, one could ask whether I pay excessive attention to certain aspects of Russian national narratives because they appear unfamiliar to me due to my cultural background in a small, secular, politically Western-integrated nation-state. How do the Finnish-Russian foreign policy relationship, national history culture, or representations in Finnish society of Russia as a country direct my interpretations? These questions cannot be answered definitively, if at all, but it is important to remain sensitive regarding the researcher's frames of interpretation. Yet the view of a "foreigner" may also prove rewarding as "outside" observations are inherently comparative: the researcher continuously mirrors the object of the study in personal experiences and preconceptions based on their own background.

However, the very assumption that nationality "inherently" determines the way a researcher interprets cultural codes hints at methodological nationalism. In general, the concept refers to the understanding of the nation as the "natural" social and political form of the modern world (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002; see also Turoma & Waldstein 2016, 6). Avoiding methodological nationalism means accepting that there is no distinctive or standard "Russian" way to interpret social reality that differs from "foreign" or "Western" interpretations. The nation-state structure upholds certain cultural patterns that have an influence on "us" as an in-group – the education system, media environment, cultural history, religion, habits and social norms, among other things – but assuming that the only or most significant in-group in this sense would be the "nation" is an oversimplification (see also Kalela 2012, 78; Brubaker 1996). Moreover, expecting that ways of thinking are different outside and inside any state borders downplays the diversity of researchers as subjects, as well as the diversity among those they study, and simultaneously upholds the idea of groups such as nations as fixed.

With the new social history paradigm, historians have become increasingly interested in ownership and representation. The question of whether "an outsider" can truly understand a group they do not identify with is worth asking, but it should never discourage an attempt to do so. In this regard, it needs to be stressed that there is no unified understanding of any issue "inside" the national community. The task of the "foreign" researcher, in this case, is to

maintain a reflective approach while not expecting to find any single voice of “Russianness”. In a way, ownership is also interwoven with the overall argument of this dissertation: despite the recurring and vigorous attempts to do so, claiming full ownership over “nationalism” is not possible. No actor in the political field, or in the scholarly debate, may exercise a monopoly over the definition of the nation.

Conducting research in a foreign language is a common practice in the (increasingly anglophone) academic world. In this dissertation, I have chosen to analyse the material in Russian and to write in English – neither of which is my native language. However, I believe working with several languages is not problematic but fruitful if one accepts that the transmission of thought between languages is often difficult, but usually possible, as well as intellectually intriguing. I began my studies within the field of Russian translation, which may have enhanced my interest in the complexity of concepts and preconditions of interpretation. Among the contemporary translation theory paradigm, two aspects are salient: the context of the text itself, as well as the cultural, temporal and spatial context in which the text is produced. Both aspects are essential for conceptual historians.

### 3 NATIONALISM AS AN ANALYTICAL CONCEPT

The previous chapter touched upon the empirical challenges arising from the negative connotations and the ambiguous meanings attached to the concept of nationalism in public discourse. However, the problem is not merely an empirical one. In everyday language, nationalism functions as a concept of disapproval, which also affects its use as an analytical concept. After all, researchers themselves are not only surrounded by but also constitute a part of the society in which public discourse is produced. Scholarly language does not seem to influence the ways in which nationalism is used, and nor have scholars focusing on nationalism been that interested in “the ordinary uses” of the concept. Pauli Kettunen (2018, 342) has suggested that the research on nationalism ought to take these issues more seriously. Conceptual history as a discipline has been interested in the divisions between analytical and practical uses of the language.

In this chapter, I will delve into the various uses of nationalism in academic writing, starting from the notion that nationalism is not only understood differently in everyday language and in academic terms, but that there are various disagreements over the concept within scholarly writing. The “conceptual battle” over nationalism is not only taking place in public and political discourses, but different academic disciplines emphasise different aspects, and hence nationalism as an analytical concept is also contested. From this perspective, the chapter presents a specific reading of the literature focusing on the analytical uses of the concept of nationalism in this (admittedly rich, even crowded) academic field. Therefore, it also functions as a further elaboration on the position of this dissertation within the research tradition.

Historian Jorma Kalela (2012, 2–3) has depicted history research as a “social process of history-making” where it is not only historians who play their part (in fact, historians’ role is very limited in respect of how their findings can influence the everyday perceptions of the past). In Kalela’s conceptualisation, scholarly histories interact with public and popular histories, produced within society and the media, as well as various communities such as family, neighbourhood, and workplace, respectively. It is the interplay between all of these “histories” that constitutes “the practical context” of scholars’ work. In a similar way, those studying nations and nationalism work *within* the everyday discourses on the topics, and their ideas rarely penetrate the “common sense” level, or any level of the public discourse on the nation for that matter. In his study on banal nationalism, Michael Billig (1995, 14–15) demonstrated how the idea of the nation in society is both

obvious and obscure: it is being reproduced in everyday language and practices in such a subtle way that resisting the idea of nation as “natural” becomes difficult, and remains like that even for scholars who study nationalism as ideology.

Regarding the concept of nationalism, I sense certain differences between the everyday interpretations, the media, and within different branches of what could be called “professional” language: the scholarly language within academia, broadly understood, and the language of “policy analysis”, located between the academic uses and media discourses. In the media, the various aspects of nationalism as a concept are rarely considered, and the way it is applied reflects the commonsensical uses. Among the “professionals”, meaning those studying nationalism and its manifestations in society or politics, some attention is paid to the concept itself, but the interpretations vary. The various aspects embedded in the concept are rarely present in the short policy analysis commentaries, perhaps because they are closer stylistically to the typical media discourses.

As a subject of study, nationalism has undergone several evolutions from the primordial interpretations of nations being “eternal” to the modernist re-interpretations of nationalism as a socially and politically construed element of modern societies. Research on nationalism has been growing since the 1970s, with the 1980s seeing the rise of what Umut Özkırımlı (2010, 169) described as “new” approaches to nationalism, illuminating many spheres where the idea of nation had remained “taken for granted”. At the same time, nationalism remains a crucial and contested concept in research communities dedicated to history, social and political sciences, as well as area studies. These disciplines have overlapping but also conflicting understandings of what nationalism as an analytical concept can refer to, which creates confusion. Moreover, there are, of course, diverging views within disciplines. A fruitful way to approach these disagreements – instead of seeking clear-cut definitions – could be to map the debates, discussions, or contexts that researchers contribute to when conducting research on nationalism.

Contemporary scholars of nationalism theory approach the concept in a broad sense, referring to it as a naturalised view of a world composed of nation-states. Umut Özkırımlı (2010, 2) summarises that nationalism does matter – “as the fundamental organising principle of the inter-state order, as the ultimate source of political legitimacy, as a readily available cognitive and discursive frame, as the taken-for-granted context of everyday life”. Brubaker (1996, 15–16) has noted that the substantialist interpretation of nations as real entities is also held by many “modernists” and “constructivists” in the field of nationalism studies – which is, I would think, further evidence of how nationalism *as a practice* merges with nationalism *as a theory*. Despite scholars’ continued attempts to unpack these taken-for-granted, national frames for politics, economics, and culture, certain concepts seem to remain

“charged” with nationalism, as Pauli Kettunen (2018, 343) observes. For example, he writes, “the notion of society as an integrated holistic entity within the borders of the nation state appears not only in public debates but also in scholarly texts, and especially in comparative studies.” Thus, the nation as a “cognitive and sociopolitical category” (Brubaker 1996, 18) is so pervasive that even the scholars studying it do not always detect the settings where it appears.

Nevertheless, one should note that the tendency to resist these “taken-for-granted” schemes of nationhood has become more pronounced in research outside the branches focusing on nations, along with increasing attention to critical globalisation studies as a part of the transnational paradigm in history and social sciences (e.g. Kalela 2012, 78–79). In other words, many contemporary nationalism theorists reject the interpretation of nationalism as a certain stage of history that started when the system of modern nation-states emerged and ended with the intensification of globalisation.

A certain tension exists between interpretations that perceive nationalism as a construct and those that wish to study it as a practice. Emil Pain and Sergei Fediunin (2018, 1–2; 53–71; 67) criticise the modern constructivism paradigm in nation and nationalism studies for “excluding” the material factors, and for the “engineered blurriness in nation and nationalism studies”. They posit that by focusing on discourses and themes such as transnational identities or methodological nationalism, scholars do not take the present crisis of nation-state seriously, thereby “‘guarding’ the theory against consistently irritating new challenges to practice”. In a somewhat similar way, Breuilly (2013, 14) advises scholars of nationalism not to treat it merely as “a reflex of non-national material and ideal interests such as class or race or state”, but warns them at the same time about “going to the other extreme”, which would interpret nationalism as “some deeply felt idea, sentiment, or political commitment that operates independently of, even against, such interests”. Instead, Breuilly suggests that “a detailed consideration of how nationalism works historically in particular regions and periods” is the most reasonable way to map the different aspects of the concept.

I contend that the critique of constructivist and “new” approaches to nationalism relates to the tendency of some liberal historians and academics to implicitly or explicitly condemn the political manifestations they study. As Brubaker (2004, 118) puts it when describing academics’ attitudes within the social sciences and humanities in the US, invocations of nationhood are often perceived as “*dépassé*, parochial, naïve, regressive, or even dangerous”. Also Craig Calhoun (2007, 7) criticises such accounts for treating nationalism as “sort of an error smart people will readily move beyond – or an evil good people must reject” which leads to underestimating the importance of national

solidarities in the contemporary world. Thus, in general, the concern has been registered by many, and the debates on the topic are expanding.<sup>9</sup>

I would hesitate to accept the claim that scholars focusing on discourses, in general, treat them as distinct from social reality, or “exclude” the material factors, as Pain and Fediunin suggest. On the contrary, many who analyse concepts, political language, or discourse are primarily interested in the political change in social reality. As chapters 2 and 4 argue, language creates the frames within which political practices are realised. Focusing on the linkages between nationalism and foreign policy, Luke March (2018, 95) states that only those accounts that consider “both the ideational influence of nationalism and the policy context of its proponents” can actually be successful – which is an appropriate reminder indeed, but, in being ordered to do this, the perception of nation as being socially construed need not be abandoned.

Hence, scholars who study nations and nationalism do not necessarily share an understanding of the concepts they use. In a similar vein, there are different interpretations of nationalism in the field of post-Soviet and Russian studies. Marlene Laruelle (2019, 5) points out that in studies on Russian nationalism, the recent trend has been towards “‘exiting the political’ and ‘entering the social’”, that is, understanding nationalism in broader terms and focusing on the societal and everyday aspects of the phenomenon – which, to a certain extent, follows the paradigm shifts within social sciences and history. Regarding the theories of nationalism in general and nationalism in Russia in particular, the tension between “bottom-up” and “top-down” nationalism is another recurring topic for (fruitful) disagreement among political scientists. Political leaders and elites inarguably have an impact on how nationalist sentiments develop in society, but that impact is always conditional. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (2018, 6–7) propose that the “top-down” influence, exercised by state power, cannot be successful unless there are attitudes “at the bottom” of society that it can tap into.

While this dissertation is interested in political language, with two of the publications analysing the language of high political leadership, I do not assume that this is simply where nationalism is “produced” and then “transferred” to society. The ideational influence does not consist of one-way channels, and nor are its directions clear-cut. Moreover, and more fundamentally, the logic of national solidarities goes far beyond the texts produced to meet certain political ends. That said, studying the language of political leaders is meaningful even when top-down influence is not expected, as it inevitably tends to describe the perceptions that the state authorities have about popular moods and societal attitudes. Explaining his focus on the public

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<sup>9</sup> A recent example of this kind of debate could be Yael Tamir’s book *Why Nationalism* (2019), in which she proposes that liberals should “reclaim” nationalism from right-wing actors and redirect its political power to progressive ends.



political narratives themselves instead of their external reception, Edwin Bacon (2012, 769) notes that the narratives always say something about their narrators: “to know someone’s story” helps to make sense of their actions more accurately.

Conceivably, the Russian media and academia have a different view compared to their Western counterparts on the concept of nationalism. Of course, national borders do not define schools of research – Russian studies is and has been an international field, Western scholars study Russian-language sources, and Russian scholars publish in other languages. But the fact that the social sciences and humanities in Russia have developed without ideological preconditions set by the Soviet government for around 30 years does influence those fields today – as do the recent political and ideological limitations on academic freedom in Russia (see e.g. Olimpieva 2021, 12–15; 31). The Western tradition of Russian studies is influenced by its past in another way: the political context of the Cold War years intensified the need to understand Soviet society and foreign policy in Western societies. Marlène Laruelle (2019, 1) writes that Western scholarship on Russia has always been interested in national identity issues, “both to explain Russia’s ‘difference’ from the West and as a part of a mirror game with Russia’s national tradition of debating the so-called ‘Russian Idea’”. In her genealogy, she depicts how the Western tradition of studying nationalism in the Soviet Union and Russia actually began in the 1960s with the emphasis on Slavophilism, Pan-Slavism, and conservatism, but in the 1970s and early 1980s the focus shifted to the contemporary society, and the “revival” of Russian nationalism (*ibid.*, 1–5).

In the wake of perestroika, a specific dual schema in the study of Russian nationalism(s) was born: the Western scholarly literature became divided between the “good” forms of non-Russian nationalism within the USSR, and the “bad” ethnic Russian nationalism. Laruelle (2019, 1–5) argues that this schema has, to a certain extent, prevailed ever since. In the 1990s in particular, forms of nationalism inside the Russian Federation were interpreted through the lens of “Russia’s problem”, but nationalisms in, for instance, the Baltic states, Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova were seen as necessary or natural phases contributing to the democratisation process of the respective countries. Non-Russian nationalisms within the Russian Federation were approached in a similar way. This critique proposed by Laruelle is in line with the overall critique of transition studies regarding the post-Soviet space. The critical examination of nationalism studies among Western scholars also confirms that the choice of research topics is always made in a specific temporal and spatial context.



### 3.1 ETHNIC, CIVIC, IMPERIAL?

The model of distinct civic and ethnic nationalisms has long played a part in nationalism studies, even though it is usually agreed that the dichotomy fails to explain the complex reality. In this categorisation, civic nationalism is based on the political agreement that holds people together, whereas the ethnic version stems from tradition, kinship, and cultural ties. A key problem arising from the ethnic-civic (or “political-cultural”) categorisation is that it often presents variants of civic nationalism as benign and legitimate, whereas ethnic nationalism is portrayed as backward and illegitimate. Following the theorisation of Hans Kohn, civic types are characteristic of Western contexts, while ethnic variants can be found within “non-Western” nations (Özkırmlı 2010, 35–37; see also Kemiläinen 1964, 139–141). Civic or statist nationalisms have also been portrayed as tolerant and peaceful, even if conflict may arise from attempts to assimilate national minorities into the civic nation (Goode 2019, 142). The dichotomy still appears frequently in academic and political debates, which Paul Goode (2019, 142), leaning on Edward Koning’s work, attributes to its usefulness in categorising and classifying nation-building *policies* – “even if it is a blunt and misleading tool for characterizing nations”.

In the Russian case, the variants appear in the context of domestic nation-building strategies, and especially in the conceptual choices in that field. In the Russian language, there are two words to describe “Russianness”: *ruskii* and *rossiiskii*.<sup>10</sup> It has long been thought that the former stresses linguistic and ethno-cultural connotations whereas the latter refers to Russians in the sense of Russian citizens – but these concepts, too, are in flux. In post-Soviet Russia, Boris Yeltsin clearly emphasised the rhetoric of *rossiiskii*, whereas Vladimir Putin has been much less consistent, and broadened the range of *ruskii* in particular, as publication IV (p. 527) shows. The increasing usage of *ruskii* in state discourse after 2014 has been analysed as a marker of an ethnonational shift in the Kremlin’s policy, or the “ethnification” of Russian nationalism (Teper 2016; Kolstø 2016, 18). Marlene Laruelle (2016a) points out that in the Kremlin’s usage, *ruskii* does not function primarily in the nation-building arena, but is used to reinforce the historical connection of Eastern Slavs:

*Insisting on Kiev, Crimea, and Sevastopol as ruskii does not underline an ethnic nationalism that would discriminate against non-ethnic Russian citizens of Russia. Rather it is the continuation of an old historical theme, which stipulates that Eastern Slavs in their three modern national units come from the same cradle, Kievan Rus’.*

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<sup>10</sup> Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (2018, 9) raise an important point in that while the Russian language allows one to choose either a standardly “ethnic” or “civic” term, it also makes it impossible for a Russian speaker *not* to choose the emphasis: “there is no ‘neutral’ term to describe Russianness”.

*Historically speaking, Kiev is indeed a russkii land, whereby russkii is understood in the original sense of Eastern Slavs, not the modern Russian state. The notion of the “reunification of Russian lands” (sobranie russkikh zemlei) is thus not evidence of ethnic irredentism but a ghost from the imperial past. (Laruelle 2016a)*

The Kremlin’s rhetorical choices have several audiences, and “ethnification” is different in nature vis-à-vis each of them. As Laruelle (ibid.) puts it, “[t]he semantic uses of *russkii* and *rossiiskii* are not mutually exclusive but overlap and diverge depending on the context in which they are used”. Indeed, the way that concepts are applied in practice reveals how they are perceived, because these uses may – and often do – change over time even though the words remain the same.

In the context of domestic politics, conceptual ambiguity prevails. The Constitution of the Russian Federation refers to Russians as a “multinational nation” (*mnogonatsional’nyi rossiiskii narod*), even if it is often stated that today’s Russia resembles a nation-state with its 80% majority of “ethnic Russians”. The official discourse also recognises ethnic Russians as the “state-forming nation” (*gosudarstvobrazuyushchaya natsiya*) in the history of the Russian state, an idea that gained popularity for the first time in the Russian Empire by the beginning of the 20th century (Miller 2012, 48). Publications III and IV, analysing presidential discourse, illustrate the importance of this theme: on the one hand, the historical multinationality of Russia is portrayed as the “strength and beauty” of the country, but on the other hand, the Russian language, culture and ethnicity are simultaneously stressed as uniting factors for all Russian citizens, and therefore Russians are portrayed as “*primus inter pares*”.

A few remarks about the field of nationalities policy will help to contextualise this ambiguity. Publication IV mentions the political attempt to “clarify” the concept of the Russian nation, voiced for the first time during a meeting of the Council for ethnic relations in 2016. The president supported the idea, stating that a new law “on the Russian nation” would be needed. Two key figures behind the project, Vyacheslav Mikhailov and Valery Tishkov, served as nationalities ministers in the 1990s,<sup>11</sup> and both have since promoted an interpretation of Russians as a special kind of civic nation (Goode 2019, 150–152.) In December 2018, the amendment to the Strategy of Nationalities Policy was accepted, and the document now defines the Russian nation as “a community of free equal citizens of the Russian Federation of various ethnic, religious, social and other affiliations, with civic consciousness

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<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of Boris Yeltsin’s presidential era, the emphasis was on the civic *rossiiskii* nation-building strategies, but then gradually shifted towards ethnic and imperial conceptualisations of the state when the influence of the liberals in the government decreased (Shevel 2011, 189–190).

(*obladayushchih grazhdanskim samosoznaniem*)” (kremlin.ru 2018b, chapter 6). Legal language refers to a classic civic nation-state, but its impact and connection to the actual policies and practices of nation-building remain unclear. The designers of the “civic” nation-building model have not avoided ethnic undertones when elaborating on their ideas.<sup>12</sup> The question remains as to why the political administration insists on a civic model of nation-building at the level of language when it simultaneously wants to embrace a clear hierarchical vision of the nation – and, as Konstantin Zamyatin (2018, 50) has argued, pursues assimilative tactics, for example in its language policies. In the new constitution, the Russian language is defined not only as the official language of the federation, but as “the language of the state-forming nation” (Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020, article 68, part 1).

Whereas “civic nationalism” can be explained through civic participation, characterised in the institutional belonging of the nation, the “ethnic” component of nationalism remains much less concrete. In the case of post-Soviet Russia, there are several possible ways to understand ‘nation’ in ethnic terms. Oxana Shevel (2011, 180; 185–189) proposes three alternative readings of “ethnic Russianness”: the nation as a community of ethnic Russians; a community of Eastern Slavs; or a community of Russian-speakers. She notes that these categories “differ substantially in terms of their core beliefs, internal logic, implications for Russia’s relations with neighbouring states, and for the territorial integrity of the Russian state itself”. The remark on territorial integrity is interesting as only the idea of the nation as a community of Russian-speakers refers to a community broader than that encompassed by the borders of the Russian Federation, and hence it does not threaten the territorial integrity of the country – unlike the other two ethnic conceptualisations of the nation.

In Shevel’s perception, the idea of nation as a restricted community of ethnic Russians is not very popular (*ibid.*, 186). These attitudes are challenging to measure, but many researchers of post-Soviet Russian nationalism support the view of a more inclusive interpretation of “Russianness” being mainstream. Marlene Laruelle (2020; see also 2019, 7) lists four variants of contemporary nationalisms in Russia: imperialist nationalism, the supporters of which wish to re-create the Soviet Union; “pure” ethnic nationalism that would exclude Caucasia from the Russian state; eastern Slavic nationalism that would include Ukrainians and Belarusians in the Russian nation; and “*rossiiskii* nationalism”, or statist nationalism, which is satisfied with the current borders of the Russian Federation but has reservations about

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<sup>12</sup> In 2019, Valery Tishkov explained his vision of the Russian identity: according to him, the Russian nation is not only a political and civic entity, but also united by historical values, ethnic culture, and even the Sochi Winter Olympics and the “re-unification” of Crimea: “These two events played a very important role in the growth of common patriotism, self-consciousness, solidarity, and unity” (Tishkov 2019).

migrants. She suggested that the first three models represent minority views, while the statist version would be “the mainstream” interpretation today. As Laruelle (ibid.) and Torbakov (2015, 455) note, (ethnic) nationalist actors themselves mix the imperial and ethnonationalist arguments, as well as the concepts of *russkii* and *rossiiskii*, which is why any clear-cut definitions of those labels or concepts are quickly prone to becoming outdated and imprecise.

Thus, the many ambiguities regarding theorisations of “ethnic”, together with the inconsistent policies in nation-building and, lastly, the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Ukraine, have encouraged scholars of post-Soviet Russian nationalisms to seek new analytical frames. One of the revisited concepts is “imperial nationalism”, which hints at both the (external) borders of the Russian state as well as the ways in which the multinational nation is perceived within that state. For example, Eduard Ponarin and Mikhail Komin (2018a, 51) posit that imperial nationalism is better suited to analysing Russia’s developments after 2014 because it combines “elements of civic nationalism with ethno-symbolism”, and holds that “the national community is not restricted to the territory of the state”.

In the context of contemporary Russia, “imperial” highlights the “multinational” characteristic of the nation; the primacy of ethnic Russianness; the expansionist foreign policy together with the discourse on “compatriots”; and the creation of “an inimical image of a geopolitical rival”. All of these can be presented as components of the post-Soviet (and post-2014) Russian nationalism that, according to Ponarin and Komin (2018a, 61), the political elite has deliberately chosen. In assessing the novelty and added value of “imperial nationalism”, the attitudes attached to the analytical concepts become crucial. The civic-ethnic divide has been criticised on account of its embedded “moral” orientation, but the concept of empire also has a strong negative connotation, which makes “imperial nationalism” an interesting alternative to the dichotomy. For example, Emil Pain (2016) has described similar developments as “Russia’s imperial syndrome”, stressing the anti-Western content of imperial nationalism (here, the metaphor of sickness emphasises the risks that Pain sees as embedded in this current, but also contributes to the negative value orientation of the concept of imperial).

In this way, the scholarly discussion on nationalism is interwoven with the studies on empire that have been revived during the 2000s. When the Soviet Union – “the last empire” – collapsed, the view of empire as a phenomenon of the past<sup>13</sup> grew more commonplace, but as Sanna Turoma and Maxim Waldstein (2013, 1) note, the interest towards empire and the imperial legacy

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Benedict Anderson, interviewed by Alexander Semyonov in 2003, critically stated that empires were studied “like dinosaurs” – something that had become extinct (Semyonov & Glebov 2003).

in the present is now back in focus, and “far beyond the domain of purely historical research”. More recently, new interpretations of the historical empires have emerged, and suggestions have surfaced about interpreting contemporary political entities through the lens of an empire. Turoma and Waldstein have linked the “new imperial history” to the growing interest in spatial history, noting that the “spatial turn” in the social sciences and humanities after the end of the Cold War has influenced Russian studies as well (Turoma & Waldstein 2013, 14–15). A particular feature of these “new histories” is that the view of empire as a backward, rural and suppressive entity has been challenged with more nuanced interpretations of the nature of the imperial context for nation building. Aleksei Miller (2008, 212) advises contemporary historians to acknowledge the Russian empire’s successes instead of holding onto the “prison of nations” metaphor. According to Miller, it is crucial to note that the empire did not always suppress nation-building processes but also consciously facilitated them. Philipp Ther (2014, 574) criticises what he calls “the standard reading of twentieth century historiography” whereby national movements endured long struggles against empires, eventually achieving independence and the creation of a nation-state.

Igor Torbakov (2018, 19–20) divides the recent approaches to empire into objective ones emphasising structural relationships of political dominance, and subjective ones analysing empire as a system of attitudes and perceptions. Alongside these schools, he suggests focusing on concrete practices, namely what the leaders of empires do. I would interpret political language as constituting a part of those concrete practices, and hence analysing “imperial” through conceptual choices, combined with actual policies, is worthwhile. The annexation of Crimea can be interpreted from the perspective of expansionist imperialism, but the nature of the new “imperial body” is difficult to determine. Could the annexation, theoretically, also be seen as broadening the borders of the nation-state? Regardless of the interpretation, it is clear that the annexation of Crimea changed the meanings of the key concepts of Russianness, both referring to the nation and the state, and will influence the interpretations of these long hereafter. In this sense, while I have not applied “imperial” as an analytical concept, I would regard this dissertation, particularly publications II and IV, as contributing in part to the debate.

### **3.2 CIVILISATIONAL NATIONALISM AS A “THIRD WAY”**

Emil Pain (2016, 47) explains that even though the Western academic tradition treats nation and empire as “extreme opposites”, in Russia the nation was long construed “along entirely different lines”. To grasp these lines, yet another concept has been proposed: “state-civilisation”. In analytical terms, the concept may represent the option to forego the theories of nation-state and empire alike: instead, the civilisational interpretation emphasises “both the

importance of national identity (the primacy of Russian culture) and tolerance toward other (non-Russian) cultures” (Torbakov 2018, 25–26). The concept has been popular within Russian academia since the early 1990s, emphasising Russia as one of the historical civilisations of the world. The Russian tradition merges with Samuel Huntington’s idea of civilisations as the main units of the world, the borders of which are defined by the main religions. In this way, the interpretation highlights the role of Russian Orthodoxy in the “thousand-year-long” history of the country.

Deconstructing the term “civilisational” in these accounts shows its close connection to the (neo-)Eurasianist school of thought. Eurasianism as a philosophy rejects the view of Russia as a periphery in relation to Europe, and instead portrays the location of the country as grounds for a “third way”. As Laruelle (2008, 12) explains, the significance of Eurasianism in contemporary Russia is based on the theoretical presuppositions of its doctrine that today’s conflicts are not economic or social in nature, but stem from “a clash between the cultural essences of peoples”. In a similar vein, the Eurasian doctrine portrays religions as a(n) (unchanging) foundation of a civilisation and suggests that civilisations are the true driving force of history. These views underline the authoritarian role of the state in preserving civilisation, but also validate the incompatibility of Russian and Western value systems as something inherently and naturally existing in the world.

Vera Tolz (1998, 994) depicted how the pre-revolutionary Russian émigré and Soviet concepts of nation and nationalism were applied in the intellectual debates on the nature of the Russian nation in the 1990s. She noted that the writings of “the Slavophiles of the 1840s, late 19th century Pan-Slavist Nikolai Danilevsky and historian Vasilii Klyuchevsky, early 20th-century philosophers Nikolai Berdyaev, Georgii Fedotov, Ivan Ilin and Vladimir Solovyov, as well as the Eurasianists – members of the émigré intellectual movement of the 1920s and 1930s” were perceived, sometimes in an uncritical manner, as “teachers” in search of spiritual and ideological inspiration. Indeed, many of the pre-revolutionary conservative-nationalist and Eurasian philosophers still serve as inspiration for currents that, by the 2010s, had gained more influence in the discourses of the nation. In this sense, the concept of civilisation illuminates the multilayered influence between academic research and other intellectual debates within society.

Kåre Johan Mjør and Sanna Turoma (2020) note that the idea of Russian civilisation that was initially formulated “in scholarly and pseudo-scholarly writings” has, by now, penetrated mainstream political discourse. Similarly, Alexander Verkhovsky and Emil Pain (2012, 56) write that the support for “civilisational nationalism” has become more visible since the early 2000s. In their view, the concept stresses Russia’s “special path” as antidemocratic: it utilises the idea of a special Russian civilisation in explaining why full-fledged democratic development cannot take place in Russia. Emil Pain has also

previously (2009, 75–76) described that the extreme imperial nationalists in Russia apply a certain kind of primordial discourse, regarding the state system as predetermined. The representatives of these strands have been portrayed as an intellectual source for the current regime (Barbashin & Thoburn 2014; Clover 2016). Indeed, according to Maria Engström:

*Putin's so-called 'conservative turn' is in full accord with the political doctrine developed in numerous right-wing intellectual circles and think tanks, which identify themselves as neoconservative. This doctrine maintains that a state without ideology cannot be considered sovereign.* (Engström 2014, 356)

This kind of “ideologisation” of politics was attractive to the Kremlin not only because it provided a means of legitimising its domestic power, but also because it had such deep roots in the Russian (both pre-revolutionary and Soviet) culture (ibid., 376.) However, the Kremlin did not adopt the Eurasianists’ neoconservative views as such. As Anton Shekhovtsov (2014) has pointed out, their political aims differ: “Putin’s project is authoritarian and restorationist, while that of [Aleksandr] Dugin is fascist and revolutionary.”

Yet the connection does not imply a causal relationship. Clearly, the Kremlin has been inspired by the neo-Eurasianist philosophy and has followed it closely, but this does not mean that those circles would have or would have had a direct impact on policy decisions. In 2014 in particular, it was tempting to interpret the Eurasianist influence on the Kremlin’s line of action as significant, but the “Eurasianist choice” has not proved to be particularly successful in mainstream society or among the political elites (Laruelle 2016b, 280-282). Perhaps the Eurasianist and civilisational discourses vis-à-vis state nationalism would be best understood in the context of the Kremlin’s “ideational improvisation”, as formulated by Henry Hale, Maria Lipman and Nikolai Petrov (2019, 182): The “founding fathers” of post-Soviet conservatism did have a role in enhancing the Crimean consensus in the media and in society, but this role was recalibrated in mid-2015 in order not to risk losing control over them (Hale et al. 2019, 190). However, the significance of this movement may lie elsewhere: Anton Shekhovtsov’s (2018) research on radical Russian nationalists’ extensive connections to Western actors functions as a reminder that the phenomenon is truly transnational in nature.

Clearly, the analytical concept of “imperial nationalism” has illuminated aspects that other concepts fail to grasp. However, labelling “imperial” or “civilisational” nationalism as Russia’s new ideology, as some scholars (Ponarin & Komin 2018a, 65; Verkhovsky & Pain 2012, 56) have done, raises several questions. First, the domestic aspect of imperial nationalism remains unclear, if we accept that an empire aims at governing different peoples differently. Can the federal structure be interpreted as an imperial model? Is



the imperial nationalism scheme actually adequate for circumventing the ethnic-civic dichotomy when analysing the domestic nation-building aspects? In the legislative sphere, the state authorities have applied classical civic language of equal citizens while construing practices that follow an assimilative course. The discourses stressing Russia's global role as a distinctive civilisation that protects and defends certain conservative values do have an "imperial" tone, but to what extent can this language be interpreted as an embodiment of imperial nationalism, and to what extent is it a foreign policy strategy, aimed at gaining greater international status?

Finally, it is perhaps worth asking whether the analytical uses of "imperial" or "civilisational" help to contextualise Russian nationalism in space and time, or whether these concepts are used instead to stress the "uniqueness" of Russia as an empirical case. In their introduction, Mjør and Turoma (2020) address this concern by stating that the interest in the concept of civilisation "should not be seen [...] as a methodological choice to highlight the country's *Sonderweg*", but should be placed in a wider, global context. An example of a fruitful transnational comparison could be one between the various forms of "imperial nationalism" in contemporary Russia and Turkey, something that Torbakov (2018, 147) has introduced in his book chapter comparing neo-Eurasianism in Russia and post-Kemalist neo-Ottomanism in Turkey.

To conclude, scholars have explained the nature of contemporary nationalism in Russia by using epithets like ethnic, imperial or civilisational. All of these concepts have been applied to the political reality in Russia, particularly after what Maria Engström (2014, 356) has dubbed "the re-ideologisation of Russian domestic, foreign and security policy", which depicts them as closely interlinked although they address different angles of the phenomenon. This dissertation aims to advance a view that with such a contested, context-bound and powerful concept as nationalism, a consensus over its meanings or a clear definition should not be expected in public discourses or in academic writing. Instead, focusing on the evolving uses of the concept in a specific context may prove helpful.



## 4 RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

When discussing methodology, many historians return to the idea of critically evaluating the source material to begin with: In what circumstances has the material been produced, by whom, and why – and how do these factors influence the usefulness of the text as a source? While these questions are still relevant for anyone working with textual material as a source, it is worth noting that the traditional view of source criticism within history research has developed into a view that stresses the usefulness of the source over its “reliability”. The usefulness of the source, then, arises from its ability to answer the research question that the scholar poses – and therefore, it is the researcher who ultimately decides which sources may or may not be fruitful for their work (Kalela 2012, 31–32). Moreover, Jorma Kalela suggests that the present mainstream thinking among historians is that all sources are tendentious, which does not imply discarding them as “unreliable”, but rather underlines the responsibility of the researcher to reveal those characteristics. This methodological approach acknowledges research as a subjective process, while still aiming to create the analytical distance needed between the material and the researcher (*ibid.*, 31).

The material for this dissertation consists of selected sets of written (or spoken and recorded) texts. From the point of view of the main research question in each publication, the texts need to be relevant, representative and meaningful. But, at the same time, they are understood as evidence of past events. In traditional history research, a very limited amount of text, possibly alongside material objects, may sometimes be all that the researcher has to build their interpretation upon. When studying contemporary subjects, the amount of potential material is enormous, and the methodological challenges arise not from scarcity but from representativeness. Yet the process of determining the sources also helps in organising the research questions in a more specific manner, which is an important part of the process. Finding, selecting, and reading the potential research material helps in further defining the parameters of the research itself. The material needs, by nature, to be limited, and the process of defining these limits encourages the researcher to ponder more consciously what it is that she is trying to find; in this way, choosing the material also directs the research questions, proving that it is not only the converse that applies.

## **4.1 MEDIA TEXTS AND THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH ACTS**

In general, certain reservations apply when using media material as a source of research. Texts in the media are produced from a certain position, they are subject to limitations, and they may serve purposes not necessarily visible in the text itself, but depending on the context instead. When interpreting texts published in a certain media outlet, the intended audience needs to be considered. Moreover, political and economic circumstances affect the media environment. In the case of contemporary Russia, during the past two decades, media freedom indicators have shown “a steady decline” in freedom of expression, most visibly due to the increasing state control over the media (Wijermars & Lehtisaari 2020, 2–3). The internet remained relatively free for a long time, but legislative measures in the 2010s restricted publishing and distributing content online. Yet this does not mean that the media sources could not be consulted. Rather, it shows that the producers of media texts need to consider political and economic preconditions, which may result, for example, in self-censorship that remains impossible to detect in the published media products.

During the 2000s, Russia's media audiences were formed anew. For example, TV is now the main source of information only for the older generation, whereas younger Russians acquire their news and other media content from the internet (Wijermars & Lehtisaari 2020; Deloitte CIS Research Center 2020, 21). The ownership of TV channels is state-aligned, and therefore politically sensitive content is distributed online or in heavily encrypted messaging applications, such as Telegram. Partly for this reason, the material collected for publication I consisted primarily of online material such as webpage texts, blog entries and tweets produced by representatives of selected nationalist movements. The analysis focused on the language of various groups and actors, some of whom were radical in their views and oppositional in relation to the Russian state authorities. Connecting the nationalist argumentation and announced activities on these sites during a three-year timeframe to the news material published online enabled analysis of the “offline” activities of the same groups, such as meetings, demonstrations, arrests, and court proceedings, which then helped in mapping the state authorities' control over these groups and individuals.

When collecting the material for publication II, online and social media content was omitted. The material in that publication consists of print media instead, collected through Integrum, a commercial collection of Russian-language full-text databases. The aim of the study was to analyse self-descriptive uses of the word “nationalist”, which would no doubt have been numerous in the social media sphere. However, studying the self-descriptive cases of “nationalist” in social media would have addressed a different issue:

in the online communities of radical nationalists, the actors would most likely have used different language. The term “nationalist” has negative connotations and carries a social stigma, which also explains the understanding of nationalism in those texts. In addition to the discussions within homogeneous groups, typical social media language would involve comments intended for a like-minded audience, or clear provocations, which is why I presume that social media sources do not depict public speech as a part of social reality in the same way that traditional media does, and hence for the purposes of publication II the narrow material collected from the latter was more functional. In the traditional press, the actors may weigh their message – consciously or unconsciously – according to the expected, wider audience. Moreover, “online media” as such in databases like Integrum comprises a wide category, including various outlets that do not necessarily follow any professional guidelines that the traditional media, despite various political and economic constraints, still does for the most part. This is what is referred to in the publication as the “filtering” function of editorial work.

Selecting the material for a study is a crucial step that sometimes extends throughout the whole research process. In each of the publications, the selection has been justified in slightly different ways to produce a representative collection of texts regarding the research question. In publication II, the material was collected from Integrum database by “hand-picking” self-descriptive uses of the word “nationalist”. The search queries were targeted at a large set of central and local newspapers, duly producing an original collection of texts purely for the purposes of this publication. Regarding publication I, a similar process was carried out: certain actors and groups in the nationalist field were detected, and their online and “offline” activities (through media representation) were followed over a certain period of time. Publications III and IV analyse keynote speeches delivered by the Russian president, combined with the context provided in federal-level policy documents, all of which have been made available on the Kremlin’s website, both in the original Russian and translated into English.<sup>14</sup> In these cases, the selection entailed choosing the most relevant speeches. In publication III, only the annually recurring presidential address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation was analysed because of its special status in formulating state policies, although the twenty-year timeframe resulted in a significant amount of text nevertheless. For the purposes of publication IV, a different set of speeches was compiled in addition to the address to the Federal Assembly – the speeches on Victory Day, on the day of the annexation of Crimea, Valdai Forum speeches (and their Q&A sessions), as well as the greetings on the Day of National Unity were all analysed between the years 2012 and 2019. Here,

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the speeches are, therefore, analysed in a mediated form: they may have been slightly altered from the version that the President delivered on the live occasion.

the aim was to ensure a diverse but concise collection, with 35 speeches scrutinised overall. It can be argued that the different audiences on these specific occasions affect the way in which the presidential message is delivered. However, an analysis of these individual, context-bound texts revealed certain consistencies within the source material as a whole. In this sense, the added value of publication IV was to present key narratives reoccurring in the presidential discourse throughout the time period studied.

Clearly, presidential speech does not represent the official political language alone. In addition, many actors in Russian politics and the media contribute to the creation and maintenance of the official nationalist discourses, and as Astrid S. Tuminez (2000, 3) points out, intellectuals and other proponents of nationalist ideas are significant because the ruling elite may become interested in their message, especially if they attract a significant number of followers within society. In the shift in foreign policy discourses in 2013–14, the state leadership seemed to take advantage of the narratives of previously marginalised groups in justifying Russia's actions in Ukraine. These discourses have been described, for instance, as *revanchist* and *messianic* (Barbashin 2017, 111; Engström 2014; see also subchapters 3.1 and 3.2). The foreign policy discourses have become more unified since 2012, and especially since 2014. There is some disagreement among the Russian political elite on some other topics, such as the national economy (see e.g. Rutland 2016), but as a general rule, it can be said that in Russian politics today the presidential discourse reflects the predominant views on decisive matters. The president's endorsement of any political idea, in the programmatic, prepared addresses in particular, carries specific weight. Thus, the president's speech is, to all intents and purposes, an act.

According to constructivist research approaches, language frames the social reality. Moreover, linguistic choices define the sphere of possible politics. A crosscutting theme of this dissertation is the ability of language to form practices: for example, dominant discourses framing “us” differently from “them” in fundamental terms enable and justify corresponding, divisive policy decisions. When it comes to presidential speeches in contemporary Russia, the linguistic actions can have very direct implications. In June 2014, the president's annual address to the Federal Assembly was categorised as a strategic planning document for steering Russia's politics (kremlin.ru 2014a, chapter 3, article 11). The linkage between the president's rhetoric and his ability to exercise power became particularly evident in January 2020 when he suggested amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation in his speech to the Federal Assembly. Less than two months later, these amendments, together with additional ones suggested by a specific working group whose members were approved by the president, had been accepted both in the state Duma proceedings and by the constitutional court. A (legally non-binding) referendum, or “All-Russian vote”, was organised at the end of

June and the beginning of July, and on July 4, the new Constitution came into force (Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020). The whole process from the president's first pronouncement concerning the amendments to their entry into force took less than seven months.

In the 2010s at least, it became commonplace to refer to the Russian political system as an established authoritarian one, and to refrain from regarding it as a “hybrid” model combining democratic institutions and authoritarian rule. In addition, the current political system in Russia is heavily president-centred both according to the legislation and in practical terms. Therefore, between 2000 and 2020, the president came to embody the highest political power in Russia. This is not to say, however, that his power would be unlimited. While the political system is formally tied to the extensive presidential powers, in practice there are many structural weaknesses that limit the president's power (Burkhardt 2021, 473–474; Frye 2021). Throughout the 2000s, the “strong state system” (Tsygankov 2014) has undergone phases of re-defining and re-distributing state power, with the result that certain tasks, especially in foreign politics, are delivered by third-party actors who have become “state actors” without a strict connection to formal institutions of power (see e.g. Galeotti 2017, 2–6). Moreover, Russian state power is built not so much on formal institutions but, as Alena Ledeneva argues (2013, 17), on the system of informal networks that both sustain and constrain presidential power.

Yet another important clarification regarding presidential power may be in order. When I chose to study presidential discourse in two of the publications, the decision was not motivated by Vladimir Putin's – or Dmitri Medvedev's – personality, but rather by their persona as a political leader. I do not assume that Putin's personality could be revealed by reading the texts that his administration has produced, nor by analysing the statements he himself has made on different occasions, and this is not even of interest in my study. Rather, these texts and statements are evidence of the “thinking” within the state system, as voiced by the president. The distinction is relevant when considering the trend of the strong personification of political power in the political sciences (Burkhardt 2021, 473).

Newspaper texts, internet media, political speeches and policy documents all follow different linguistic conventions. In the publications comprising this dissertation, the focus has been on nationalist language as a political practice. The guiding principle of the content analysis from the perspective of conceptual history has been to interpret changes in specific concepts, reoccurring expressions, and their contexts over time. In the following, I will discuss the method in practice as well as its potential limitations. Publication III conducts an analysis of metaphors in political rhetoric, while publication IV maps narratives on the Russian nation produced in the presidential discourse. Both publications are based on political speeches, mainly Russian

President Vladimir Putin's keynote speeches (III) combined with the context provided in federal-level policy documents (IV).

## 4.2 RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CONCEPTUAL CHANGE

Any text-based research is confronted by an important question: How can a consistent method of interpretation be created and maintained throughout the process of analysing the material? In this dissertation, as has been described above, the textual material represents political language for the most part, produced by those exercising state power or those challenging its views. The texts have provided insights into the views and thoughts of the actors about the nation, but in order to produce a coherent analysis, a more specific understanding of political language was needed. To this end, I have turned to the theorisations of conceptual history as a general approach to political language when shaping my method of interpretation.

Quentin Skinner, building upon the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and John L. Austin, argued that in order to understand any serious utterance, “we need to grasp something *over and above* the sense and reference of the terms used to express it” (Skinner 2002, 103–104, italics added). As Kari Palonen (1999, 43) has explained, Skinner's perspective on conceptual change is primarily linguistic, or rhetorical. This view is rather fundamental in his reply to critique in 1988, where Skinner stated that “there can be no histories of concepts as such; there can only be histories of their uses in argument” (cited in *ibid.*, 46). Thus, adopting a rhetorical view of conceptual history means that the interest lies in the way in which concepts are used, and what is *done* when they are used. Yet, following Skinner's logic that interpretation goes beyond the text itself, I have aimed at a careful contextualisation of the research material in each of the publications. The spatial, temporal and political context of the text also helps in discussing the intentions and objectives of the actors, even though it is acknowledged that these cannot be “shown” by interpreting the text alone (and intentionality, in the way that Skinner explains it, has not been the main focus of any of the dissertation publications). Rather, the ambition has been to detect changes over time in the ways in which nationalist language is used within certain discourses.

In publications II–IV, discourse as a concept is used in a practical manner to refer to a certain kind of text or talk: for example, presidential discourse follows certain conventions and maintains a specific power position in society, whereas the media have a different logic for producing text, which depends on the type of outlet, expected audience and channel. In publication IV, I have also consulted some key policy documents that characteristically dispel the agent, producing an impersonal and seemingly unambiguous message.

Despite using the concept of discourse to describe various textual genres, I have not applied discourse analysis as a method. Peräkylä and Ruusuvaori (2018, 671–672) suggest that a common denominator of various styles of discourse analysis lies in “uncovering the features of text that maintain coherence in units larger than the sentence”. Discourse analysis in general, and critical discourse analysis in particular, stress the element of power – an eminent category in the research questions in this dissertation, too. The main interest of the publications has been in rhetorically oriented conceptual history. Following this line, all of the publications have a slightly different methodological emphasis, which I will summarise below.

The first publication, studying the changing policies of the Russian state authorities towards “the nationalist challenge” in the country, maps the territory of contemporary Russian nationalism(s) by depicting the “shared space” of state nationalism and the interpretations of the oppositional nationalist actors. The publication is based on a systematic reading of online material provided by radical nationalist actors themselves between the years 2011 and 2015. Some of the material was accessed through the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, a tool that enables access to websites that might no longer exist. When analysing this material, opinion polls as well as media sources were consulted to contextualize the online manifestations of the movements to “offline” events. In reading the material, the presented views, claims, and activities of the groups were categorized and then compared both to each other and to the state authorities’ reactions and measures towards the most well-known actors within those movements. In this way, the state response to “the nationalist challenge” could be presented, and analysed from the perspective of dissentful-consentful political contention.

In publication II, I analysed a textual collection of self-descriptive uses of the term “nationalist” in the media, drawing on Quentin Skinner’s typology of conceptual change. Skinner explains that change in the “meaning” of a certain concept is best approached by focusing on three aspects: the nature and range of the criteria according to which the word is usually applied (what does the word standardly refer to?); the nature and range of reference (in what circumstances is the word applied?), as well as the range of attitudes usually connected to the word (is the word perceived positively, negatively, or in neutral terms?). Following these aspects over time provides more systematic information on conceptual change than merely focusing on change in the meaning of a certain word (Skinner 2002, 160–162; see also Palonen 1999, 46–47). These three aspects guided the analysis in publication II, where the speakers aimed to explain the attitudes related to “nationalist” as either neutral or positive, and broadened both the range of criteria and the range of reference in using the concept.

In the last two publications, I chose to employ qualitative content analysis to study the nationalist argumentation of the state leadership. In this material,



the aspect of power in nationalist argumentation was implicitly present as the president's speeches represent and express state power, and could be interpreted as hegemonic discourse. More specifically, publication III drew on the study of metaphors, whereas publication IV analysed key narratives about the nation in the speeches. Publication III maps Russia's internal, external and historical "Others" in presidential keynote speeches during the years 2000–2020. In practice, the material was read in two phases: first, the parts where the national "us" was mirrored against "them" were detected, and any particular metaphors and concepts related to these were highlighted. For example, the metaphor of world order or international relations as *competition*, or the *strength* of the nation or state, reoccurred in the presidential discourse. After collecting these metaphors (or "meaning units" as they are sometimes referred to in coding qualitative material), they were analysed from a temporal perspective: Which implicative elements did the metaphors stress at different times, and how did they evolve over time? In this way, certain continuities could be distilled from the material, such as the enduring economic, political and even "moral" competition between Russia and its Others.

Publication IV benefitted from the study of political narratives by organising the state leadership's discourse on "Russianness" into three key narratives. In this case, too, the material was first scrutinised for references to the Russian nation (*russkii / rossiiskii narod / natsiya*), to "us" as a nation, or to "our" national character. Thereafter, the mentions were categorised thematically, in that the temporal and possible causal aspects of defining the nation were studied. For example, if a certain national characteristic was connected to a past event or chain of events, these were elaborated on. As a result of the analysis, three distinctive narratives could be presented that persist over time and that appear to be mutually reinforcing. These were not the only possible narratives about the nation during the period studied, but I would maintain that they capture the essence of the nationalist argumentation of the Russian state leadership in 2012–2019.

There are numerous ways to study conceptual change in practice, but for the purposes of these publications, selecting the relevant material has been crucial. The close reading phases that followed for each publication all highlighted different perspectives. Next, I will briefly return to two methodological approaches, namely analysing the implicative systems of certain metaphors and organising key concepts within certain narratives, and situating these in a temporal context.

## **Metaphors**

This dissertation views the nation as being the result of a deliberate process of constructing. Moreover, in the publications that focus on political language, I



contend that “[n]ationalist ideologies strive to gain acceptance as ‘common sense’ in their chosen territory by operating a successful articulation of concepts” (Fairclough, cited in Sutherland 2005, 195). As has been described above, this process takes place in language, and often benefits from figurative language, conceptual innovations, or persistent, “naturalised” forms of expression. Elaborating on his theory of banal nationalism, Michael Billig stressed the everyday practices with which nationalism is produced and maintained in society. One of the “unnoticed” linguistic patterns, particularly common in political and media discourses, is the habit of describing the nation as “us”. The national stereotypes reinforced in this way stress both the temporal aspect of the nation, and its indivisibility: “we” have our own particular national history, and “we” form a unified entity in the world of many other similarly particular nations (Billig 1995, 70–73). The stereotyping force of the nation as “us” metaphor appears to a certain extent in all of the publications comprising this dissertation, and especially in publications III and IV, which focus on presidential speeches.

Speaking of a nation as “us” is a widespread, universal metaphor of political language. Some more specific metaphors of political language may, in a similar way, invoke a feeling of unity among the nation. For example, what “we” are like, or what “our” position is in the world are often described in figurative language. In the realm of international relations, one of the persistent metaphors is to portray states (or nations) as persons, as Paul Chilton and George Lakoff (1995, 39) have explained – and, unsurprisingly so, as “organisations of all kinds tend to be personified”, with states being among the most powerful political organisations. Portraying the state as a person enables translating common sense concepts such as the health and strength of a person into the virtues of a state, such as national wealth and military force (ibid., 43). In a similar way, the nation can also be addressed with metaphors like family or house, but the “anthropomorphic” use, or the Nation-As-Person metaphor, seems particularly commonplace. All of these metaphors form strong rhetorical tools for justifying political aims as well as “naturalising” national frames of thinking.

Rieke Schäfer (2012, 29) has noted that the conceptual history approach could be fruitfully combined with metaphor theory, as figurative language often plays a significant role in conceptual change. She points out that the analytical focus on figurative language, such as metaphors, could help conceptual history overcome its “blind spots”: that of concepts being present even when the exact words would not be used; and that of new interpretations of conceptual relations. To do this, as she suggests, the uses of a certain metaphor could be historically contextualised, after which the “thought-guiding” force of that specific metaphor can be studied more effectively. In this way, the increasing or decreasing force of a metaphor helps in explaining conceptual change.

In Schäfer's study, a metaphor is understood as "an analogy in thought": a metaphorical utterance connects two concepts from different semantic systems, and thus creates meaning. Following Max Black, Schäfer refers to the non-conventionally used concept as *focus*, and the implicative complex of the metaphor as *frame*. If the metaphor is impossible to express equally in a literal paraphrase, it can be understood as a "strong" metaphor (ibid., 32). Publication III analyses the evolution of Russia's "Others" in the years 2000–2020 through, for example, the metaphor of international relations as a competition. In this case, competition is the focus, and international relations form the frame of the metaphor. Yet competition as a metaphor for international relations is no longer "non-conventional" in the sense that Schäfer depicts, as it has become a conventional way of perceiving world politics, but the concept has a strongly metaphorical connotation when it is used by political actors for positioning: they depict "Others" as being "ahead", and may reinforce the idea that only one actor may "win". In this case, competition is the focus, and international relations are the frame of the metaphor. The analysis shows how the Russian presidential addresses apply the metaphor in the early 2000s mainly as having an economic character: the competition between states in the world is a struggle over global markets and resources.

## **Narratives**

Like metaphors, narratives are universal and commonplace ways to enrich political discourse on the one hand, and to reach a "commonsensical" hegemonic position, on the other. Shaul R. Shenhav (2006, 250) explains that the general public regard the narrative form as a natural way of thinking. As an analytical concept, a narrative has many layers depending on its field of application, be it literary theory, sociology or social science. As Anna De Fina (2017, 234) points out, there is no consensus among linguists "on the criteria that distinguish narratives from other discourse genres". A narrative does not equal a "story", even though the two concepts are often used interchangeably. Rather, a story should be reserved for a prototypical narrative whereas the narrative, then, would signify a genre that comprises different types of stories.

In defining what actually constitutes a narrative, the emphasis varies between causality, chronology and temporality as key categories. Edwin Bacon (2012, 768) states that "[w]hile scholars debate the relevance and rigour of narrative explanations, political actors employ them habitually in communicating with the public", and points out that "a good story" provides a powerful way of touching the populace, which is why political actors often rely on the narrative form in their parlance. Following these notions, I have mapped key narratives about the nation in the discourse of the Russian political leadership in 2012–2019, and have presented them in publication IV.

In this respect, a minimum definition of sorts was applied, namely that a narrative is understood as a socially produced account of events that contains aspects of temporality and causality (De Fina 2017, 234).

Jorma Kalela has pointed out that “history-making” is a social process, involving various actors within a society or a community that together produce “shared histories”. The groundwork for these understandings of the past is created “outside university rooms and libraries”; the shared histories are formed through popular representations, various stories, and folklore – scholars have only a very limited role in influencing the interpretations of the past that exist in society (Kalela 2012, 75). It is in this context of various shared histories that politicians and political leaders produce their narratives – and often aim to connect these to the widely held, existing perceptions. Bacon’s (2012) understanding of public political narratives as stories of the shared past told to the people in the present, usually to further certain political ends, can thus be situated as forming one part of Kalela’s conceptualisation of shared history. Following these lines of argumentation, the aim of publication IV has been to detect key events, causalities and continua of the past that the state leadership wishes to emphasise when reinforcing their nationalist argument.

Selective use of the past in political discourse is a common practice, but in choosing to focus on “narratives” instead of, for example, “topics”, I wish to stress how the president’s discourse draws on the long history of the nation and connects the development of the nation’s explicit character to previous phases of challenge, conflict and pride in its past. For example, in the presidential discourse after 2015, parallels between past generations and the nation in the present were drawn repeatedly: the president likened the Red Army metaphorically to the Russian military, operating in Syria at the time, or to the Victory Day commemorations in Red Square. In these processes, “narrating” the nation is seen as a means by which the state leadership can enhance national unity and produce boundaries of belonging in space and over time that, eventually, become “common sense”.

It is methodologically challenging, to say the least, to study whether the narratives produced by the state leadership are genuinely or intuitively embraced by the people, and hence that question remains to be examined elsewhere. In this sense, the actual “reception” of key narratives by the population falls beyond the scope of the publication. However, at the same time, the discourse of the political leadership *includes* the reception by the audience in its formation. The president’s speeches are socially produced, and the way in which the narratives of the nation are told reflects the views that the state power assumes that the general public holds.

Bacon suggests that by analysing public political narratives, some predictions about future trends could also be made, although I have not fully endorsed this view in the publication. I have, however, embraced his vision of “subplots”:

*Subplots sit within the narrative; they are not alternative stories told by those opposed to the regime, but are told by the regime itself. [...] a successful public political narrative contains plot and subplot, providing the developmental flexibility essential to its usefulness and longevity. (Bacon 2012, 780)*

For example, in the presidential discourse, multinationality as a historical feature of the Russian nation is frequently emphasised: “Russianness” is presented as inherently multi-ethnic, but ethnic Russians have a special – that is, more important – role within the national constellation. Therefore, the decisive role of ethnic Russians in the shared history of the nation functions as a subplot within the narrative of the multinational nation. The political force of this subplot increased after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 when distinctively ethnic vocabulary was applied concurrently with references to the multinationality of the Russian nation.

### **4.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE CHOSEN METHODOLOGY**

In all of the research publications, the aim was to maintain a certain sensitivity towards detecting recurrent words and utterances in the textual material. The material chosen for each publication was concise enough to be processed manually, and hence no statistics were produced or meaning units quantitatively grouped. For this reason, I have not been able to show in concrete terms whether some expressions in the material became explicitly more or less frequent during the research period (which could have been done in publications III and IV, for example). However, in the reading phases of the material, I believe the context of any utterance has a critical significance in this sense; it is not only the frequency but also the ways in which certain concepts are used that matters when analysing conceptual change.

The amount of textual material in each publication is not extensive, which is why I was able to conduct the reading phases myself instead of relying on any digitally assisted method. Thus, the method could be described as a “close reading” of the texts instead of digitally assisted “distant reading”. The latter, intended to be used with large-scale textual material, such as corpora and other “big data”, may prove useful because “it allows us to see things that we don’t necessarily see when reading as humans” (Froehlich 2015). For instance, digital methodologies help in mapping patterns of grammatical use and in detecting statistically likely or unlikely phrases. In an ideal case, “close reading” could be complemented with “distant reading”, but software-assisted methods are not “ready-to-use”, and often do not suffice by themselves. Rather, they yield the best results when applied after a qualitative “close-reading” research phase (e.g. Indukaev 2021).

In the publications that make up this dissertation, the reading phases could also be described as “distant” and “close”, starting from the first reading to familiarise myself with the material and organise it in a preliminary way, and proceeding to the reading phases that categorise and analyse the texts in a more detailed manner. Therefore, the “manual” methodology of interpretation is no less rigorous, but approaches the texts differently. The publications in this dissertation each address an original research question, based on their source material, but several possibly fruitful topics for digitally assisted “distant reading” could be proposed based on their results.

As mentioned in publication II, the meanings and values attached to the concept of nationalism seem to be in flux in contemporary Russia. Between the years 2009 and 2015, the proportion of respondents who treated the term “nationalism” in a positive way increased considerably (Pipiya 2015). One way to map the attitudes linked to the concept in the Russian language would be to make a big data collection and then search for linguistic patterns that surround the concept, for example with topic modelling tools. (Some of these could be used, for instance, to ascertain which words appear in texts most often alongside each other by listing, for example, five words that appear before and after the key concept in the text, and then showing the most common ones.) In other words, mapping the words that appeared in texts along with the concept of nationalism most often during the past decade could produce interesting results on conceptual change and help in analysing whether the immediate linguistic contexts in which the concept is most often applied have changed. Ideally, this could aid understanding of why the attitudes towards nationalism as a concept have eased over time. Could the change in contexts, for example, indicate movement away from ethnic, xenophobic or even racist connotations – and perhaps towards contexts linked more directly to state nationalism, national pride, or patriotism?

During the review process for some of the publications, the “manual” method of coding was discussed, which I would interpret as signalling an increasing interest and confidence in computer-assisted corpus analysis, and perhaps digital methodologies in social science research in general. However, the software used for qualitative analysis functions along the same lines as the “manual” process of interpretation: the researcher determines the categories that they wish to identify in the material, selects the meaningful coding units, and interprets the results. Consequently, using digital methods does not solve the problem of subjectivity. In order to draw plausible conclusions, the researcher needs to be familiar with the logic of processing the data in any case. Therefore, I do not see the lack of digitally assisted methodologies as a problem in this dissertation, even though I do recognize the possible benefits they could have provided.

Another, perhaps more significant point of consideration is that I have conducted the whole analysis on my own. Often in qualitative research, it is

regarded as an asset if more than one researcher is involved in coding the material because this is thought to ensure that several possible readings are covered in the process (e.g. Schreier 2012, 19). There are certainly benefits in sharing the responsibility with another researcher, discussing the material, and posing further questions for each other. While not being able to benefit from discussing the interpretations I have drawn with someone else, I can now be relatively certain that my analytical methods have remained consistent throughout the process. This is not to say that subjectivity can be avoided. On the contrary, I believe that acknowledging that a researcher's interpretation is always subjective should be seen as a starting point for the analysis and not as a hindrance to it.

## 5 HISTORICAL ELEMENTS OF THE NATIONALIST ARGUMENT

When situating the fluctuations of the nationalist discourses in Russia in a temporal context, certain continuities and changes in Russian and Soviet history begin to take shape. Political language is always layered, and the contents of the nationalist argument in the present are built upon its previous understandings in space and time. In this chapter, I will consider those historical elements of the nationalist argument that appeared significant when working with the material collected for the publications. In this sense, the approach is inevitably selective, focusing on aspects of the *longue durée* of Russian history that seem particularly crucial in understanding the nationalist argumentation today.

Nationalism, in general, is a phenomenon that utilizes representations of the past. The explicit character of any nation vis-à-vis other nations is best explained with its distinctive history. In this dissertation, the significance of the “shared past” is revealed at several levels: first, the past events *in themselves* are important as they have created the circumstances we live in today. In addition to the actual events, the languages of the past have an influence on the languages of the present. Second, the *use* (and abuse) of the past plays an increasingly important role in public speech and politics in the contemporary world. The ways to frame, highlight and connect past events to each other indicate the values and thinking in the present.

Third, not only certain events in the past but the *perception of history itself* is embedded in the nationalist argument. In this deeper, essentialist understanding of the nature of history, the nationalist argument makes the case that the nation realises a historical “mission” in the world. The state authorities, for example, produce language that positions the Russian state (and the Russian nation) above the various chains of historical events: it is in the *nature* of the state (and nation) that it prevails throughout the centuries. Michael Freeden (2005, 220) depicts the view of historical time as “organic” and accumulative, as being primarily a feature of those nationalist morphologies that exist and develop within conservative host ideologies.

Politicians often use rhetoric that seeks validation from history, and Russia is no exception in this sense. Particularly in the 2010s, the political leadership invested significant material and symbolic resources in promoting its version of the national past. In her analysis of the political uses of the Great Patriotic War, Olga Malinova (2017, 46–47) conceptualises the official politics of history with the term “usable past”. In present-day Russia, the state has taken



the leading role in constructing the official narratives of the national history, and the ruling elite also sees this as their political responsibility.

In the 2000s and 2010s in particular, the importance of a “usable past” has been reflected in several projects of the state authorities, aimed at “guarding” the correct interpretations of the past: patriotic education programmes employ certain narratives of the national past, projects to unify history education in schools have taken place since around 2009, patriotic historical tourism is enhanced across the country, and Victory Day celebrations have become increasingly important for the state in the 2010s.<sup>15</sup> Expressing “disrespectful” views about the national history has become criminalized, as the “rehabilitation of Nazism” was included in the 2014 set of new media and extremism legislation (the so-called Yarovaya law package).<sup>16</sup> In the context of repressive measures of an authoritarian state, it is perhaps worth noting that this legislation is not merely a deterrent but has been applied in practice (see e.g. Strugov 2016). Moreover, the constitutional amendments that came into force in July 2020 state that the Russian Federation, “united by the thousand-year history”, protects the historical truth. The new constitution also notes that downplaying the significance of “the heroic deed of the people in defending the Fatherland” is not allowed (Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020, chapter 3, article 67.1, parts 2–3).

In the official discourse, the post-Soviet narrative of Russian history as “thousand-year-long” is affirmed by referring to earlier history. These cases underline how Russia’s agency and mission prevail over the course of history: the nation and the state are portrayed as existing in the world for centuries, and duly remaining above and beyond the events that take place. For example, in 2005, the Day of National Unity was introduced as a new public holiday, taking the historical context from the Muscovite resistance against the Polish-Lithuanian invasion in 1612 (see more on this in publication III). In the context of the Crimean annexation, Vladimir Putin highlighted Prince Vladimir’s Christian baptism, which took place on the peninsula in the year 988 (kremlin.ru 2014b). The symbolic might of the event – and the Kyivan Rus’ history as a whole – for contemporary Russia was further stressed in 2016 when a statue to the same Prince Vladimir was unveiled outside the Kremlin in the heart of Moscow (Plokhyy 2017, vii–viii). Publication IV argues that the parallels between past and present conflicts have been asserted in the

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<sup>15</sup> As recent examples of state-backed history projects, military “amusement parks”, called Park Patriot, and new history museums called Russia – My History could be mentioned (Kurilla et al. 2018). Ekaterina Klimenko (2020) points out that the latter initiative was originally developed within the Russian Orthodox Church and serves to portray the “official” vision of Russian history.

<sup>16</sup> In November 2020, Deputy Chair of the State Duma, Irina Yarovaya, suggested expanding the current legislation to criminalise spreading false information about the Soviet history (*Kommersant* 2020).

presidential discourse in recent years. The rhetorical choices highlight Russians living today as a link in the long chain of generations of the victorious nation, stressing the moral aspect of the conflicts in the present and the responsibility of today's Russians to remember and respect their past.

Clearly, interpretations of the national past have become crucial for the state leadership in enhancing national pride and securing national unity within the country, but the way historical elements are understood also influences Russian foreign policy discourse. Most evidently, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was and continues to be portrayed as correcting a mistake of the past (kremlin.ru 2014b; see also Teper 2016, 383–384). In June 2020, President Vladimir Putin published an essay depicting his vision of world history. Repeating his view that history is under threat of falsification, Putin concluded by stressing the role of the five great powers in managing the contemporary challenges:

*There can be no doubt that the summit of Russia, China, France, the United States, and the UK will play an important role in finding common answers to modern challenges and threats, and will demonstrate a common commitment to the spirit of alliance, to those high humanist ideals and values for which our fathers and grandfathers fought shoulder to shoulder. (Putin 2020, 44)*

In Putin's foreign policy vision, the great powers should take the lead in uncertain times, just as they did in Tehran, Yalta, San Francisco and Potsdam in 1943–1945, and agree upon future world policy developments among themselves. The text positions Russia among the leading powers in the world, which reflects the analysis presented in publication III: Russia's strengths in the present-day international competition are portrayed as its moral and military might. The emphasis on the outcome of the Second World War – and the Soviet Union's indisputably decisive role in that outcome – serves a political goal in Putin's representation, and the essay to defend an "objective" understanding of history needs to be read primarily as an act of foreign policy.

Among the Russian people, history has been a significant source of national pride in recent decades. Marharyta Fabrykant and Vladimir Magun (2019, 33) show that the Russians' overall national pride grew substantially in 1996–2015, and particularly rapidly between the years 2012 and 2014. Growth in national pride has been selective, but the data shows that pride in history has remained relatively high throughout the study period.

With the state authorities' increasing eagerness to "guard" the interpretations of the national past, there is no room for critical public discussion on these topics in society. Serious scholarly debates on history are confined to small academic circles. Yet this is not to say that the official

discourse of the national past would always be embraced by the general (educated) public.

In the following, I map the historical elements of the nationalist argumentation by showing, on the one hand, how the past becomes manifested in the present-day actors' language and, on the other hand, which events, shifts or figures in history I as a researcher interpret as crucial in shaping the course of nationalism in Russia.

## **5.1 THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE: NATIONALISM “EMERGING”**

Historical writing often organises the past into periods, defining the beginning, phases, and ending of certain phenomena. The same applies to nationalism in Russia. The “birth” of nationalism is impossible to detect, but a comparative view of scholars' interpretations is nevertheless illuminating: depicting the periods in which nationalism has evolved in Russia also reveals the various contexts of nationalism. Emil Pain, for example, begins his account of nationalism from the “long nineteenth century”, from 1790 until 1917. In the first phase of that period, from around 1790 until 1833, the idea of “nation” emerged in the context of “popular sovereignty, political representation and constitutional order” – mostly propagated by the Decembrists, demanding reforms of the tsarist autocracy. In these interpretations of history, nationalism “begins” when the idea of the nation as a political subject emerges in the context of its relationship to the state. From this point of view, Decembrists are sometimes depicted as Russia's “first representatives of nationalist ideology” (Pain 2018, 23–24). However, nationalism is often understood as really taking root in Russia only in the debates that followed the crushing of the Decembrist revolt in 1825: namely, the conservative response of Nicholas I's government.

As mentioned in subchapter 2.2, the “official nationality”<sup>17</sup> doctrine rested upon the triad of “orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality”, formulated by Minister of Education Sergei Uvarov in 1832. The true conceptual innovation was embedded in “nationality”, meaning Russian people's traditional and organic devotion to the first two core ideas. Alexei Miller (2014, 321) explains that the word *narodnost* “was now used to create a cognitive gap with the concept of Nation – which was inseparably linked to the idea of political representation – and constitution”. With this move, the regime portrayed constitutionalism per se as unsuitable for Russia.

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<sup>17</sup> The policy sometimes appears in scholarly work under the name “official nationalism”.

The Decembrists, the officials of the Russian army who had familiarised themselves with liberal Western thought during the Napoleonic Wars, posed a domestic challenge to the Nicholas I regime, but at the same time, the developments within and around the Russian empire – the 1830–31 revolutions in Europe as well as the November Uprising in Poland – required new approaches from the government. As Serhii Plokhyy (2017, 72) puts it, it was indeed the “failure to resolve the Polish question by the traditional expedient of assimilating the elites of the conquered territories” that made the Russian political elite re-examine its own identity in the 1830s. Alexander Yanov (1987, 30; see also the Appendix) has outlined Russian and Soviet history as a cycle of reformist attempts and counter-reformist responses following each other, where Nicholas I’s reign from 1825 to 1855 should be read as one of the counter-reformist dictatorships. Yanov described the mechanism of official nationality as “craftily constructed”:

*The trio of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality artfully interwove despotism with religion, reaction with patriotism, and serfdom with a sense of nationality. In rising up against despotism, one risked striking a blow against patriotism, and in rising up against reaction, one risked challenging religion. It was a resourceful construct, an ideological trap of enormous potency. (Yanov 1987, 31)*

It was in these circumstances that the early Slavophiles began to develop their views on the “Russian idea”, strongly influenced by German Romanticism. In Yanov’s (1987, 31) interpretation, the Slavophiles aimed at the secularisation of power by challenging the official nationality doctrine, but as Susanna Rabow-Edling (2006, 17) notes, anti-imperialism by no means dominated the ideas of the nationalists at the time. She argues that the emergence of Slavophile thought resulted from the Russian educated elite’s multifaceted crisis of identity. The educated elite’s hopes for reform were shattered after the Decembrist revolt, and as Nicholas I reacted to the challenge by excluding the gentry from participation in government, the country’s cultural elite became even more separated from official society. The key discrepancy was that the “‘educated society’ was westernized, while their country was not” (ibid., 27) and the emphasis on the Russian people and distinctive culture arose from this notion (ibid., 25–27; 135). Even though the early Slavophiles failed to change the political reality of the empire, their ideas were adopted and further developed by representatives of subsequent ideological currents.

After the death of Nicholas I, the debates between the Slavophiles and “Westerners” (*zapadniki*, from the Russian word *Zapad*, West) intensified, and especially from the 1880s onwards, both currents grew more radical in their views (Rabow-Edling 2006, 137–138). Russia’s relationship to Europe remained at the heart of their disagreement. While the early Slavophiles

sought ways to overcome the idea of “imitating” the West with their original, distinctive Russian culture, the later developers of the philosophy portrayed the Russian national character more directly as opposing the “Western” one, providing intellectual grounds for future forms of Russian nationalism.<sup>18</sup>

Marlene Laruelle (2016b) notes that in everyday parlance, the idea of the West often overlaps with Europe, but acknowledging the distance between those concepts aids understanding of Russian identity debates. Even the late nineteenth-century Slavophiles perceived Russia as a part of Europe, but they saw the Western model of Enlightenment as having taken the wrong direction. The Enlightenment based on Western rationalism lacked the connection to the moral condition of man, whereas the Russian alternative (in Slavophile terms, *prosveshchenie*) would have “both a spiritual and national character” (Rabow-Edling 2006, 87). The true, pure Christianity was preserved within the Russian Orthodox Church – a discourse that coincides with the idea of Russia representing “the third Rome” after the fall of Byzantium.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the dichotomy between the spiritual Russia and the rationalist (or materialist) West has served various functions in Russian intellectual history.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, certain representatives of the artistic, non-conformist and Orientalist intellectual circles, and more explicitly their successors within the Eurasian movement in the interwar period, argued that Russia actually forms its own civilisation, not belonging to either Europe or Asia. Marlene Laruelle suggests that since these ideological currents emerged, Russia’s place in the world has been debated in trinary, not binary terms:

*In the Russian view, there is a triple choice of identity: being a European country that follows the Western path of development; being a European country that follows a non-Western path of development; or being a non-European country. (Laruelle 2016b, 278)*

Laruelle (2016b, 279) further argues that in the wake of the conservative turn in the 2000s, the Kremlin chose to pursue an “anti-Western European civilisation” narrative – an “almost-perfect reproduction of the nineteenth-century debate in today’s terms”. The late Slavophiles’ juxtaposition between the West and Russia and their ideas on Russia’s “special path” of development have been revisited implicitly and explicitly in the post-Soviet political discourse. For example, as publication III notes, in Vladimir Putin’s parlance concerning Russia’s Others after the mid-2000s, the West continues to be portrayed as exemplary, but Russia must strive for modernisation by following

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<sup>18</sup> Emil Pain (2018, 26) summarises the late Slavophiles’ view of the Russian national character as “patient, spontaneous, warm, generous and inclined to *sobornost*’ (a preference for collectivism)”, mirrored against a generic view of the Western mentality as “self-interested, greedy, deceitful and coldly calculating”.

<sup>19</sup> On the myth and its post-Soviet application, see Østbø 2016.

its own path. In this way, ideas originally shaped by the early Slavophiles and the architects of the official nationality policy have been revisited in the present, particularly in order to rhetorically reinforce the continuum of Russia's distinctiveness vis-à-vis the West.

The official nationality policy and the emergence of Slavophile thought in the 1830s marked one possible "beginning" of the history of nationalism in Russia. Analysing the development of state nationalism in the pre-revolutionary Russian and Soviet empires, periodisation can also be arranged in terms of the relations between national minorities and the state. Theodore R. Weeks (2013, 200) maps "separatist nationalism" in Russia along these lines, noting, however, that "in the Russian Empire, religion was a much more important element of identity than 'nationality', a term that most subjects would not have understood". Religious practices (instead of spoken languages) were significant markers for the peasantry, not least because the level of literacy remained below 50% until the end of the imperial era.

Even if the aim of the government was not to "de-nationalise" non-Russian peoples, it did adopt policies to reinforce political centralisation and the use of Russian as the single official language in the empire. These policies intensified after the failed Polish insurrection in 1863 and are often considered the first phase of "Russification" (Weeks 2013, 200–201). It is worth noting that despite the various government measures in relation to different nations (for example, Poles faced strict Russification measures at the time but Finns did not), the view on nationality *in general* developed: it began to mark a category that existed naturally in the world and within the empire. Emil Pain describes the period from 1863 until 1890 as the "advent of ethnic Russian nationalism", when the idea of nationalities developed into a more political one. At the turn of the century, the view of ethnic groups' (*narodnost'*) potential transformation towards political nations (*natsiya*) started to gain ground. From this perspective, ethnic Russians were the "state-forming nation" (*gosudarstvobrazuyushchaya natsiya*), entitled to a privileged status vis-à-vis other nations (Miller 2012, 48). Around the same time, "the national question" had already become a political keyword, referring mainly to (ethnic) separatism at that time (Pain 2018, 25).

The empire's repressive nationality policies were one trigger in creating the conditions for the revolution in 1905 (Plokhly 2017, 160). Nicholas II's government made significant concessions in the October manifesto, which for the first time introduced limitations to the tsar's power in favour of the people, although it did not fully settle the questions that had led to the revolution. Therefore, the event is sometimes depicted as a prologue to the 1917 October revolution. The national question was superseded in the government's interests only by the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914, but it soon became evident that both the governments and national movements aimed to advance their goals in the war – and later the Russian Civil War

(Weeks 2013, 202–204). Many national movements saw their chance to seek stronger autonomy or even independence from the Russian empire.

The contemporary political leadership in Russia treats the historical narrative of Russia's revolutions with caution. This became particularly clear during 2017, the year of the centennial commemoration of the October Revolution. The commemoration of "the Russian Revolution of 1917" (*Rossiiskaya revolyutsiya 1917 goda*) – the name merging the two revolutions in February and in October that has recently gained popularity – proved challenging for the state authorities because it also raised the question of the current stance towards Soviet history in general, requiring commentary on the "founding myth" of the USSR (Malinova 2018). Publication IV finds that President Putin has compared demands for social change in the present to revolutionary sentiments in the past, making the point that nobody wants "too radical" changes. The key problem embedded in commemorating 1917 was, thus, on the one hand, that the shared memories could not be merged into one narrative: the state leadership could not encourage simultaneously celebrating the tsar and those who murdered him. On the other hand, condemning revolutionary behaviour in the present while celebrating a revolution in the past was simply not sustainable. In this sense, revolutions as such are not considered the "usable past" by the state leadership.

## **5.2 THE SOVIET UNION: "NATIONALISM" CONDEMNED**

The obvious break in all of the periodisations of Russian history was the end of the Romanov empire and the October Revolution. The political reality and language transformed fundamentally in and after 1917. According to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, *nationalism* did not (and could not) exist in the country because it was the converse of the *internationalism* that the whole Soviet Union was supposed to be built on. The contents of the desired form of internationalism fluctuated over the years, which affected the way in which "the nation" was perceived (see e.g. Pain 2018, 27). The balance between antithetical concepts remained up to the late Soviet years: internationalism and patriotism represented key values of the Communist doctrine, whereas nationalism and cosmopolitanism were denounced as bourgeois ideologies (Kettunen 2018, 349). These dichotomies, as will be suggested in publication II, had a strong impact on the interpretations of nationalism as a concept in post-Soviet Russian language. By using the concept of nationalism as an analytical frame one may, however, point to several phenomena in the Soviet reality: the logic of managing ethnic relations within the new multiethnic state; (ethnic) Russian nationalism, emerging in the margins of society and in the dissident movement, especially since the 1960s; and the "nationality question" that again surfaced in the perestroika years and that contributed significantly



to the collapse of the Union in 1991. Next, I will briefly discuss these “nationalisms” in the Soviet Union and their connection to the nationalist argumentation in the present.

During the Civil War, the Bolsheviks had assured national minorities the right to self-determination, as a means of gaining their support in fighting the White Army. In the Bolshevik vision, after the eventual world revolution, everyone would live in “classless and nationless Communist republics of workers and peasants” (Scherbak 2015, 871). In practice, the actual policy adopted in the 1920s was something of a compromise between the Communist interpretation and the “greatest danger principle”, which saw great-power (or Great Russian) chauvinism as a more fundamental risk than local nationalism (Martin 2007, 7; Smith 2019, 976). The federal structure of the Soviet Union was decided in the autumn of 1922, and it guaranteed the national minorities some autonomy in the form of national republics and other federal subjects, thought to ensure the integrity of the Soviet Union in the future.

There was a clear difference between this version of the nationalities policy and the one it transformed into around the mid-1930s. Emil Pain (2018, 27–28) points out that Josif Stalin, like other Communists, initially supported Lenin’s nationality doctrine, but his views changed by the early 1930s. It was then that Stalin’s mistrust towards non-Russians started to deepen, and the decision to include a nationality category in passports in 1932 enabled the Soviet authorities to target members of “suspicious minorities” (Weeks 2013, 210). Including nationality in passports was a crucial move in institutionalising and codifying ethnicity, and it remained unchanged until the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Smith 2019, 977–978; Brubaker 1996, 30–31).<sup>20</sup>

Massive ethnic persecutions took place in the 1930s, and mass deportations followed in the 1940s. Towards the Second World War, Stalin’s emphasis on ethnic Russianness became undeniable. As Serhii Plokhyy (2017, 257) describes, Stalin had “abandoned the communist dreams of the 1920s about a victorious world revolution” and started to prepare for a defensive war both against Germany and Japan. In this process, non-Russian peoples had become “potential turncoats”, and the primary goal was to ensure the loyalty of Russians, the largest Soviet nationality. Andrey Shcherbak (2015, 872–873) calls the years between 1940 and 1955 the period of “great-power Russian nationalism”.

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<sup>20</sup> According to Jeremy Smith (2019, 978–979), the fact that the federal state structure or the ascription of nationality in passports went unchallenged after their adoption shows that these features had become an institutional setting rather than features of a coherent “policy”. After the early 1930s, the decisions on nationality issues were made in negotiations between the central authorities and the regional leaders, instead of being conducted as a part of a clear, periodically evolving programme.



The primacy of ethnic Russianness in the official discourse intensified during the war, and some non-Russian nationalities were portrayed as suspicious. Stalin's speech after the war on May 24, 1945, clearly demonstrated that the state leadership's attitude towards minority nationalities had changed in word and deed.<sup>21</sup> The wartime rhetoric paved the way for campaigns against "traitors" at the end of the 1940s and in the early 1950s when, for example, Soviet Jews were severely repressed as a part of Stalin's campaign against "cosmopolitanism". These persecutions only ended with Stalin's death in 1953 (Weeks 2013, 210; Pain 2018, 28–29).

During the thaw in the 1960s, the Russian *intelligentsiya* fostered the growth of nationalist sentiments in society. A crucial factor in this was Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation programme, which enabled debate on political matters, although the debate did not take place within the party system but in literary journals – a vital tradition in the pre-revolutionary era. The cultural elite were divided into two camps, those that campaigned for further de-Stalinisation, for example in the journal *Novyi mir*, and the conservatives who were critical of it, who formed around the journals *Molodaya gvardiya* and *Oktyabr*. Taken together, these circles created a new foundation for Russian nationalism upon which genuinely dissident views could also evolve (Brudny 2009, 32).

At the same time, a literary trend of "village prose" (*derevyannaya proza*) started to form. The way it romanticized "the provincial" could be seen in a wider, transnational context – the nostalgic imagery of a simple country life was strong in the modern-era literature elsewhere as well. In the Russian context, village prose had an underlying tone of (ethnic) Russian nationalism. During the 1970s, writers became the only "officially permitted and even encouraged" group of nationalistically minded Russian intellectuals as part of the state's co-optation strategy (Brudny 2009, 56; Plokhly 2017, 291–292). Some nationalist-religious groups were even allowed to organise, as the KGB was hoping to foment an internal battle between the liberal-minded and conservative forces in society that way (Pain 2018, 30). For these reasons, by the mid-1970s, nationalism as promoted by those dissident groups had become a significant societal force. Representatives of dissident nationalism – among them writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – drew on the Slavophile legacy in their search for "the Russian idea". Susanna Rabow-Edling (2006, 141–142) notes, however, that the village writers were anti-progressive in a way that the Slavophiles had never been: they rejected modernisation as such as a "non-Russian" phenomenon, something that would cause moral degeneration (see also Yanov 1987, 19).

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<sup>21</sup> In his toast honouring military officers, Stalin described the Russian people as "the leading force of our Soviet Union among all the peoples of our country", having merited that title "in this war and earlier" (address cited in Plokhly 2017, 274–275, and Weeks 2013, 211).

In the 1980s, the 1960s generation (*shestidesyatniki*) gained political power. Mikhail Gorbachev was a rather odd representative of this generation, bringing his educated but optimistic and Soviet-patriotic mindset to the Kremlin (Zubok 2009, 335–336). According to Weeks (2013), Gorbachev had no experience with nationality issues, having only worked as a party functionary in the Stavropol region, where he was born, and in Moscow, suggesting that this shortcoming led to mistakes from the beginning of his era as General Secretary.<sup>22</sup> Around 1985, Gorbachev introduced glasnost, the openness policy, calculating that it would ensure the success of the reform policies, as public criticism of the evident problems would hinder his opponents (Brown 2007, 92). With glasnost, the “national question”, still suppressed during the Brezhnev years, reappeared in the language of Soviet politics. Even if the roots of the conflict were much more complex (Smith 2019, 988–989), the violence that broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1987 was – and continues to be – interpreted as a grave example of the ethnic tensions within the Soviet Union that were now surfacing. At the same time, many Soviet republics started to seek and realise policy choices that were independent of the political core of the USSR. For example, by the end of 1989, several Soviet republics, starting with the Baltic states, had adopted laws that required all residents to learn the titular language (Weeks 2013, 215).

At the same time, political reform proceeded at a fast pace. In spring 1989, relatively free elections were held in the USSR for the first time since 1917. The creation of the Congress of People’s Deputies undermined the power of the Communist party and the political centre as a whole, which was a decisive step in the disintegration process. As Serhii Plokhyy (2017, 302) puts it, “all of a sudden, people everywhere began to feel that their polities were being mistreated by the government in Moscow.” The failed coup attempt in August 1991 finally demonstrated that the political reality had transformed in an irreversible way, and not in the way that Gorbachev had planned. On 1 December, an agreement signed by Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislau Shushkevich, the new Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian leaders, formally dissolved the Soviet Union.

Pål Kolstø (2000, 229–231) notes that from the very beginning of Soviet rule, an attempt to designate all nationalities a “home” territory persisted. Important exceptions to this rule notwithstanding – not all diasporas or small titular groups had their own ethnically-defined territory, and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was not a formal state of ethnic Russians – “the link between ethnicity and territoriality was both strong and institutionalised”. By the late 1980s, the political exploitation of territoriality

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<sup>22</sup> One such miscalculation was appointing an ethnic Russian as First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party in 1986, which led to violence in the region (Weeks 2013, 215).

had developed into a phase whereby it served as a weapon against either “alien” ethnic elements residing in the national territory or the “occupants”. In a similar vein, as Andrey Shcherbak (2015, 875) has argued, the political nationalism of the late 1980s was predicted by the cultural nationalism of the Soviet Union: broad cultural autonomy was originally guaranteed in order to compensate for the thin legitimacy of the supraethnic Soviet identity. Moreover, when that supranational identity ceased to exist, “the void was filled with particularistic, exclusive ethnic identities”. Yet both the territorial vision of nationalities policies as well as the support of cultural nationalism through institutions were of an earlier origin than the Gorbachev years.

Nationalism did not “destroy” the Soviet Union, as Theodore Weeks (2013, 215–217) points out. Instead, it happened due to the systemic weakness that became evident in the context of intensifying international competition. The profound shift of the late 1980s in understanding “us”, or “the nation”, in political and public discourse marked a break in the continuum. The strengthening of the “ethnic” understanding of the nation altered political realities in many regions of the Union (see e.g. Kolstø 2000, 231). In publication II, I propose that since it was indeed “the national question” (*natsional’nyi vopros*)<sup>23</sup> that had such a significant impact on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the meanings attached to the concept of nationalism in Russia today are inevitably linked to that process. Even though the Soviet Union was ethnically much more diverse than the Russian Federation,<sup>24</sup> fear of separatism and inter-ethnic tensions feature in contemporary policy-making, especially in the context of nationalities policy.

Until the fall of the Soviet Union, nationalism, as a word, was condemned because it represented a malign feature of bourgeois societies. Nevertheless, what can be categorised as nationalist ideas existed, developed and were contested also in the Soviet Union throughout its existence. Thus, late Soviet or post-Soviet nationalism(s) should not be understood as “new”, and they were not “born” when the ideological basis of the state began to erode – but, at that moment, the ideas connected to the nation had to be re-thought.

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<sup>23</sup> In this context, it is worth noting the widespread “return-of-the-repressed” view on post-communist nationalisms, which Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000, 25–26) have criticised for simplifying the Soviet regime’s approach to nationhood. They write: “Although *antinationalist*, and of course brutally repressive in all kinds of ways, the Soviet regime was anything but *anti-national*. Far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the regime went to unprecedented lengths in institutionalising and codifying it.”

<sup>24</sup> Often-quoted figures for the share of “ethnic Russians” in the Soviet Union and in the Russian Federation are around 50 and 80 per cent respectively, based on the census data from 1989 and 2010 (See e.g. Sakwa 1998, 245).

### 5.3 POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: NEW FRAMES FOR THE NATION

The fall of the Soviet Union remains a formative experience in the nationalist discourses and practices of the region. As Marlène Laruelle points out, while people had hoped for change, they had not wished for the Soviet state to disappear. In the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin's administration wanted to distance itself from the Soviet past by stressing Russia's future as developed, democratic and free. However, the early years of the new state were marred by ordeals: the economy deteriorated, crime increased, and the constitutional battle between the President and the parliament culminated in the autumn of 1993 when army tanks shelled the Russian White House in Moscow. The following year, the brutal war began in Chechnya. In 1998, the economic crisis peaked, with the rouble collapsing and poverty further increasing. Taken together, these failures of "democratic" Russia have had a long-lasting impact on Russia's domestic development (Laruelle 2009, 18), but they have also inevitably affected the way in which the past is being portrayed in the shared history. Serguei A. Oushakine (2009, 7) has described how the feeling of loss translated into ideas of national belonging, which did not emerge from events in one's private life, but the shared experience of "losing a Motherland". He argues that the "patriotism of despair" of the 1990s has provided the main support base for Russia's new, assertive national identity in the 2000s. Indeed, the trope of "the turbulent 1990s", especially in contrast to "the stable 2000s", has remained commonplace in public discourse (Malinova 2020) and, as shown in publication III, has frequently been exploited by the President.

Yeltsin's administration adopted a "civic" interpretation of the nation by consistently using the concept of *rossiyane* to describe the citizens of the Russian Federation regardless of their ethnicity. However, by the mid-1990s it was clear that this identity was not emotionally embraced by the people, and after his re-election as president in 1996, Yeltsin urged Russian society to search for a new "Russian national idea". The initiative proved problematic because promoting such ideas was not seen as the state's responsibility in the first place, and because evoking pride in a strong state was impossible when that state was clearly in a weak condition (Tolz 1998, 1008; 1010–1011). Thus, even if the state administration had rhetorically endorsed the "de-ethnicised" model of nation-building, it could not provide credible content for the new identity.

At the same time, the state narrative had to find its place among several alternative discourses on the nation. As early as the Brezhnev era, the radical conservative groups had begun to develop their ideas on distinctive Russianness which, according to them, needed to be protected from Western "cultural, ideological, or military" aggression by a strong state and a capable leader (Brudny 2009, 11–12). These groups were vocal opponents of

perestroika, and by 1991 many of the Orthodox-monarchist and neo-Stalinist groups had become politically active. In the early 1990s, the so-called “red-brown” coalition, bringing together religious monarchists and Communists, as well as other conservative-nationalist streams of thought such as the neo-Eurasian movement, started to gain strength as a counter-force to Yeltsin’s reforms in the 1990s, and especially after the economic crisis in 1998. Thomas Parland (2005, 2–3) argues that the traditionalist groups became “gradually overshadowed” by more radical and secular currents of “Westernized” nationalism that also catered for extreme forms of fascism, national socialism and rightist authoritarianism. In the early 2000s, the skinhead movement, the extra-parliamentary National Bolshevik party, and the Movement Against Illegal Immigration gained popularity, especially among the young generations (Laruelle 2009, 49–63).

When economic growth started to revive, the state leadership could again attempt to induce pride in serving and belonging to the Russian state, which proved more successful under Vladimir Putin than it had been under Yeltsin. In the 2000s, the state structures were centralized, symbolic measures were taken to emphasise national identity, and new policies such as introducing patriotic education programmes were adopted. Publication III shows the development of the state rhetoric since the early 2000s, noting that at the beginning of his rule, Putin used the experiences of the 1990s as a legitimising trope for the need for a strong state and “stability”. However, after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Russian state authorities became increasingly troubled by the “foreign influence” within Russia’s borders, potentially causing unrest in Russia. In the years that followed, the Kremlin began to increasingly emphasise the external threat to the sovereignty of Russia, which also began to appear in the presidential rhetoric concerning the competition between Russia and its Others (III, pp. 13–15). In particular, Vladislav Surkov, presidential advisor at the time, advanced his vision of “sovereign democracy”, which perceived the Western model of democratisation as unfit for Russia. Surkov’s initiatives strongly reflected the conservative tradition of the country, demanding any political change to be “organically” formed in compliance with the tradition of the nation. Around the same time, the state authorities sought to enhance the idea of distinctive “Russianness”, for example by establishing a new national holiday, the Day of National Unity, on 4 November.

To this day, it is not clear what kind of nation, exactly, is to be celebrated on this holiday. The state discourse adopted the expression ‘multinational Russian nation’ in 1993, but the policies were ambiguous at a practical level. Oxana Shevel has argued that since all of the alternative nation-building strategies at the Russian state’s disposal have been problematic, the

authorities employed the discourse on “compatriots”,<sup>25</sup> representatives of the national “us” living outside the borders of Russia proper, to “legalize the ambiguity” of the nation-building strategy. According to Shevel (2011, 199), this enabled the state authorities to postpone the resolving of nation-building strategies, and both the ambiguity as well as the emphasis on compatriots seem to be crucial aspects of Russia’s nationalities policy in the 2020s. In addition, it is perhaps emblematic that the Day of National Unity remains poorly recognized among Russians. Publication I analyses the claims and political position of the various radical nationalist groups, the only ones annually celebrating the new holiday by organising their “Russian marches” mainly in the suburbs of Moscow.

The scholarly analysis of contemporary Russia’s “conservative”, “authoritarian” or even “nationalist” turn<sup>26</sup> after 2012 brings to mind Aleksandr Yanov’s depiction of Russian intellectual history as a cyclical process of reformist attempts and counter-reformist responses. Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner (2020, 3) suggest that the change took place gradually between the years 2007 and 2012. In the foreign policy sphere, President Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 has been interpreted as a turning point in Russia’s alienation from the NATO-oriented West, and the tensions grew the following year with the Kosovo declaration of independence and the Georgian war. At the same time, domestic politics were re-defined: Suslov and Uzlaner argue that the manoeuvre to replace Putin with less known and less popular President Dmitri Medvedev demanded more ideological tone in securing domestic legitimacy. With the economic stagnation stemming from the global financial crisis, the new policy of “conservative modernisation” became a cornerstone for the ruling party after 2009. Moreover, the enthroning of Metropolitan Kirill as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2009 contributed to enhancing the conservative value basis in Russian society.

The implementation of conservative-authoritarian politics became most apparent after the winter of 2011–2012, when mass protests took place in Russia’s big cities. After the ceremonial announcement of Putin’s return to the presidential office in September 2011, fraud in the November 2011 Duma elections triggered demonstrations against the political leadership. The fragmented, liberal extra-parliamentary opposition seemed to have found common ground. First, the regime reacted with limited liberalisation of some democratic procedures, but many of the “slight openings” were again closed

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<sup>25</sup> The definition of “compatriot” has, in a similar way, been vague, but the idea of the Russian language as the common denominator is persistent (see e.g. Zamyatin 2018, 53–54).

<sup>26</sup> I would interpret all of these conceptualisations as referring to the same phenomenon, even though the emphasis may vary. For these examples, see Suslov & Uzlaner 2020; Feldmann & Mazepus 2018; Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2018, 7.



when Putin's third term as president began and the state authorities curbed possibilities for any political contention by introducing legislation to control the media and non-governmental organisations (Hale et al. 2019, 172–173). Publication IV demonstrates how, since 2012, traditional values as a unifying feature of the nation have become apparent in the presidential discourse: speaking in front of the Federal Assembly in December 2012, Putin lamented, hinting at the unrest, that the country was experiencing “an obvious deficit of spiritual bonds” (*yavnyi defitsit dukhovnykh skrep*) that had always made the country strong and powerful. The discourse on “spiritual-moral values” became a matter of national security (Østbø 2017; Strategy of national security 2015, articles 11 & 78), and in that respect, it soon acquired a foreign policy aspect. The traditional Russian values were not only distinguished from the liberal, “Western” ones, but they were also portrayed as being under threat globally. In this regard, Russia's role as a state to “defend” them became pronounced (see also publication III).

The consolidation of the conservative-authoritarian trend in politics, as well as the ambiguous nation-building strategies that combined distinctive Russianness, an external threat, and the emphasis on compatriots, all became manifested in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich had turned down the Association Agreement with the EU in November 2013, which caused considerable popular unrest in Kyiv – resulting in the ousting of Yanukovich – and made the Kremlin recalculate its policy towards Ukraine. After the festive closing ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympics, Russian soldiers arrived in Simferopol, and a “referendum” was held in March 2014 (Plokhly 2017, 336–337). The discourse on the Russian world (*Russkii mir*) was reproduced in Putin's justification for the move when he explained that there were “our people” living on the peninsula who needed to be protected (Teper 2016; see also Torbakov 2015). The annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine created new, internal divisions in the Russian debate on the nation. The official discourse celebrated the event, and opinion polls showed strong support for the annexation, but the annexation and the war in Ukraine shattered the mental image of Russians and Ukrainians as one people, still embraced by many (Plokhly 2017, 345).

The left-right or conservative-liberal axis often falls short in depicting the post-Soviet currents of nationalist thought. In addition to ideological differences, the movements have also been categorised according to the proximity to or distance from the formal power structures. For example, in her book published in 2009, Marlène Laruelle distinguished the thinking within the party of power, United Russia, from the populist versions of nationalism developed by the Liberal-Democratic Party and Communist party, which both represent the so-called “systemic opposition” of the State Duma. The extra-parliamentary movements can be divided along similar lines, as shown in publication I: the “dissentful” or oppositional nationalists promote policy



changes different from those voiced by “consentful” actors, who support the Kremlin’s line. The oppositional nationalist groups were still able to function in many ways during 2012–2013 – at the time, anti-migrant messages were even endorsed in state-aligned television (Hutchings & Tolz 2015) – but after the annexation of Crimea, they became both more dispersed and more controlled by the state.

In the 2010s, the boundaries between those representing “radical” nationalist views and those representing state power became more fluid. In her more recent typology, Laruelle (2019, 10) defined four main camps of contemporary nationalism(s) in Russia: official groups that function within the state apparatus; co-opted statist nationalists who support the regime but who might, nevertheless, express critical views; mid-opposition nationalists who enjoy some support from the state but cannot rely on it; and full opposition nationalists, who function openly and directly against the state. Yet the nationalist groups are hardly ever univocal, and diverse ideas about the nation, its characteristics, and its borders within a single collective also exist.

Describing contemporary Russia as “post-Soviet” encourages interpretations of “the Soviet” as bygone. Yet many Soviet characteristics are still present in Russian society – after all, the country was not built *from scratch* but *on ruins*, to put it metaphorically. In her book focusing on the remnants and new features of totalitarianism in Russia, Masha Gessen (2017, 2) writes that “perhaps the assumption that it [the Soviet regime] collapsed needed to be questioned”. The layers of the Soviet and imperial past are intrinsically present in the discourses of today even though the dramatic political discontinuities would cause one to think otherwise. Historical “ingredients” are sources of political claim-making and become manifested in shared histories of society, justifying – in both instances – the role and nature of the nation as a continuous and essential agent of history.

## 6 SUMMARIES OF THE PUBLICATIONS

The publications that make up this dissertation illuminate the nature of nationalist language in Russia during the 2000s and show how, and why, that language has changed during the past two decades. The research process has not followed a chronological or linear path; instead, the results obtained during the earlier research stages have inspired and motivated further questions. In this vein, the four publications have guided the work from one perspective to another.

Essentially, the publications offer four perspectives on the nationalist argumentation in Russia, analysing nationalism through the lens of political contention and a conceptual battle. In this battle, the boundaries of the nation are drawn by defining who “we” are, who are excluded as “Others”, and what it is exactly that “we” as a nation share. The state leadership seeks to maintain its power and position in the shared societal space of nationalist argumentation by controlling the challenge from oppositional radical nationalists, but also by reformulating its argument when needed, and these developments connect the nationalist argumentation to the question of state legitimacy. In the following, I will summarise the approach, material, and key arguments of each publication and explain how these publications contribute to the study of nationalism(s) in Russia.

### **Publication I: Contemporary Russian nationalisms: the state, nationalist movements, and the shared space in between**

Publication I approaches nationalism through the prism of various actors who use it as an argument, and who compete over the shared societal space. The primary material was collected from online sources, starting from January 2011 until December 2015, encapsulating the change in the field during and in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. During this time, I followed the blogs, webpages and social media content produced by the various nationalist movements organised around the annual Russian March event, as well as those actors that appeared during the timeframe to show support for the state. In order to trace the Kremlin’s measures vis-à-vis different forms of nationalist contention, the primary material was supplemented with news sources.

In this publication, nationalism is analysed in the context of political contention in a hybrid (or authoritarian) regime, and the theories on state mobilisation strategies have guided the analysis. In particular, the conceptualisation of dissentful and consentful forms of political contention by Ammon Cheskin and Luke March was applied in order to produce a more nuanced understanding of state co-optation. They suggest that research would benefit from acknowledging that political contention “can situate claim-

making along the axes of consensual and dissentful motivations, and compliant and contentious behaviours” (Cheskin and March 2015, 262).

The key differences in the language used by the “dissentful” nationalists and the state arise from their views on migration, race, and Russia’s “desired” borders. For the vocal radical nationalists, “Russianness” is a more restricted concept than that which the state rhetoric proposes. Their message is focused on resisting migration, in which they include people from the Caucasian republics, who are treated as “non-Russians” even though they are Russian citizens. The Russian March, the key event for dissentful nationalist groups, is advertised with openly racist messages. Some of the nationalists who advocate creating a “Russian nation-state” in their online messages also make claims related to democracy and national representation, which keeps them in opposition to the state authorities.

Publication I shows that whereas still in 2012–2013 the state strategy was to tolerate but monitor and manage the radical, dissentful nationalist movements, after 2014, they became directly controlled. The shift had to do with the Kremlin’s overall intention to diminish any political contention after 2011–2012, but the radical nationalists were still functional in the Kremlin’s strategy until late 2013. I argue that the radical (dissentful) nationalists played a certain role in the Kremlin’s strategy to build societal consensus upon xenophobic anti-migrant attitudes, but when this strategy partly fuelled the ethnically-motivated clashes around Moscow in late 2013, it was abandoned. However, as the dissentful nationalists encountered increasingly controlling measures after 2014, new, consensual actors appeared in the shared space. The publication suggests that these movements may prove more extreme than the Kremlin line they seem to support, and that there is no reason to assume that the consensual nationalists would decline ethnically motivated nationalist claims. These factors were mentioned as adding uncertainty to the “shared space” of nationalism in society in the future.

After the crisis in Ukraine began, the already heterogeneous field of nationalist movements grew even more splintered internally: some oppositional nationalists supported the Ukrainian uprisings, whereas other groups chanted for the Crimean annexation, and demanded even wider offensives in Ukraine and “Novorossiia” (a term that the state rhetoric never fully endorsed, but that inspired nationalist groups for years). Moreover, there was evidence of voluntary fighters from Russian nationalist groupings leaving for both sides of the war in Ukraine. The Russian March, the annual event gathering together various radical nationalist groups on November 4, split into several small events in 2015, which all had a very modest turnout around Moscow. Since then, this has continued to be the case: the nationalists

continue to celebrate the Day of National Unity in parallel events, each decreasing in size year after year.<sup>27</sup>

A few remarks on the “shared space” of nationalism could be added to the findings presented in the publication. Since 2015, some of the new “consentful” actors that emerged in the “shared space” between the radical nationalists and the state have remained active, but not all of them. For example, Anti-Maidan as a label has practically disappeared even though individuals and groups that formed a coalition under that name in 2015, such as the motorcycle club Night Wolves, continue to exist. The Rodina party won one seat in the State Duma elections in 2016 and endorsed Vladimir Putin instead of their own candidate in the presidential elections in 2018.

The National-Liberation Movement (*Natsional’no-osvoboditel’noe dvizhenie*, NOD) has continued its activities under the leadership of United Russia Duma Deputy Evgeny Fedorov. Deemed “rather insignificant” in 2015 by Sova Center analyst Natalia Yudina, NOD has hardly become more mainstream in the Russian media sphere since then. It boasts about regional offices and a variety of events, but these appear rather marginal. The organisation has shifted from using the slogan “*Rodina, svoboda, Putin*” (Motherland, freedom, Putin) to advocating direct anti-Americanism. Yet despite its small size, NOD may still have certain influence as a support organisation for the president within Russian nationalist circles. For example, the organisation has since 2016 campaigned for constitutional amendments that would “secure the sovereignty of the Russian state” by abolishing the statement in Russia’s jurisdiction respecting international agreements and norms (*Natsional’no-osvoboditel’noe dvizhenie*, 2020). Not suggesting that NOD would have had any direct impact on the constitutional change carried out in 2020, the amendments included a statement that decisions made by international organs are not implemented in Russia if they contradict the Russian constitution (*Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020*, article 79).

Another potential embedded in the “consentful” nationalist movements is that they maintain close connections with like-minded nationalist-conservative parties abroad and, in this way, market the international appeal of Russian nationalism. For example, the leader of the youth wing of the NOD, Maria Katasonova, has praised Marine Le Pen in social media and hosted her visit to Moscow in 2017 (de Haldevang 2017). The official discourse, not limited to the presidential rhetoric, stresses Russia’s traditional values as enjoying support worldwide (Patrushev 2020), so this aspect may be welcomed by the state authorities.

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<sup>27</sup> According to Sova Center monitoring, the turnout for events organised in Moscow in 2019 was at a record low. In 2020, none of the Russian Marches of the nationalist groups obtained permission from the authorities because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Sova 2019 & 2020).

Publication I concludes that the Kremlin's attempt to dominate the shared space of nationalist argumentation in Russia is risky for at least two reasons: first, the xenophobic attitudes that had eased since 2013 could become more popular again in the future, and second, the "consentful" nationalist actors could, given time, adopt a more extreme line of activities and ideas than the state leadership would hope for. These themes will be discussed from a broader perspective in the next chapter.

### **Publication II: "Biggest nationalist in the country": Self-descriptive uses of "nationalist" in contemporary Russia**

Publication I demonstrated aspects of the conceptual and political battle over nationalism between those using state power and those challenging it. The study found that the president himself had declared himself a "nationalist", extending the conventional uses of the concept, which was interpreted in the publication as a way to further disarm the dissentful, oppositional nationalist actors. However, the case raised further questions on the uses of nationalism and nationalist in contemporary Russian political discourses. These questions are addressed in publication II.

While it remains debatable whether nationalism should be categorised as an ideology – or more precisely, what kind of ideology it represents (Freeden 2005, 207), the significance of nationalism as a political idea and label is unquestionable. The puzzle presented in publication II stems from two contradictory notions: that the self-descriptive use is rarely connected to nationalism (Koselleck 2006, 235–237), and yet, there are cases in contemporary politics (not only in Russia) where self-descriptive uses have indeed been a way to re-define the content and position of nationalism. Following Jani Marjanen and Jussi Kurunmäki, the publication treats isms as multi-layered, temporal and contested concepts that have significant rhetorical potential. They are often framed in political debates in a way that presents complex ideas as one simple whole. Marjanen and Kurunmäki call for attention to be paid to the "wrong" uses of isms because they enlighten the rhetorical possibilities embedded in them. Moreover, referring to invective isms, they suggest that:

*[t]he processes in which certain groups have chosen to make particular isms self-descriptions of their intellectual or political position or have ceased to protest the label imposed on them should be regarded as key instances in which ideological formations are renegotiated. (Marjanen & Kurunmäki 2018, 273)*

In this way, publication II suggests that an "instance of renegotiation" of nationalism is currently happening in present-day Russia.

The primary material consists of 54 central and regional newspaper articles collected from the Russian-language database Integrum between January 2008 and December 2018. The analysis of the texts confirmed that “nationalist” is a concept that carries a negative connotation, even stigma, that the speakers “explained away” in various ways. Those labelling themselves as nationalists created distance between themselves and the negative connotations in various ways, adding positive values to the concept in the form of epithets, describing their interpretation of nationalism as “good” or “healthy”, for example. Or they gave the concept new meanings, duly producing a conceptual innovation, such as insisting that nationalism, for them, “did not mean what it meant to other people”. This strategy was applied, for instance, by oppositional nationalists, who denied the connotations related to violence or “hooliganism” by explaining that, for them, nationalism was a purely theoretical way of thinking. Moreover, a commonplace rhetorical move was to position nationalism within a semantic network either by comparing it to a more stigmatising concept, such as fascism, or likening it to a clearly positive concept, such as patriotism.

In addition, I was interested in whether the president’s statement on his being a nationalist had “widened the conditions” of possible uses of the concept in the public discourse. This was not confirmed in the material: only two texts referred to the president’s claim directly, and the number of self-descriptive uses had not increased after the president’s two examples. However, the material in the study is too limited in scope to conclude that this could not have taken place in other forums, such as online or on social media platforms. Moreover, the presidential statements reframing nationalism as something desired and respected – especially if they reappear – could still convince other key politicians or influential individuals to use “nationalist” in novel ways, or contribute by other means to making nationalism more socially acceptable in the future.

Another important finding in the publication is that all of the speakers in the material discussed nationalism in the context of inter-ethnic relations or minority nationalism in Russia (topics that the president rarely touches upon, as will be shown in publication IV). Thus, the president’s re-definition of nationalism, which combined “multinationality” with the primacy of ethnic Russians as a state-forming nation, was not embraced by other speakers describing themselves as nationalists. This finding highlights the ambiguity of the “ethnic” component of the nationalist argument in the Russian political discourse. For many of the speakers in the material, a “nationalist” not connected to a certain ethnicity simply does not seem possible, which is why the president’s conceptual innovation appears thin. In this way, the results of the publication encouraged further analysis of the content of the nationalist argument in the presidential discourse, and the role that ethnicity (broadly understood) plays in it.

### **Publication III: Evolution of Russia's 'Others' in presidential discourse in 2000–2020**

Publications I and II focused on the nature of nationalism and how it is manifested in the internal debates within Russian politics and society. Publication III continues to examine the nationalist argument by analysing the portrayal of the nation in presidential discourse. In this way, the focus moves from the domestic sphere to the portrayal of Russia and Russianness in the wider spatial and temporal context: presidential rhetoric situates the nation both in the world and in relation to its past, present and future.

The publication is part of a book entitled *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia: A Quest for Internal Cohesion* (Pynnöniemi 2021), which studies othering and enemy images produced in the political rhetoric, as well as various aspects of patriotism, drawing linkages between these and the role of the military sector in Russian society. The publication illuminates the background of state nationalism in Russia and, in so doing, starts from the idea that constructing a nation is simultaneously a process of drawing, maintaining and defending boundaries between “us” and “them”. Nationalist argumentation rests upon the assumption that “our” characteristics make us as a nation distinct from “Others”, who in a similar way have their distinctive characteristics.<sup>28</sup> Yet the “Other” in this publication is understood as multilayered: it can be internal, external, or temporal, and not restricted to another state or nation.

Methodologically, the publication is based on Rieke Schäfer's (2012) notion that figurative language plays a crucial role in conceptual and political change. A collection of 21 presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation was analysed in order to trace the reappearing metaphors and concepts depicting Russia's and Russians' relationship to their Others. The president, also utilising the State-as-Person metaphor, describes Russia as being either strong or weak compared to its Others. In the context of foreign policy, the metaphor of competition acquired different characteristics: at the beginning of the 2000s, it was predominantly economic, and the main Other consisted of the Western (European) countries that were ahead in the competition and thus portrayed as models for Russia. Towards the end of the 2010s, however, the competition ceased to be primarily economic and transformed qualitatively into a military and “moral” one. In this phase, Russia was depicted as being under an external threat, but it had simultaneously grown stronger in relation to its Other. Gradually, from the mid-2000s onwards, the moral aspect gains importance: according to this rhetoric, Russia continues to preserve and defend the traditional values that Europe no longer

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<sup>28</sup> As Michael Billig (1995, 83) notes, “foreigners are not simply ‘others’, symbolizing the obverse of ‘us’: they are also like ‘us’, part of the imagined universal code of nationhood”.



shares. After 2014–2015, the competition becomes a conflict, and the Other, meaning the West and the US in particular, is depicted as having taken the side of the Enemy, which makes Russia alone capable of and morally fit for fighting the evil in the world.

From the perspective of state legitimacy, the internal, temporal Others had a significant role. During Vladimir Putin's first presidential term, he described the inefficient state officials as a reason for Russia's weakness, and distanced "us" from the chaotic past. The representation of the 1990s as tumultuous persisted until the end of the study period, but the inefficient state official of the past was replaced with a corrupt middle-level bureaucrat in the present.

Thus, the publication argues that "stability" and "modernisation", key conceptual innovations until around 2012, gave way to the rhetoric of conflict and external threat during the "conservative turn". Russia's values were still described as rather liberal in President Dmitri Medvedev's parlance, but since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third term, explicitly conservative values have been stressed. The idea of Russia's values as fundamentally different from those of its Other, "the West", was introduced during a relatively short period but has been consolidated in word and deed. The president has repeatedly described national unity as being achieved through shared values, while the traditional conservative value basis as the unifying feature of the nation has been inscribed in several laws – most importantly in the text of the new Constitution, adopted in 2020. The consistency of this rhetoric and its application in legislation make any conciliatory turn regarding Russia's Others during the current leadership unlikely.

#### **Publication IV: New Generation of Victors: Narrating the Nation in the Russian Presidential Discourse, 2012–2019**

Publication IV continues to examine state nationalism through metaphors and narratives. The publication offers insights into the dynamic nature of Russia's political system by asking how the state leadership formulated their nationalist argument between the years 2012 and 2019. The selection of timeframe was motivated by the "conservative" or "authoritarian" turn in Russian domestic and foreign politics after the beginning of Putin's third term as president, and the publication focuses on the changes in nationalist argumentation after that "turn". It draws on theorisations of political legitimacy and "the social contract" between the Russian people and the state, the nature of which is inherently dynamic (Feldmann & Mazepus 2018; Hale et al. 2019). In order to maintain and produce legitimacy in an authoritarian context, the incumbent leaders need to "re-negotiate" the social contract, and nationalist argumentation is understood as a part of this process. The analysis is based on a collection of 35 presidential addresses, consolidated with scholarly literature and relevant opinion polls.

The publication demonstrates that the nationalist argument of the Russian state leadership relies on three distinct, overlapping and mutually reinforcing narratives: the narrative of the multinational nation; the narrative of the victorious nation; and the narrative of the moral nation. First, the narrative of the multinational nation suggests that the historical unity of the nation was born in 1612 when the Muscovites organised themselves against an external threat and ended the Polish invasion. Ever since that year, the unity of the nation has been put to the test in conflicts, most importantly in the Second World War, but the nations have fought “shoulder to shoulder” – and won. Thus, the multinationality of the nation is its eternal feature, and the “strength and beauty” of the country in the present day. The multinational character of the nation, underpinned by the Russian language, culture, and ethnicity, also functions as a distinctive feature of the Russian nation in comparison to other nations, mainly European countries glorifying harmful “multiculturalism”.

Second, the several wars and conflicts in the course of the “thousand-year-long” Russian history have proved that the nation is victorious in nature: it has successfully fought against external threats in order to defend its unity and distinct values. The Great Patriotic War is a formative event that made the nation what it is today. However, the war between good and evil has not ended: international terrorism shows that “peace on this planet is not established by itself”. As the title of the publication suggests, the president draws a parallel between past “victors” and present ones: it is therefore a moral responsibility of the people in the present to recognise their role in the chain of generations by remembering, respecting and defending the memory of the past.

Third, the Russian nation is portrayed as sharing traditional “spiritual-moral” values. These values are not explicitly defined in the presidential speech, but other policy documents – like the Strategy of National Security (2015, article 78) – mention “service to the homeland”, morals and family values, among other things, as the core values of the nation. In the presidential discourse, there is a global division, and the Russian state acts as the defender of traditional values in the world. The spiritual-moral values are under an external threat, but also challenged internally by those advocating values foreign to Russia.

The aspects highlighted in these narratives are selectively derived from Russian and Soviet history. The publication argues that these three narratives were consolidated and bound together after the so-called conservative turn in 2012–2013 and have remained the constitutive element of the state nationalist argument since then. After 2014, the narratives served in justifying the annexation of Crimea and the growing tensions in international relations by stressing a fundamental difference between Russia and “the West”. Previously, some scholars have noted that the annexation of Crimea marked an “ethno-national shift” in the presidential discourse (Teper 2016) but the analysis in this publication does not endorse this view: in the years that followed, the

ethno-national tone did not overtly dominate the presidential speech but rather coexisted with (and within) the narrative of the multinational nation (pp. 525–526). The publication suggests that even though the nationalist argument has now been adjusted to appeal to the conservative part of society, the domestic challenges to the state legitimacy – both latent and visible – remain.

**Table 2** *Main arguments of the publications*

<b>Publication</b>	<b>Years studied</b>	<b>Key argument</b>
<b>I</b>	2011–2015	Various actors recognise the appeal of the nationalist argument and want to use it; until 2014, the radical (ethnocentric) nationalists served a certain purpose in the state strategy but since 2014, they have been internally dispersed and partly replaced by the consensual ones in the “shared space” between nationalists and the state.
<b>II</b>	2008–2018	Actors who use the “nationalist” concept in a self-descriptive way in contemporary Russia aim to distance themselves from its negative connotations in two main ways: adding positive values (often in the form of epithets) to the concept, or positioning it within the semantic network, either by comparing it to a more stigmatising concept such as fascism, or likening it to a positive concept such as patriotism. Nationalism is defined in (narrow) ethnic terms throughout the study and used in the context of ethnic relations or tensions. The presidential statements have not (yet) “widened the conditions of possibility”. However, the other speakers in the material do not embrace the president’s conceptual innovation of “multinational” nationalism.
<b>III</b>	2000–2020	In the presidential discourse, three distinctive Others are presented to the Self: The Other in the Past (chaos, weakness, inefficient / corrupt state official); the Other ahead in the competition (but who Russia challenges when the competition transforms from an economic one into a military one); and the Other with different values.
<b>IV</b>	2012–2019	The nationalist argument portrayed in the presidential discourse is formulated with three overlapping and mutually reinforcing narratives of “Russianness”: the narrative of the victorious nation; the narrative of the moral nation; and the narrative of the multinational but ethnically hierarchical nation.

## 7 THE NATIONALIST ARGUMENT IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN POLITICS

After summarising the key results of each publication in the previous chapter, I will now draw these together under two broader themes to which I believe the dissertation as a whole contributes. The publications confirm, first and foremost, that the nationalist argument is central to the language used by the current state leadership, and that it remains contested in contemporary Russian politics. The state power faces a challenge from other actors using nationalist claims as well as from society, which expects the state authorities to fulfil their part of the “social contract” and drives the state leadership to shape their nationalist argument accordingly. The study provides new insights into nationalism in Russia by mapping the boundaries drawn for “Russianness” in various discourses, and by analysing the nationalist argumentation in relation to state legitimacy. At the same time, the dissertation sheds light on the temporal aspects of nationalism: the past figures in the present ways of defining and representing the nation, but the story of the shared past is constantly re-told. History, in this sense, serves both as a frame for the nationalist argument and provides ingredients for it.

All of the publications have, to varying degrees, benefitted from John Breuilly’s theory of nationalism as an argument. Breuilly emphasises the aspect of power in the political context, which enables a focus on agency instead of seeing nationalism as “rising” like a natural force. Yet political actors may not perceive the nationalism they advance in those terms. As Rogers Brubaker (2004, 116) notes, nationhood is, first and foremost, a category, and nationalism is a way of using that category. Thus, while all nationalist arguments build upon the idea of the nation as the primary group of belonging, they define the boundaries as well as the characteristics of that nation differently. Analysing these explicit and implicit definitions within specific discourses, the actual contents of the nationalist argument can be uncovered. Treating nationalism as an argument helps to contextualise the space within which the meanings, values and contexts of “the nation” are being formulated, positioned and defended against each other. In this way, it allows for a more nuanced understanding of nationalism in society than merely viewing it as an instrument in politics.

Belonging to a nation is often perceived predominantly as a question of identity and membership but, as Eleanor Knott (2017, 223) points out, studies of nationalism would benefit from understanding belonging as a concept of “politics, distance, crisis and contingency” alike. Drawing the boundaries of the nation recognises those who belong and distinguishes “us” from the

“others”. However, these relations do not constitute a dichotomy, but rather a hierarchy: some belong *more* than others, and are more entitled to resources and benefits than those who are conceived as not belonging or not fully belonging within the hierarchy (ibid.). In other words, the question is not only whether an individual belongs to a nation or not, but whether they belong to the nation in an accepted and desired way, and nationalist arguments are used to create these rules of acceptance and desire. Along these lines, nationalism functions according to the logic of inclusion and exclusion, which takes place in language but has clear and real political implications.

### **Drawing the boundaries of “Russianness”**

Considering that nationalist argumentation is about politics and politics is about power, as Breuilly puts it, defining the boundaries of belonging is an arena for competing views. Publication I argued that the actors who challenge the state interpretation of the nation have become strictly controlled and marginalised since 2014. The biggest difference between the claims of the radical, oppositional nationalists and the current state leadership is the anti-migrant and even outright racist message of the former, stressing a restricted interpretation of Russian ethnicity. With their narrow understanding of ethnic Russianness, which excludes Caucasian peoples for example, the radical nationalists pose a challenge to the integrity of the Russian state (even though the popularity of their narrow definition of the “ethnic Russian nation” remains limited among the Russian people (see Shevel 2011, 186; Laruelle 2019)).

The state interpretation of the matter is ambiguous. The presidential discourse upholds a continuous attempt to connect the emphasis on the historical “multinationality” of the nation to the primacy of Russian ethnicity, culture, and language as the unifying features of that same nation. In this way, the state leadership builds upon the imperial vision of Russians as the state-forming nation in relation to the other nationalities living in the country. At the level of policy practices, the assimilative nationalities and language policies of the federation are mixed with the rhetoric of a “civic” Russian nation: for example, while the nationalities policy strategy, amended in 2018, describes all citizens of Russia as equal and sharing a “civic consciousness”, the constitutional amendments in 2020 promoted the status of the Russian language as “the language of the state-forming nation” (kremlin.ru 2018b; Gosudarstvennaya дума 2020). There is a considerable degree of ambiguity embedded in what the role of the “state-forming people” or the unifying Russian culture means in practice.

Hence, the boundaries of “Russianness”, at least in ethnic terms, remain vague in the state discourse. Instead, the nation is described in different terms: the state leadership emphasises the values, tradition, and spiritual legacy of “Russianness”. The boundaries of the nation are thus more of a “mental” or

“moral” character, as opposed to being based on ethnicity or even institutional membership, like citizenship. Publications III and IV show that the state leadership has reverted to emphasising traditional values as a historically uniting feature of the nation. Moreover, the shared past figures strongly in the president’s parlance on the nation: remembering and respecting the memory of past generations’ heroic deeds is depicted as a moral responsibility of today’s generation. The presidential discourse portrays Russia as being under an external threat, which is reflected in the rhetoric that draws parallels between wars in the past and the present. According to the president, the Russian state needs and is prepared to defend not only the traditional values of the Russian nation but also the “correct” interpretations of the national past. From the perspective of belonging, it is worth stressing that the presidential discourse produces language in which the nation is a unified whole – or in Freedén’s (2005, 209) terms, both holistic and homogeneous. When all Russians are depicted as subscribing to the set of conservative values, Russians who do not embrace these values are rhetorically excluded from the nation. In this way, as noted in publication IV, the state authorities uphold the rhetoric of a unified nation by simultaneously creating and preserving divisive lines *within* society.

At the level of argumentation, the state leadership “borrows ingredients” from the conservative tradition and, in doing so, it also reinforces the essentialist interpretation of the past as a path on which the nation proceeds. In this way, the nationalist argument of the state leadership marks the place of Russia in time and space. Temporally, it positions the Russian state and nation as continuing a “thousand-year-long” tradition, but it also defines Russia’s place in the world. In this sense, the nationalist argument of the state also has a foreign policy aspect. The idea of Russia under threat is combined with the idea of borders of “Russianness” being wider than the state borders would suggest: the “mental” Russia is bigger than the state in its current form. And yet it is indeed the current Russian state that carries itself as a force defending the traditional, spiritual values in the world. In conclusion, it can be stated that according to the nationalist argument of the Russian state leadership, the boundaries of “Russianness” are both more restricted and more encompassing than the current borders of the Russian Federation: they are more restricted given that not everyone living in Russia belongs to the nation in a “proper” way because they subscribe to “foreign” ideas and values instead of the traditional, Russian ones. However, there are people living outside of the borders of the Russian state who can be affiliated with “Russianness” because they share these values and are therefore regarded by Russia as “ours”.

With the political system developing in a more ideological and authoritarian direction, the state leadership’s definition of the boundaries of “Russianness” remains the one framing and conditioning the sphere of actual politics. For example, adopting words like “foreign” and “non-traditional” to

characterise undesired activities in recent legislation<sup>29</sup> shows that nationalist languages have very real and palpable implications in society. Moreover, with legislation that functions as a deterrent towards liberal or critical stances, deeming them “unpatriotic” or foreign to Russia, certain views become impossible to express in public. On the one hand, this means fewer chances for other actors to publicly challenge the basis of the state leadership’s nationalist argument on the unified nation. But, on the other hand, this tendency pushes certain sensitive topics – like those related to ethnic tensions – to the margins of society and outside the public debate, which hampers the state leadership’s ability to follow the latent attitudes of society.

In this context, it is important to note that, as mentioned in publication I (p. 235), the ethnonationalist and xenophobic attitudes “have not lost their popular appeal forever”. Indeed, the decline in these sentiments in 2014 proved temporary, with negative attitudes towards migrants as well as some specific nationalities rising again after 2017 (Mukhametshina 2019; Levada 2020). To a certain extent, attitudes towards migration in the contemporary Russian context indicate popular perceptions of the boundaries of the nation: people from the republics of North Caucasus are seen as “the Other” in relation to “Russians”, when “their” presence among “us” raises resistance. As these aspects are not addressed in the state leadership’s rhetoric concerning the boundaries of “Russianness”, the interethnic tensions, anti-migrant sentiments, and everyday racism will remain contentious topics vis-à-vis the state nationalist argument in the future, especially if the ethno-nationalist sentiment intensifies. This is not to say that those topics would be of great importance to the majority of people, nor that many Russians would support narrow ethnonationalist views. However, if the trend continues, the state leadership may start sensing that it should include this aspect in its nationalist argument.

Thus, in formulating the nationalist argument, the state leadership’s discourse has maintained distance from the oppositional nationalists’ anti-migration message as well as from the radical neoconservative nationalists’ demands, but as they all develop over time, the contention over the concepts and framing of the nation will prevail.

### **Nationalist argument contested: nationalism and state legitimacy**

Since the annexation of Crimea in particular, interpretations of nationalism as a tool in the hands of the Russian political leadership have gained ground. Indeed, the “Crimean consensus” faded division lines within society for some time, but I would lean on the interpretation presented by Henry Hale et al.

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<sup>29</sup> I refer here specifically to the laws and amendments on “foreign agents” (*inostrannye agenty*) as well as the laws on “non-traditional” (*netraditsionnaya*) sexual orientation or religious movements.



(2019, 189) that, from the perspective of the Russian state leadership, the manoeuvre took place in the context of the regime's "ideational improvisation" – instead of a fundamental ethno-national turn in its policies. Nevertheless, state nationalism in contemporary Russia is intrinsically connected to the idea of domestic legitimacy, which often motivates the foreign policy decisions.

In the context of state-society relations in post-Soviet Russia, the concept of a social contract is crucial. Instead of the widespread definition of the social contract simply meaning the loyalty of citizens in return for the stability of the state, Aleksei Makarkin (2011, 1460–1461) suggests that the social contract in Russia is based predominantly on socio-economic factors. In his view, the state guarantees the majority of people a reasonable quality of life; pays pensions and salaries; and enables the people to plan their future. Only if the state fails to fulfil its part of the social contract do "politics proper" become relevant. In 2011–2012, the contract was put to the test when Russian people gathered to protest against Vladimir Putin's plans to return as president after Dmitri Medvedev's era. The state authorities' reaction to limit the possibilities of political contention in 2012 did not change the basic outline of the social contract, but rather demonstrated that the stability of the country was to be secured by increasing authoritarian control.

At the same time, as shown in publications III and IV, the rhetoric on traditional "spiritual-moral values" and the external threat intensified in the presidential discourse during the 2010s. In this sense, the state authorities sought support from the conservative part of society, which they perceive as the majority and thus the critical base of the social contract. When analysing the change in discourses in the early 2010s, it seems that the turn away from "common European values" towards the "distinctively Russian" values was relatively swift. Publication III argues that a turn "back" could have been possible earlier if it had been deemed appropriate by the state leadership, but after the constitutional amendments in 2020, this seems out of the question. The new "ideological" emphasis has been written into the key legislation of the Russian state, which may reduce the chances of "recalibrating" its ideational base (Hale et al. 2019, 171) under the current leadership. It remains to be seen what practical consequences the new Constitution will bring about, but it is already clear that the laws that have been rewritten on the basis of the new Constitution strengthen the isolative, authoritarian and conservative line of politics.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the process confirmed that instead of adjusting the contents of the nationalist argumentation in a conciliatory direction, the state

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<sup>30</sup> In summer 2020, President Putin stated that "the entire legislative framework of the country" needed to be developed in order to "fully comply" with the new Constitution (Interfax 2020). In the latter half of 2020, this reasoning was used to introduce a widening of the scope of the "foreign agent" law to individuals and granting former presidents lifetime immunity from prosecution, among other things (Makutina 2020; Zamakhina 2020).

authorities wanted to expand the ideologically charged rhetoric to the legislative sphere of the country.

The annexation of Crimea marked a watershed in Russia's foreign policy behaviour – even though it followed an ideational trajectory that had already been adopted years earlier in respect of Russia's "true" and justified borders being wider than the current ones. The annexation in 2014 and the subsequent surge in national pride led to scholarly interpretations of a new social contract: in this view, the people were given a "boost" of nationalist great-poweriness in exchange for loyalty to the state in a time of crisis. Magnus Feldmann and Honarata Mazepus (2018, 69–72) note that the explanations leaning solely on nationalist claims replacing the earlier "outputs" of the social contract fall short in understanding the change that the Crimean annexation created in Russia, and that they have much to do with political culture as well. Indeed, the social contract should be understood as dynamic by nature in that it can be re-negotiated, but the process of "re-negotiating" has not ended in Russia.

Thus, as noted in publication IV, the "Crimean consensus" did not resolve the challenges related to state legitimacy, even though this was most likely one of the important reasons why it was conducted. The action manifested Russia's assertive foreign policy and the state leadership's willingness and ability to force changes in state borders abroad, against the international agreements they had committed to. Despite the fact that the majority of Russians perceived the annexation of Crimea in a very positive light – and that the percentages of these attitudes have not changed significantly since then<sup>31</sup> – the domestic "utility" of nationalism should not be exaggerated (March 2018, 85). More importantly, the support for the annexation of Crimea is insufficient evidence to conclude that the Russian people would support any other interpretation of the nation produced by the state. As publication II in this dissertation confirms, the views connected to nationalism – among those who use the concept for self-description – were not congruent with the views expressed by the president.

Moreover, recent years have provided evidence against the instrumentalist readings of nationalism as the optimistic enthusiasm related to the annexation of Crimea, still palpable in 2014–2015, has faded (Hale et al. 2019, 192). Shortly after the annexation, Emil Pain and Lev Gudkov (2014, 73) were quick to discuss the potential durability of the nationalist boost, suggesting that it might function as a supportive factor for the regime for some years to come, and agreeing that the trend would slowly decrease. Adopting assertive foreign policy manoeuvres in order to enhance domestic legitimacy is not only a highly risky and costly strategy, it may also be temporary.

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<sup>31</sup> In a Levada Center poll conducted in March 2019, 86 per cent of respondents supported the annexation (in March 2014, the figure was 88%). Sixty-five per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that the annexation had, as a whole, benefitted Russia (Levada 2019).

As Luke March (2018, 79) puts it, the approaches that deem nationalism a mere “driver” of foreign policy remain simplistic and contentious. But nor should the annexation of Crimea be taken as “proof” of nationalism within the state apparatus: it should, rather, be seen as one part of the ideational improvisation of the regime. The language used to justify the annexation indeed played with the ideas of “proper” borders of the nation: in Putin’s rhetoric, the move was needed in order to protect the rights of “our people” living in the area (kremlin.ru 2014b). In this sense, the nationalist argument of the state stretched the idea of “Russianness”, but there is no reason to expect that it was exactly this aspect of the annexation that gained support in the eyes of the people. The great powerness (*derzhavnost*) and the “return” of Russia’s international influence was similarly welcomed by the people, but the support may derive from sources other than “ethno-nationalism” among the Russian people. For example, even though the majority of Russians after 2014 agreed with the statement that Russia is a great power, the most popular feature of a great power was considered to be the well-being of its citizens (Levada 2016).

In general, the nationalist argument based on the idea of conservative-traditional values shared by all Russians is problematic because it assumes a unity that does not exist in society. In this sense, the nationalist argument of the state leadership, in its current or any form, is not “enough” to secure the legitimacy of the regime, which is why, for the time being, the state authorities have chosen to lean increasingly on deterrents and repressive measures against contentious forces in politics. The repressive measures, however, rely heavily on the logic of the boundaries of “Russianness” that the state leadership produces in its discourse: the dissentful activities are portrayed as either “foreign”, unpatriotic, or as a threat to national security.

In the future, the legitimacy of the current Russian state leadership will remain a key question guiding the country’s development. Returning to Aleksei Makarkin’s definition, the socio-economic challenges that the increasingly authoritarian (and “ideological”) state should be able to overcome in order to fulfil the social contract have not eased during the past decade – in many respects, they have become even more acute. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the prospects of economic growth were modest at best, and with the new situation, hopes of a quick recovery have been shattered. Thus, the various socio-economic grievances among the people prevail.

In addition, the state leadership will face challenges stemming from the ongoing tensions and unpredictability in international politics. Since the mid-2000s, Russia’s political leadership has created and maintained narratives of malicious foreign influence. As shown in publication III, during the 2010s, the presidential discourse portrayed Russia’s traditional values as being fundamentally different from those possessed by Russia’s “Others”. The common European roots of Russian values were gradually replaced by the discourse that “the West” has abandoned the true Christian morals, something that Russia holds dear and defends – an idea that has been worked within various currents of Russian conservative thought since the early Slavophiles in

the 1830s, and has now been reinforced in the post-Cold War context. At the same time, the rhetoric of an external threat, essential for the conservative worldview, has been developed more explicitly in the presidential discourse.

The publications in this dissertation, underpinned by the literature cited above, add nuances to the scholarly discussion on nationalism in Russia by showing how uncertain nationalist claims can be a source of legitimacy from the point of view of the regime. First, the nationalist argument developed by the Russian state builds upon the homogeneity of the people in their acceptance of the traditional-conservative emphasis. However, the sentiments of society are not necessarily as conservative or unified as the state discourses assume.

Second, with the repressive and authoritarian policies that restrict the views expressed in the media and public debate and suppress any real political contention, the state leadership risks creating an echo chamber that complicates formulating the nationalist argument according to the popular moods when indications of those moods are no longer visible to them. In addition, the decision to adjust the repressive legislation to follow the nationalist-conservative language may limit the flexibility of the nationalist argument at the state actor's disposal. Even if the state leadership were to recognise the need to redefine the nationalist argument, the changes should be moderate enough to still be congruent with the key narratives on the nation, consolidated and bound together during the past decade. Moreover, any possible changes should be placed within the ideologically oriented legislative framework. Thus, any substantial re-directing in this sense seems less likely under the current regime.

However, it needs to be noted that this conclusion is tentative, considering that the legislation, or even the Constitution, is not necessarily respected by the authoritarian state leadership. The previous, notably liberal text of the Constitution was formulated in 1993 and remained unchanged until 2020 when its ideals had diverged very far from the political reality of the country. This did not prevent the political leadership from acting against the spirit of the Constitution, which would suggest that the new, internally incoherent Constitution, combining liberal principles with ideologically oriented ones, will not restrict the political leadership in any significant way. Moreover, the political elite of an authoritarian country should not be understood as monolithic. Even if the disagreements within the state apparatus are not always visible, they may nevertheless exist, which potentially creates conflicts within the state leadership.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the state discourse on traditional values says nothing about the commitment to those values within the state leadership, which undermines the credibility of the argument. As publication IV argues, the state authorities have struggled with answering accusations of corruption committed by state officials. The state leaders who portray “placing

spiritual over material” as part of the shared value basis of the nation (but whose obscure ownerships were reported in the media) have been an easy target for the protesters who have gathered on the streets since 2017 to protest against corruption. The socio-economic challenges as well as the worsening situation with the Covid-19 pandemic in the Russian regions in particular may contribute to this erosion of credibility. While the state nationalist argument has addressed shared experiences of resentment and humiliation in the foreign policy context, there is no reason to assume that those experiences among the people could not rise from the domestic sphere, and be directed against the political elite of the country.

Thus, I would maintain that nationalism in the context of legitimacy – in contemporary Russia, and perhaps in general – cannot be exhaustively explained as an instrument. The view of nationalism as something that can be “utilised” treats both the “user” and the “recipient” of the instrument, as well as the power relationship between them, in a simplistic manner. Instead, nationalism is better understood as an argument alongside other, similar competing arguments. In light of its contested nature, the nationalist argument continues to be re-formulated and defended.

## **8 CONCLUSIONS**

In this dissertation, several interlinked questions related to nationalism as an argument in contemporary Russian politics have been posed. The four publications as well as this introductory part advance the point that nationalism remains a contested concept not only empirically but also analytically when scholars apply it in different ways within and across research disciplines. The disagreements over the meanings of nationalism, as well as the qualitative gap between the way it is applied in everyday and scholarly language, provide a fruitful yet challenging research niche. Any attempt to define nationalism in an exhaustive manner, so that all of its elements could be addressed, inevitably fails. Instead, the meanings, contexts and value orientations of the concept are best grasped by analysing how it is applied.

Yet, as has been shown in the previous research literature, the complex relationship between the concept of nationalism and the word itself creates empirical and analytical challenges. The nationalist argument is often formulated, re-formulated and defended without using the word at all due to the persistent negative connotations of the term in public speech. In the Russian context, the word has acquired derogatory meanings over the centuries. In the Russian empire, the concept was long shunned and censored because of its liberal connotations stressing national representation. At the turn of the century, the view of nationalities as entities forming the empire grew stronger, and the concept's meanings became related to separatism. After the October Revolution, the view of nationalities as (political) entities became institutionalised in the affirmative action policy of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but the concept of nationalism became even more charged as it started to signify an antipode to the Communist ideal of internationalism. The dissident nationalism(s) developed the Slavophile ideas further from the 1960s onwards, and their legacy is apparent in the language of today's national-conservatives. Experiences of national conflicts in the late 1980s and the fear of separatism that pervaded the early years of independent Russia have added new elements to the concept. In the 2000s, extreme forms of nationalism such as the skinhead movement enhanced the connection of nationalism to violent "hooliganism".

In present-day Russia, therefore, the concept's negative connotations have multiple sources. The concept is influenced, however, not only by the legacy of past language, but also by the ways in which the past is represented in the present. In this way, the dissertation suggests that nationalist language in Russia is also currently undergoing change. Over the past decade, the challenge posed to the state authorities on the part of radical oppositional nationalists has decreased but not disappeared. At the same time, some of the

views of radical conservative nationalists have been adopted into the political mainstream as the state nationalist argument borrowed their “civilisational” ideas of Russia’s position in the world. Both in the camp of “dissentful” and “consentful” nationalist actors, the concept of nationalism is used differently from the way it is used in the state discourse. Moreover, the views related to nationalism are highly diverse even among those who describe themselves as nationalists. The state leadership, for its part, has begun to emphasise conservative values as a shared feature of the nation, and reorganised federal legislation accordingly. In this way, the intensified authoritarianism has silenced public debate on sensitive topics related to nationalism, which may distance the state nationalist argument further from everyday understandings of the concept.

It is in this context that the Russian president has described himself as “the biggest nationalist in the country”, adding that he has 146 million like-minded nationalists – referring to the whole population of Russia. The statement underlines how the state leadership portrays the nation as a unified whole, which, in reality, it cannot be. Yet it also manifests a conceptual evolution of nationalism in the self-descriptive use that may well be occurring elsewhere in the world as well. For example, in 2018, Donald Trump differentiated nationalists – such as himself – from “globalists”, suggesting that the latter group did not care about “our country”, and attached greater importance to the “globe” instead. The key question therefore remains: Do these self-descriptions signal, or even facilitate, a change by which nationalism is becoming a more accepted “ism” globally? The self-descriptive cases appear to be conceptual innovations that have not reached (thus far) a commonsensical position in the language of the society. Yet I suggest that they should be taken seriously: conceptual change may take place through the unexpected uses of an existing concept. Nationalism, and nationalist, despite being invective, have the potential to become accepted and even transnational in the sense that conservative nationalists perceive nationalism as a positive feature – its country of origin notwithstanding.

As often happens in research, the publications in this dissertation have answered important questions but also raised new ones. In particular, two themes related to the overall research problem remain to be further studied in the future: the contestation *within* the Russian state structures regarding the boundaries of the nation, and the regional diversity of the nationalist argumentation. The publications, as well as this introduction, view nationalism in Russia as a diverse phenomenon that does not have a singular voice. In society, and regarding the various nationalist movements, the approach seems rather intuitive, but the authoritarian and heavily president-centred state system creates an image of unity within the state apparatus.

All of the publications in this dissertation mention the discrepancy between the primacy of Russian culture, language and ethnicity, on the one hand, and



the historical multinationality of the nation, on the other – both endorsed in the official language. The nationalist argument of the Russian state leadership has been analysed on the basis of the president’s speeches, as the president is the highest figure expressing state power in public. Reflecting the presidential discourse against the output of other key actors on nationality issues could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the disagreements within the policy-making sphere. There are certain signals suggesting that the state authorities’ views on the “proper” boundaries of the Russian nation may diverge: Publication IV mentions the seemingly civic definition of the Russian nation that was included in the Strategy of Nationalities Policy in December 2018, and yet the Constitution, amended in 2020, explicitly reinforces the status of the Russian language. What process led to these decisions, and how would the contestation be characterised from the perspective of conceptual change?

Moreover, juxtaposing the views on the “Russianness” of the federal authorities with those of the representatives of the regional-level administration, for example by conducting interviews, could be a valuable contribution in studying the Russian state apparatus. The regional aspect has been absent from the research questions in this dissertation. Publication II, where regional newspapers were included, touches upon titular nationalism and how “nationalist” as a concept was applied in those contexts, and a further study focusing solely on these aspects in specific regional media outlets, for example, would help diversify the views on the nationalist argumentation in contemporary Russia.

As argued in the previous chapter, nationalism as an instrument is unreliable in the hands of a political leader; it should rather be perceived as an argument or claim, prone to continuous contestation. Nationalism as such is socially constructed, but conscious political processes to construct a nation along desired lines rarely succeed in becoming “common sense” – and even then the process appears slow and partial. In the case of contemporary Russia, the nationalist argument of the state leadership whereby the “proper” borders of the nation are at the same time wider and more restricted than the state borders, based on the acceptance of traditional Russian values, cannot be said to have “won” the contestation over nationalism. The state leadership has translated this interpretation into repressive domestic policies that thwart any political challenge to it, but with time, the resentment that has previously fuelled support for the nationalist argument may become re-directed. Thus, the boundaries of the nation – mental or political – are not written in stone, and the nationalist contention in Russia will continue. In analysing the future forms that this contention will take, the dissertation argues for understanding nationalism as a temporal, powerful and omnipresent argument.

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# PUBLICATION I

## Contemporary Russian nationalisms: the state, nationalist movements, and the shared space in between

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For several years, various nationalist groups and the Russian state have been competing over nationalism as a political concept and for popular support to nationalist claims. This paper analyzes the relationship between the state and anti-government, ethnocentric nationalist groups that gather annually in an event called “the Russian March.” Emphasis is on the change in that relationship that happened in 2014, when the state added efforts to channel and mobilize the nationalists to its previous repressive and controlling measures. The article conceptualizes the competition over the nationalist argument in contemporary Russia as a case of dissentful and consensual contention in hybrid regimes, and shows how the dissentful nationalists have been forced to make way for the more consensual ones. Until recently, the room for maneuver for the radical nationalists was relatively wide. The events in Ukraine, however, divided the nationalists, and since 2014 radical nationalists have faced increased state repression. At the same time, pro-government nationalist actors have strengthened, and new players have appeared in the field. These developments tell us not only about the Kremlin’s diminished tolerance for dissentful contention, but also about the importance of the nationalist argument in Russian politics today.

**Keywords:** Nationalism; Russia; regime management; contention

### Introduction

The motivation for this article arises from the notion that the policies of the Russian state toward nationalist contention changed in 2014. The paper aims to answer how and why. At the core of these questions is the popular appeal of nationalism in contemporary Russia that both the state actors and the nationalist movements opposing them are trying to exploit. Thus, it is explained that the nationalist groups and the state share a space in which they compete over nationalism with both words<sup>1</sup> and deeds. The article analyzes the state’s measures applied in this battle over the shared space with the radical nationalist movements and shows how the repertoire of those measures has changed over the past five years.

Contemporary Russian nationalism as a concept may refer either to official rhetoric, so-called state nationalism, or to the various interpretations of nationalism promoted by nationalist movements. The field of nationalist movements in Russia is diverse and has grown even more splintered since the popular uprisings in Ukraine, the Crimean annexation, and the beginning of the war in Donbas. At the same time, nationalist rhetoric in the

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state leadership has intensified, with the aim of unifying the people in a time of crisis. Public opinion surveys show a rise in national pride during the past two years among Russians and since the Crimean annexation in particular, and a simultaneous drop in xenophobic attitudes toward migrants. In this paper, I will analyze these developments and elaborate on recent changes in the relationship between the radical nationalists and the Russian state.

A particular focus of the paper is on the Russian March (*Russkii marsh*), which has gathered together various nationalist groups on the Day of National Unity, 4 November, for the past 10 years. These groups promote xenophobic values and a related policy agenda, and the event has been characteristically anti-governmental. Over the years, some democratic nationalists have also taken part in the march, with pleas for fair elections and a Russian nation-state. The event is organized in several Russian cities, but the biggest turnout has always been in Moscow. Neither this event nor the groups taking part encompass the entire field of ethnocentric nationalist movements in Russia, but they serve as a sufficient case for the purposes of this article.

This paper is based on systematic reading of online material provided by the Russian March participants and organizers themselves between 2011 and 2015. The web pages have been read with the help of the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, which provides access to websites that might no longer exist elsewhere. I have compiled a set of web pages that represent the ideological background of the movement behind the Russian March, such as the official homepage of the movement and personal blogs of some of its activists. These pages were visited at least once every three months during January 2011 and December 2014. After that, the pages were followed directly, without the Internet Archive tool, until December 2015. Alongside this material, recent opinion polls and Russian media sources were used in order to connect the online presence of the movements to the "offline" events, and thus portray the causalities between the radical nationalists' endeavors and state actions.

In the first chapter of this article, nationalism as a concept will be defined and its ethnic component in particular will be discussed in the Russian context. Then I will introduce the theoretical background on which I lean when suggesting that the relationship between the state and nationalist actors could be described as "sharing a space" that they are competing over, with means of dissentful and consentful contention. In the next chapter, the changes in that shared space will be looked at in the context of actual events and the measures that the state has applied in managing and controlling the nationalist movement: 2014 will be presented as a turning point, after which the nationalist groups not only grew more divided internally but also fell under stricter governmental control. Some new actors who entered into the shared space are introduced. In the conclusive remarks, it is suggested that the shared space still exists, but the dissentful nationalists have been replaced by the consentful ones.

### **Russian nationalism and the question of ethnicity: a tempting political tool**

In order to add some understanding about the phenomenon, nationalism as a concept should be first defined. I have adopted a rather broad definition, following Verkhovskii and Pain (2012, 52), who state that it is "a political tendency in which the basic principle is the recognition of a people (nation) [*narod (natsiia)*] as the source of state power and the main agent [*sub"ekt*] of the political system." This comes close to John Breuilly's formulation (in Özkırıklı 2000, 105), of nationalism as a "political movement seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with nationalist arguments" – where the nationalist argument, for its part, rests upon three assumptions: that there exists a nation with explicit

character; that the interests of this nation take priority over that of other nations; and that the nation must be as independent as possible. In this paper, it is exactly the nationalist argument that lies in between the nationalist movements and the regime: both recognize its appeal and want to use it as a political instrument, but strictly according to their own interpretations.

The question of ethnicity has been in the focus of research on contemporary Russian nationalism. As Marlène Laruelle (2009a, 2) has pointed out, Russian nationalism is often – mistakenly – approached as a new phenomenon. In the Soviet Union, ethnic nationalism was absent from official rhetoric. Instead, the USSR was established as a “union of equal nations and republics” (Shcherbak 2015, 871). But the Great-Power Russian nationalism of the Stalin years as well as the steady Russification of the late Soviet era contributed to the emergence of interethnic tensions. As Andrey Shcherbak (2015, 869; 875) argues, the cultural nationalism of the Soviet Union preceded the political (ethnic) nationalism, strengthening of which was extremely important in the process of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Because problematic questions related to ethnicity as well as the political rights of ethnic groups were to a large extent impossible to address publicly, the discussion burst forth only during and after the Soviet Union’s demise. But this does not mean that Russian nationalism did not exist before that, on the contrary. The emergence of political nationalism – both in the political claim-making of titular nations and of the Russian nationalist-conservatives who had mobilized during the 1960s – deeply affected the way Russian state nationalism was promoted in the early years of independent Russia. Throughout the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin tried to implement the idea of a multiethnic Russian nation (*rossiiskii-narod*), emphasizing the civic, not ethnic, meaning of the concept. Such conceptual innovations offered little to the majority of people who felt they had lost their homeland: what Serguei Oushakine (2009) called “patriotism of despair.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, nationalist movements mainly leaned to the political left and cherished the Soviet system. In the early 2000s, as the rightist nationalist groups grew stronger (Verkhovskii and Pain 2012; Laruelle 2009b, 58–60), the first Russian March (at the time titled “the Right March,” *Pravyi marsh*) was organized. In 2005 a new holiday was introduced to celebrate the end of the Polish-Lithuanian occupation in 1612, with the Russian March its first public celebration (Zuev 2013, 103). There remain few official or popular observances of the holiday, which the public has never really embraced (Hutchings and Tolz 2015, 75). Perhaps exactly for this reason radical nationalists were able to take over the new holiday. The Russian March has from the beginning promoted the often openly racist demands of the ethnic nationalists, including restrictions to the immigration policy and the abolition of articles 280 and 282 of the penal code, which prohibit provoking extremist activities and inciting hatred on discriminatory grounds (Ugolovnyi kodeks RF 2015).

The march is often described as a right-wing nationalist event, but the right–left axis is not the most appropriate one in this case. There are features in the official march program that are not rightist, such as calls for free elections, social justice, and stronger representative democracy in the regions and within the court system. Instead, the often used epithet “ethnocentric” is more to the point, because many of the movements taking part in the Russian March have adopted an ethnically exclusive interpretation of nationalism, and some of them seek political rights for ethnic Russians only. In this paper, I have chosen to call the Russian March participants “radical nationalists,” or dissentful nationalists – many of them seek to change the current political system, or at least some of its fundamentals, and some of them support revolutionary or violent means to achieve those goals. It is

this standpoint that makes them dissenters; the pro-government nationalists also can be radical in their views, but they support the current political leadership nevertheless and rely on it to make the changes they wish for.

Russia's radical nationalist movements are monitored and managed by the state, but that does not mean the state rejects all the views they represent. The populist appeal of ethnic nationalism is strong, and both the radical nationalists and the state leadership know it. In August 2015, 51% of Russians supported the slogan "Russia for the Russians" either fully or to some extent, and 37% stated that they harbored negative feelings toward migrants from the southern republics living in their own region (Levada Center, 2015a). It needs to be noted that the negative attitudes have decreased from October 2013 – the similar figures then were 66% and 62%, respectively. But, as the analysts from the Levada Center note, this does not mean that people feel less xenophobic and think more positively about migrants, but rather that they have become less interested in the issue in general as the events in Ukraine and globally have directed their attention elsewhere.

Russian state nationalism in the 2000s was attempting to link national pride with the idea of a strong state, its leadership, state symbols, and even territory instead of Russianness as an ethnic feature. But the official nationalism during Putin's presidency has not been civic: it does not emphasize the participation of citizens and their individual rights (Rutland 2010, 124). Boris Yeltsin's attempts to introduce the new, civic concept of *rossiiskii* nation instead of the ethnic *russkii* one did not really endure, and Putin has been much less concerned about this sort of conceptual choice. In fact, it seems that instead of creating new terminology or new policy, the state is rather blurring the boundaries of old ones (Blakkisrud 2016, 216). Hence, undefined questions related to ethnicity create the key challenge for state nationalism. National minority politics has been relegated to a reactive level, and as there is no consensus on strategies, there is no comprehensive legislation on integration (Gorenburg 2014, 3–7). Despite the evident need for labor, the Russian state has imposed restrictive migration legislation specifically because of the xenophobic attitudes of the public at large (Schenk 2010, 106, 114–115). Migration policies have tightened even further since the sporadic ethnic conflicts that broke out involving migrants in 2007 and 2010 (Tipladou and Uba, 2014). Against this background, it is clear that the state needs to aim at maintaining and strengthening social stability in the country without using ethnic nationalist rhetoric, but still appealing to the population in a credible way. Attempts to do this by consolidating a civic national identity have not been very successful, which adds to the temptation to use ethnic nationalist argumentation.

Nationalism is also attractive for political forces in Russia because it marks a quest for "normalcy" among the citizens (Laruelle 2009b, 1–3): "Requested as much by its citizens as by political authorities, the normalization of the country demands that a consensus be established, and the notion of the motherland (*rodina*) is alone apt to achieve this: there is no other symbol which, traversing all divisions, generates as broad an adhesion as that of the nation." Nikolai Zakharov (2015, 110) has described the social movement against immigration as "currently one of the most important players in the field of social movements in Russia." He argues that "ordinary" and "law-abiding citizens," not only members of radical nationalist movements, have taken part in this social mobilization and in racist attacks during the last decade in Russia (Zakharov 2015, 112–115). However, this support for ethnic nationalist causes is largely latent in society. Despite their sympathy for ethnic nationalist and anti-immigration claims, people are not necessarily willing to demonstrate these feelings publicly, let alone join the activities of existing nationalist movements. Nationalists are often perceived as hooligans and extremists, hence the campaign of opposition activist and politician Aleksei Navalny, who for several years attempted to

“normalize” nationalism by encouraging people to take part in nationalist events and did so himself (Moen-Larsen 2014). Radical nationalists themselves recognize the stigma (Zinovev 2014) and try to define themselves as “good nationalists,” often finding other examples from the field to represent the “bad nationalists.”

There is a contradiction between the official rhetoric portraying Russia as a traditionally multiethnic state, on one hand, and the way Russianness is understood as an ethnic category, in relation to immigrants in particular, on the other. Even the high leadership of the country seems to suggest that ethnic Russians are “first among equals” (Zakharov 2015, 123), and this view is presented in addresses that underline multiethnicity as the main policy of the state. Thus, the prevalence of xenophobia in society (see also Gorodzeisky, Glikman, and Maskileyson 2014, 118–119) poses a serious challenge to the state: it should discourage those attitudes among the public in order to minimize ethnic conflicts, but at the same time, as I argue, it would like to benefit politically from the clearly positive valorization of the (ethnic) Russian nation among the wider public. That challenge, in short, is the main reason why the ethnic nationalist movements and the current Russian state establishment share a certain common space.

### **Nationalistic movements and shared space: views on societal movements in hybrid regimes**

This study focuses on the relationship between the state and nationalist movements, drawing from studies on authoritarian regimes and the measures they take toward political contention. Robertson (2011, 6–8) explains that it is not the type of the regime that determines which sort of political contention or protest will arise, but rather the ecology of organizations in general, elite competition, and state mobilization strategies. In this article, the focus is on the last: I will explore how the state uses repression and control as well as channeling and mobilization in relation to nationalistic movements. It is, however, worth noting that state actions alone cannot define the visible or invisible activities of the society, and this is very much true when it comes to managing nationalist movements in particular. The nationalist argument is appealing because it taps into strong emotions such as national pride or fear of “the other.” As mentioned above, ethnic nationalist causes have enjoyed wide support among the Russian population. Therefore, nationalism as a political idea is competed for, and the state applies various strategies in order to maintain its interpretation of nationalism’s nature as the dominant one.

In this study, I approach Russia as a hybrid regime,<sup>2</sup> although it has taken a clear authoritarian turn since Putin’s re-election in 2012. Cheskin and March (2015, 270) suggest that the perspective on political contention in authoritarian societies should be widened to include “dissentful” and “consentful” contention. By this, they mean societal activities that make political claims either to challenge or to comply with the norms defined by the state. The writers suggest that analysis should include all four categories of motivation and behavior: consentful contention, dissentful contention, dissentful compliance, and consentful compliance – through these “analytical lenses” it becomes possible to produce more nuanced research on society that makes clearer which actors are challenging the system *per se*, and which perhaps put their hopes primarily on the state to implement their demands. One of their main arguments is that the normative approach to civil society research has left the less visible forms of political contention under-conceptualized: for example, co-optation is a nuanced phenomenon that is constantly changing (Cheskin and March 2015, 263–264, 267). When it comes to managing nationalism, co-optation both on the



level of civic activity and on the conceptual level has been one of the key instruments of the Russian state (Horvath 2014).

The Russian March is a marginal movement when measured in numbers of participants. Despite the fact that it takes place not only in Moscow and St Petersburg, but also in several cities in the regions, it usually gathers at most a few thousand participants in any one location. This, however, does not make the analysis less important. First, reliable information on political and social mobilization can be scarce in a hybrid regime, and as the regime itself is also dependent on the few sources of information, it needs to take seriously even the fainter signals of political contention. Therefore, it does not necessarily require masses but only a few demonstrators to have an impact (Robertson 2011, 168–169, 185). Second, some of the radical nationalists have gained vast publicity. The Russian March itself, as a phenomenon, is rather well-known considering its size – in a Levada Center survey conducted in November 2015 (Levada 2015c), 28% of respondents had heard about the marches. So even if the actual event does not draw that many participants, the ethnocentric radical nationalists have indeed carved out some space in society.

### ***Shared space until 2014: nationalists monitored but not directly repressed***

It was in 2006 that radical nationalists first demonstrated their ability to escalate ethnic clashes, a phenomenon that later became known as “Kondopoga tactics” (Tipaldou and Uba 2014, 1085). The term refers to a situation where the nationalists participate in an ethnic outburst, try to profit from it, and in some cases fuel the conflict by spreading word and organizing new gatherings. This was the pattern in the case of violent rioting that took place in a small town of Kondopoga in August 2006, triggered by an incident in a restaurant between an ethnic Russian and a Caucasian. In that case, it was the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (*dvizhenie protiv nelegalnoi immigratsii*, DPNI), led by Aleksandr Belov (born Aleksandr Potkin), that was playing an important role in fueling riots in other cities: the movement rushed to generalize the case and stated that migration creates a security threat to the ethnic Russians (Tipaldou and Uba 2014, 1086–1087). So when similarly motivated conflicts took place in Moscow’s Manezh Square in December 2010, the authorities reacted in a few months’ time and banned DPNI – whose role, again, was seen as crucial in escalating the conflicts (Tipaldou and Uba 2014, 1088; Zakharov 2015, 115). It was in the Manezh Square riots where Zakharov (2015, 121) says “ordinary Muscovites” also mobilized because they felt that the police had been negligent in solving the ethnic crime that triggered the violence.

In 2011–2012, the nationalists also took part in the massive protests in Russia’s big cities that were triggered by fraudulent Duma elections held on 4 December. Discontent had been brewing before the actual election day, stemming from the United Russia party conference in September 2011, at which Putin announced his intention to run for a third term (Robertson 2013; Greene 2014, 202–204). The protests continued until the next summer, gradually shrinking, particularly after the presidential election in March 2012. During the late spring, it became clear to both the protesters and the media that enthusiasm had waned. To a large extent, this was due to the repressive means taken by the government shortly after Putin’s inauguration, which enabled, for example, remarkable penalties for violations during street protests (Greene 2014, 216). But another significant reason was that the protest movement had become more scattered over time: in the beginning it was clear that the protesters opposed Putin, but as the movement was not able to produce a commonly agreed alternative, its public representations slowly dwindled.

At first, there were some signals that the nationalists did not find the demonstrations appropriate for them. Or, to be precise, the nationalists blamed liberals for not welcoming them to events – for example, the leader of the movement “Russians” (*Russkie*), Dmitri Demushkin, complained that the nationalists would have been ready to march with the liberals but not vice versa (Izvestiia 2011). Despite these complaints, Demushkin, well-known nationalist blogger Konstantin Krylov, and other nationalists from the Russian March participated in the demonstrations and urged other nationalists to join as well. Even though the nationalists joined the protest movement for the sake of a common cause, they still distanced themselves from the liberals, who occupied the organizational committee of the protests and who looked askance at the nationalists. But, as long as the protests lasted, both Russian March leaders and liberal opposition leaders were represented.

These massive street protests, the so-called Bolotnaia demonstrations, did not necessarily change the nationalist field, but they made the challenge it faced very clear. There were too many obstacles between the anti-government nationalists and the liberal opposition that could not be overcome just by demonstrating their shared frustration with the elections. Even though both parties opposed Putin’s return, they could not produce any viable alternative to him together.

Even more important from the point of view of nationalists was a series of events roughly a year later. It was exactly then when the swift reactions of the authorities were conspicuous by their absence, even though the destabilizing power of radical nationalism was ever so clearly demonstrated. In fact, Hutchings and Tolz (2015, 222) describe how after Putin’s re-election there was an “orchestrated anti-immigration campaign on state television,” which contributed to the souring attitude toward migrants, but subsided after the clashes in summer 2013.

Two cases were especially striking. The first happened on 7 July in a town called Pugachev, where a Russian youth was stabbed to death during a fight with an ethnic Caucasian. The events escalated into a riot, with the city’s Russians demanding that Caucasians be deported from the region, and violent attacks broke out. The rioting soon spread to other cities as well, and nationalist activists came to Pugachev from afar to take part in the “cleansing” of the town. The next similar incident took place in Biriulevo, a Moscow suburb, on 10 October. A young Russian man was killed in a street fight by a young man originally from the Caucasus, who was then arrested a few days later. The case provoked violent riots targeted at businesses and individuals of “non-Russian appearance” (Novaia gazeta 2014), not only limited to the Moscow region. The Biriulevo rioting also revealed an inconsistent and problematic official reaction to the ethnic clashes. First, the police were not able to prevent the pogroms; but second, officials were uncomfortable discussing these events and avoided clear statements to the media (Zakharov 2015, 120–121) – something people were clearly expecting from them.

Partly due to discontent with the establishment, the citizens seemed to support the rioters. It is not an overstatement that “at some point, public opinion favored the [anti-immigration social] movement” (Zakharov 2015, 122). As these events were taking place in the capital city, xenophobic attitudes toward migrants among the wider public were measured at their all-time peak (Levada Center, 2015a). Also, 2013 saw an increase in ethnic crime in Russia, especially in the capital cities: eight people were killed and 53 injured in ethnic violence in Moscow, and three killed and 32 injured in St. Petersburg. The majority of victims were of Central Asian origin (Alperovich and Yudina 2014, 8–9).

Despite these clear signals and even the risk of geographical spillover of rioting, the authorities did not follow up with any controlling measures – either locally or on the federal level. Unlike after the Manezh Square riots in 2010, this time the nationalist

groups of Belov and Demushkin were not investigated. Obviously, the leaders of the movements had learned a lesson and were more cautious in their words and deeds, but they were still actively involved at least in online activities: if there had been any will to penalize the known nationalist leaders, it would have been possible.

It seems that until 2014, the radical nationalists' activities both in the online sphere and in real life generally took place without attracting direct repressive measures. Annual events such as the Russian March and Russian May Day (*Russkii pervomai*) on 1 May were organized with permission from administrative organs. In Moscow, the radical nationalists negotiated with the city administration over a time and place for their events – and as a result, the city's Russian March took place in the suburbs. The nationalists wanted to stage the event in the center, but in the end they agreed to change the location according to the plan proposed by the city authorities.

Over the course of the event's history, authorities in various regions have in some years canceled the Russian March (e.g. in 2012 in St Petersburg) or detained participants during or after the march. The nationalists have had their ways of dealing with these controls: for example, since 2012 they have advertised a direct "hotline" to legal advisers, who would help the participants if needed during the marches in their encounters with the police. Thus, it is clear that the Russian March and the movements behind it are not accepted by the state, but rather monitored and managed.

Leaders of the radical nationalist groups have remained the same for years, and they are well-known by the authorities and visible in the media. A good example is Dmitri Demushkin, who often comments on migration-related issues in the press (Argumenty Nedeli 2012; Izvestiia 2012a; 2012b; Izvestiia 2013a; 2013b). The longevity of the key figures of the nationalist movement supports the argument that these "established opponents" are also useful for the regime: it is much easier to monitor the field when the key actors are known.

I base this interpretation on one more peculiarity in the history of these movements: when certain nationalist organizations were banned, the leaders of those movements could easily put up new organizations and continue similar activities.<sup>3</sup> First, an openly violent and racist movement called Slavic Union (*Slavianskii soiuz*, using the acronym SS) was banned in 2010, and then the Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) a bit later in 2011, the latter clearly as a consequence of the Manezh Square riots. The leaders of the banned movements were Demushkin and Belov, respectively, who are today both identified as the leaders of the movement Russians and the Russian March. However, after the clashes in Pugachev and Biriulevo in 2013, the successor organization Russians (*Russkie*), which was formed on the basis of DPNI and Slavic Union, was not treated in a similar way by the state. Instead, the explanation that it stands for "political nationalism" and not violent actions was even printed in newspapers (Izvestiia 2013c).

Why, then, were measures to control ethnic nationalist movements during the 2010s so inconsistent? Although it must partly be due to the equivocal legislation (Verkhovskii 2014), I would argue that part of the reason is that radical nationalists have been needed in order to represent a sort of antipode for the official nationalism. This way the state has been able to present its own, inclusive interpretation of nationalism as the "good" version and to link ethnic nationalism primarily to extremism. I would also argue that it has been useful for the regime to be able to monitor groups that are a visible form of widely invisible attitudes. Despite being a small movement, the popularity of the Russian March, its political slogans, and the movements behind it indicate the level of latent xenophobia within society. However, especially since the mass protests in 2011–2012, the regime has been losing patience for all political contention. When it comes to nationalist activity in particular, the change seemed to take place during 2014 and 2015.

***Tightening control: shared space during and after 2014***

The year 2014 could be described as a turning point for nationalists both within the movement and in terms of their room of maneuver in society. New division lines formed among the nationalists as they all needed to decide their stance on the popular uprisings in Kyiv (the so-called Euro Mайдan or Mайдan movement) in late 2013, the annexation of Crimea in spring 2014, the Ukrainian nationalist groups, and, finally, the war in Donbas. At the same time, the nationalist argument became more important for the state, which in turn applied new mobilizing measures. This section examines the split in the nationalist camp and the growing repression the movements faced from the state.

The Russian nationalist movement was never a unified one. The various groups were – and still are – divided not only according to their perceptions of the current leadership of the country, but also according to their view of the ideal state. For example, Emil Pain distinguishes three forms of nationalist movements in the Internet sphere: imperial, anti-imperial or national-democratic, and liberal nationalism (Pain 2014, 10–12). But in 2014, new division lines appeared. The Mайдan protests in Kyiv were supported by some democratic nationalists, who in doing so could also demonstrate their distrust of the current Russian leadership, which had condemned the protests. But some nationalists opposed the Mайдan movement as a part of their anti-Western ideology. Interestingly, almost all sentiments of the nationalist sphere supported the annexation of Crimea – even the national-democratic wing (Pain 2014, 27–30). As opinion polls in Russia have shown (Levada 2015b), support for the annexation is very high (83% in August 2015), so the nationalists are no exception in this respect. The war in Donbas was and still is a more complex question. Some nationalists quickly embraced the “Novorossiiia” narrative, but some have also questioned the costs and motives of Russia’s participation in the conflict. The Russian media (Kommersant’ 2015a; Moskovskii komsomolets 2015) have reported nationalists leaving to fight in eastern Ukraine on both sides of the front. As early as March 2015, nationalists were reportedly losing interest in the war in eastern Ukraine (Sova 2015c).

One important factor influencing ethnocentric nationalist movements was the diminishing weight of immigration as a political issue in 2014 and 2015. As mentioned above, negative attitudes toward migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus expressed by people in surveys decreased in 2014, mainly because attention was simply elsewhere: the dramatic events in Ukraine and in Syria took the spotlight in leading media. Also, by the end of 2014, the media reported that many migrant workers were leaving Russia because of stricter policies regarding the registration of foreign workers and the ruble’s decline. The phenomenon was even labeled an “exodus” (Moscow Times 2015). Therefore, the radical ethnocentric nationalist movements had lost not only the little unity they had within the nationalist field, but also some of the significance of their main political claims in the eyes of the wider public.

The split of the nationalist field became evident in the Russian March of 2014, which in Moscow drew only about 2000 participants, compared with 6000–8000 in previous years (Laine 2015, 13). One of the reasons was that the former “defense minister” of the “Donetsk Republic,” Igor Strelkov (born Igor Girkin), organized his own event under the name “Russian march for Novorossiiia” in another Moscow suburb. Strelkov was still a popular figure among the nationalists in particular, who perhaps found his militant image appealing. His alternative event drew 1200 participants (Sova 2014), of whom many were inevitably potential or previous attendees of the “original” Russian March. Later he practically disappeared from the public arena for several months, but in October 2015 he announced plans to found an opposition party for the next Duma elections (Kommersant’

2015c). This was not the first time there had been multiple events called the Russian March in one city (see e.g. Zuev 2013, 103), but this time it was clear that all of them remained rather weak demonstrations. One more novelty took place in November 2014, namely, an official and public mass event that was arranged in the center of Moscow on the Day of National Unity. A pro-government concert under the name “We [are] united” (*My ediny*) attracted 75,000 people. The event emphasized Russia’s multiethnicity and multinationality in its online public relations, and, unsurprisingly, Russian flags were displayed both online and at the concert. Interestingly, the event was put up very quickly – the first advertisements in social media appeared just weeks beforehand – yet it succeeded in drawing a remarkable audience. For these reasons, it is likely that “We are united” was an example of an ersatz movement (Robertson 2011, 194–197), organized from above in order to demonstrate the regime’s popularity – in this case, the popularity of the state’s version of nationalism – on the streets and in the media.

About two weeks before the Russian March in 2014, one of the leaders of the movement, Aleksandr Belov was arrested on embezzlement charges. Since then, additional charges have been added and he remains in prison.<sup>4</sup> The repression of nationalists increased during 2015. In April, the leader of the *Russkie* movement, Dmitri Demushkin, was arrested for eight days (Interfax 2015), long enough to ruin the Russian May Day event planned for the following week. Most likely this arrest – as well as Belov’s before the Russian March in 2014 – was a pre-emptive strike from the regime. During spring 2015, the homes of several nationalist leaders were searched.

The year 2014 marked a certain low point for Russian nationalists. In late 2013, it seemed they had gained momentum, with the help of an anti-immigrant campaign in the governmental media, but this “opportunity” was soon lost as developments in Ukraine were unraveling. It is hard to say whether the radical, ethnocentric nationalists could really have posed a serious political challenge to the regime in 2013 – even when they then demonstrated the destabilizing power they undoubtedly have in escalating regional violent riots in Moscow – but in 2014, it became clear that the radical nationalists could no longer do so. Whereas the Russian March of 2014 revealed the internal split in the nationalist field, a year later it demonstrated the power of external controlling measures toward the nationalist movements taken by the regime. In August 2015 a court case was brought against the *Russkie* movement. Soon after that, two weeks before the march, a court banned the movement as extremist (Kommersant’ 2015c). Demushkin was arrested for extremism on the eve of the Russian March in Moscow, and some detentions were made during the march as well.

As a result of the repressions and the internal split, the Russian March in the suburb of Liublino gathered only some 700 participants. In 2015, the organizers had clearly tried to avoid referring to Ukraine or other topics that had divided the nationalists when marketing the event. The main slogans, introduced in advance in social media and on the homepage of the movement, rather focused on the oppositional nature of the movement – they demanded political rights for nationalists and freedom for those well-known figures who had been detained. The march was even labeled the “Russian March against dictatorship” (*Russkii marsh protiv diktatury*). The split of the nationalist movements was visible not only in the poor turnout of the original Russian March in Moscow, but also in participation at two other events using the name of Russian March, happening at the same time. “The Russian March for Russian revenge” and “The Russian March for the Russian world” drew some 360 and 100 participants, respectively. At the same time, the official celebration “We are united” was arranged again in the center of Moscow, and according to police drew around 85,000 people (Sova 2015b).



These nationalist movements are highly dependent on their leaders, and therefore the arrests alone could have scuttled their traditional events. The home searches and ban on the *Russkie* movement have likely made previous attendees more cautious. The pressure is not all-encompassing, but it is exactly that inconsistency that makes the atmosphere among the nationalists more uncertain. The repressive measures are not new, but their severity toward the anti-governmental nationalists has grown significantly. Since 2014, the state has no longer been willing to share the societal space with radical nationalists. Instead, it wishes to push them further to the margins and to use the nationalist appeal as a political tool itself.

### *New actors enter the shared space*

The actions taken against the dissentful nationalist activists in 2014 indicate that the state is no longer as tolerant toward them as it used to be. Until 2013, and even surprisingly after the ethnically motivated clashes in October that year, there were no large-scale control measures taken toward ethnocentric nationalists in Russia. The repressive means described above raise a question of timing: why does the state want to control the nationalists now that they are already weaker due to internal divisions? One answer relates to the notion of “normalcy” and “nationalism as consensus” mentioned earlier. After 2012, when the massive street protests had showed their might, the state reacted quickly by limiting opportunities for political disagreement, popular gatherings, and media accessibility for oppositional demands. But ethnocentric nationalists were not targeted with these measures in particular. On the contrary, the anti-migration campaign on Russian television fed xenophobic attitudes. One could say that tolerating and even fueling ethnocentric nationalism was one attempt from above to build a societal consensus after 2012, which failed.

But the appeal of nationalism has not disappeared. It has become crucial for the state to define which forms of activities are acceptable and unacceptable in society (Cheskin and March 2015, 269; Novaia gazeta 2015). Dissentful (nationalist) contention has encountered serious problems, while other forms of nationalist mobility become more commonplace. Among the new movements to be formed is the National-Liberation Movement (*Natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie*, NOD), a patriotic project led by Duma Deputy Evgeny Fedorov. Its close ties with the Kremlin are evident in its slogan, “*Rodina, svoboda, Putin*” – the motherland, freedom, Putin. NOD has been actively taking part in pro-Kremlin actions in social media as well as on the streets. For example, a representative of the movement’s youth wing, Maria Katasonova, is combining the aggressive nationalist message with more personal pieces of lifestyle blogging in social media channels such as VK.com, Twitter, and Instagram. Yudina (2015, 57) suggests that NOD is one of the few new nationalist organizations established directly by the Kremlin.

NOD works closely with an organization called Antimaidan, whose name refers to the popular uprisings in Kyiv in late 2013. According to the nationalist-conservative view, these sorts of uprisings are orchestrated from abroad. The official rhetoric of the external threat posed to Russia by the West is shared by the active figures of Antimaidan, of whom many have connections to other nationalist-conservative groups. The Russian Antimaidan is a movement encompassing various actors and groupings – Eurasianists, conservatives, and even motorcyclists – and is therefore able to gather big crowds to its street events, one of the biggest of which was held in February 2015. As Horvath (2014, 469, 474–475) has shown, these sorts of nationalist movements are by no means a novelty: after the first cycle of so-called color revolutions, Russian nationalist movements previously

working in the margins consolidated their status in the struggle against “orangism” (the Ukrainian events in 2003–2004 were dubbed the “Orange Revolution”).

Some existing pro-government nationalist groups have also gained momentum: for example, the Rodina party, reorganized in 2012, has become more active (Sova 2015b). The history of Rodina (“Motherland”) is in many ways interconnected with state nationalism, and it is often mentioned as the one example of state co-optation measures toward nationalists – not because it would have been the only one, but because it was successful. In August 2015, the party introduced a new youth organization, TIGRy rodiny, whose name movement leaders say works as an abbreviation of the Russian words for tradition, empire, state, and motherland (*traditsiia, imperiia, gosudarstvo, rodina*) (Lenta.ru, 31 August 2015). Unlike the NOD and Antimaidan movements, the new Rodina aims at parliamentary representation.

The Kremlin has struggled to square its use of the nationalist argument in official rhetoric with its need to maintain stability within society. As a consequence, nationalist movements are treated with “carrots and sticks” (Horvath 2015, 832–833), with access to the public sphere for compliant ones and stricter repression for dissentful ones. The purge, as Horvath calls it, not only broke the connection between the national democrats and the left-liberal opposition that they had formed during the electoral protests, but it also sealed a partnership between the (consentful and compliant) Russian nationalists and the Kremlin (Horvath 2015, 834).

It seems there could be many actors willing to enter the societal space of nationalism, benefiting from widespread attitudes that had been shared between the official state nationalism and the radical ethnocentric movements. The new, consentful actors share the official view of a righteous Russian nation that the state defends against external threats. Yudina (2015, 57) stated that the Kremlin “has not established any special organizations to air its new policy,” except NOD, whose role she sees as rather insignificant. Yudina says that this means there is no need for “subtleties” when supporting the presidential policy. But it also means that the consentful actors of the society can be born out of genuine, private incentive. Following the categorization of Cheskin and March, both dissentful and consentful actors choose the behavioral pattern that could be either contention or compliance. The movements that now seem consentful and compliant could also try their appeal in a consentful way of contention. Even if, for example, the Rodina movement is now in line with the official version of nationalism, it could still deliver this message in competing ways, not in compliance with the current political system later.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have shown how state policies toward nationalist contention in politics changed during and after 2014. Before that, radical nationalists were not systematically repressed, even though the state had generated means to restrict political contention in general after the mass protests in 2011–2012. The ethnocentric radical nationalists were tolerated, and some of their views were even seconded in a media campaign against migration, until the strategy to build societal consensus this way came to an end in late 2013. After that, in 2014, the radical nationalists’ existence in the shared space was challenged. On one hand, the change took place inside the nationalist movement: the radical nationalists became weak and fragmented as they were divided by their stances vis-à-vis various aspects of the crisis in Ukraine. Additionally, the political claims they had made lost their appeal as negative and even aggressive attitudes toward immigrants among the wider public eased. But, on the other hand, the state stepped up control over nationalists. Today, those who do not



publicly support the official policy are pushed to the margins – and this includes nationalist actors as well.

In short, if the strategy of the regime toward radical nationalists was previously based on “monitoring and management,” now it has shifted into a more intense form of pure control. In the years 2012–2014, and especially during the ethnic clashes in Moscow in late 2013, the radical ethno-nationalist movements were rather visible in the media and online. When the Russian March reached its largest turnout in 2013, no detentions were made, and the movements participating in it could continue as they did before the ethnic clashes. It seems that the radical, dissentful nationalists were playing a certain role in the Kremlin’s strategy of managing political contention. I argue that this role was twofold: first, the nationalists were posed as the undesirable form of nationalism, the “bad nationalism,” as an antipode for the “good nationalism” that the state itself was representing. Second, the radical nationalists offered an outlet for those largely invisible racist and xenophobic attitudes. The leaders of the movements had remained the same for a long time, so they surely were well-known among the security services, and thus easy to monitor. Also the key happening, the Russian March, took place in a way that was familiar to all already beforehand, and the leaders of this event were also amenable to negotiation.

The change in this strategy, however, took place in 2014. The anti-migration attitudes expressed on TV as well as the tolerating of radical nationalists’ activities could indeed have been a strategy imposed from above, but the riots in late 2013 showed that this campaign carried serious risks. After the crisis in Ukraine started and especially after the annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin became more concerned about societal stability, and instead of having the ethnocentric radical nationalists as an “antipode,” it wanted to get all the dissentful forms of contention under control. The nationalist leaders, who previously could act rather freely, were detained, home searches were conducted, and some movements were banned. At the same time, nationalist movements loyal to the state emerged, and the state organized its own official celebrations on the Day of National Unity, which had previously been dominated by the radical nationalists. In other words, as the state wanted to gain a monopoly on nationalism, it could no longer stand contention in that space.

The ethnocentric, anti-governmental nationalist movement split into several factions during the crisis in Ukraine in 2014. Many of the most visible nationalist figures have been arrested, some for shorter periods of time but others, such as Aleksandr Belov, for considerably longer. Also the *Russkie* movement was banned in October 2015. So the dissentful nationalists first faced ideological challenges and then intensifying state repression, whereas nationalist movements that comply with the official rhetoric, such as Antimaidan or the new Rodina party, have become more visible in the offline and online spheres. In other words, since 2014, the dissentful nationalist movements have lost the societal space to the consentful nationalist movements.

The appearance of new nationalist-conservative movements that at first glance seem to be in line with the official rhetoric but that might in the long term prove more extreme than the current leadership do add uncertainty to the future. Now that the anti-government radical nationalists have been pushed further to the margins, there might be space for other nationalist pleas in the society – even those that the state is not willing to use itself, for one reason or another. Ultimately, there are no reasons to assume that ethnic nationalist claims could not be integrated into a patriotic and initially pro-Kremlin message. However, the state has a long history of managing nationalist movements, and it has showed in recent years that its tolerance toward *any* political contention has diminished. As long as the tense political situation both internationally and domestically prevails,

ensuring the dominance in that previously shared space of nationalism remains a key challenge of the state.

Nationalism as such will not disappear, and even if the xenophobic attitudes related to it are on the decline, they have not lost their popular appeal forever. The Russian leadership has chosen to use the nationalist argument, which indeed is powerful and flexible but carries with it serious risks. Only time will show if these risks can be controlled in times of growing discontent and diminishing resources.

## Notes

1. One illustrative example of the conceptual battle can be found from President Vladimir Putin's (2014) speech at the Valdai forum in October 2014, where he nominated himself as the "biggest nationalist of the country" – and continued that this is the case as long as nationalism is interpreted as an idea that functions for the sake of the country. This commentary could be seen as a way to disarm those actors who had previously defined themselves nationalists.
2. Hybrid regimes, according to Robertson (2011, 6), is a broad category encompassing various set of regimes "in which at least some legitimate and public political competition coexists with an organizational and institutional playing field that renders this competition unfair."
3. For example, on the homepage of the banned Slavic Union, there was a direct link to the new page and new contact information of the nationalists, even though it was stated on the same page that the activities of the movement were declared illegal in the territory of the Russian Federation (demushkin.com, 19 March 2010).
4. Belov's court hearing was postponed several times, first until January 2016, then again until June 2016, and finally until August 2016 (Kommersant' 2015b; Lifenews 2016; Kommersant' 2016).

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## **PUBLICATION II**

## **“Biggest Nationalist in the Country”: Self-Descriptive Uses of “Nationalist” in Contemporary Russia**

Veera Laine

Nationalism is an ism rarely used as self-description. This article suggests that nationalist discourses are on the move, meaning the concept may be used in novel ways. In Russia, for example, the president recently identified himself as a nationalist, claiming ownership of the concept in the long-standing struggle against manifestations of oppositional nationalism. The article asks, who describes themselves as nationalists in contemporary Russia, how do they define the concept, and how did it change during the years 2008–2018, when nationalism as a political idea became increasingly important in Russian politics? Drawing from Russian newspaper sources, the article suggests that diverse, self-proclaimed nationalist actors rely on narrow ethnic understandings of the concept and do not embrace the president’s interpretation of multinational nationalism.

**Key words:** *History of Concepts; isms; Nationalism; Rhetoric; Russia*

In October 2014, seven months after the annexation of Crimea, Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered his annual speech in the Valdai forum, an event for political and business circles of the country. In the dialogue that followed, the president was asked whether patriotism in Russia was going in the “wrong direction.” He answered that patriotism can indeed “turn into nationalism (*natsionalizm*),” which is a dangerous tendency, but continued that

I am the biggest nationalist in Russia (*samyi bol’shoy natsionalist v Rossii – eto ja*). However, the greatest and most appropriate kind of nationalism is when you act and conduct policies that will benefit the people. However, if nationalism means intolerance of other people, chauvinism – this would destroy this country, which was initially formed as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state.<sup>1</sup>

It was not the first time Putin described himself as a nationalist (in 2008, Putin told German Chancellor Angela Merkel that both himself and newly

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<sup>1</sup> Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, kremlin.ru 24 October 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860> (Russian originals added to the translations provided by the Kremlin website).



elected president Dmitri Medvedev were “Russian nationalists”<sup>2</sup>), but this time the comment received more attention, particularly because “rising nationalism”<sup>3</sup> had become a common explanation for the change towards a more aggressive foreign policy. At the same time, Putin’s most likely impromptu statement illustrates a conceptual battle that has been ongoing in Russia for years over the meanings and values attached to *nationalism*. On the one hand, the battle is being fought between those in power and those who aim to challenge that power by making various claims, such as oppositional nationalists advocating a “Russian nation-state” or representatives of minority nationalisms seeking stronger political recognition. But, on the other hand, the competition over the meanings of *nationalism* is interlinked with the political leadership’s aims to justify certain foreign policy measures in the name of the nation and its shared interests. During at least the past decade, the struggle over *nationalism* has been a crucial one in Russian political discourse.

Yet, in order to map the struggle over nationalism as a concept, one must subscribe to the complexity of the relationship between a concept and a word. As Quentin Skinner explains, possession of a concept is standardly – but not necessarily – signaled by the use of a corresponding term. For example, a concept in an actor’s mind may exist before they employ a certain word to describe it, or there may be words that many habitually use in a similar way but cannot explicate their meanings.<sup>4</sup> This complexity applies to *nationalism* as well, and the challenges that follow are both analytical and empirical. On one hand, the actors not referring to nationalism as a word may still contribute to defining the position of the concept in the social reality. As Pauli Kettunen has noted, “those who use nationalist language often fail to recognize it.”<sup>5</sup> But, on the other hand, those using the word may have widely divergent understandings of the concept.

In regards to *nationalism*, it is pivotal to note that the vocabularies connected to the concept may, actually, not include the word at all. Instead, words such as nation, national, or nationality may be – and definitely, have been – more

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<sup>2</sup> “Vladimir Putin: ‘Medvedev ne men’shiy russkiy natsionalist, chem ya’ [Vladimir Putin: ‘Medvedev is no less Russian nationalist than I am’],” *Komsomol’skaya Pravda*, 8 March 2008, <https://www.msk.kp.ru/daily/24060/303858/> (accessed 10 June 2019).

<sup>3</sup> “Surveys show Russian nationalism is on the rise,” *The Washington Post* 30 May 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/30/surveys-show-russian-nationalism-is-on-the-rise-this-explains-a-lot-about-the-countrys-foreign-and-domestic-politics/?utm\\_term=.3a118fd7cea6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/30/surveys-show-russian-nationalism-is-on-the-rise-this-explains-a-lot-about-the-countrys-foreign-and-domestic-politics/?utm_term=.3a118fd7cea6); “The return of Russian nationalism,” *Financial Times* 12 October 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/edb595d8-aeba-11e7-beba-5521c713abf4>.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Language and Political Change,” in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, eds. Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), 8–11.

<sup>5</sup> Pauli Kettunen, “The concept of nationalism in discussions on a European society,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 342–369, 342.

significant in defining and re-defining the role of *nationalism* in the society. In Russian, nation can be referred to with two distinct words, *narod* and *natsiya*, of which the former appeared to the language earlier. Nouns *narodnost'* and *natsional'nost'* were introduced in Russian language as equivalents for the French *nationalité*. For example, the doctrine that later became labelled as “official nationality,” introduced by Count Sergei Uvarov, the minister of education after the Decembrist uprising in the 1820s, consisted of the notions of autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nationality (*narodnost'*). As Aleksei Miller notes, Uvarov aimed to stress national consolidation of the Russian people but to denounce, at the same time, the constitution and national representation as inappropriate for Russia. Those liberal ideas were often connected to *natsiya* and *natsional'nost'* – terms that were subject to censorship until 1880s, when they gradually exceeded *narod* and *narodnost'* in popularity.<sup>6</sup> In contemporary use, *narod* still has the primary meaning of people (also in the sense of “common people”), whereas *natsiya* has a stronger connotation of ethnic group, and of a political entity.

However, in the discourses of tsarist Russia—like in other parts of Europe<sup>7</sup>—, *nationalism* (*natsionalizm*) still remained less popular than terms such as national cause, national spirit, and nationality. In late nineteenth-century uses, nationalism was described in explicitly negative terms. Miller quotes philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, who stated that “the difference between nationality and nationalism (*natsional'nost'*; *natsionalizm*) is like the one between personality and egoism.”<sup>8</sup> Also elsewhere in Europe, the early uses of *nationalism* were “abuse words directed at political opponents.”<sup>9</sup> The negative connotation of *nationalism* is, thus, deeply rooted in Russian history.

As Jussi Kurunmäki and Jani Marjanen note, isms are contested and historically changing concepts that have significant rhetorical potential. In political debates, the use of an ism may be an attempt to “colonize” the discourse by pointing out the “correct” meaning of the issue at hand. Simultaneously, an ism might serve in making a claim in specific circumstances. Thus, the possibility to connect particularistic and universalistic claims makes isms useful in political rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> The rhetorical

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<sup>6</sup> Aleksei Miller, “Istoriya ponyatiya *natsiya* v Rossii,” [History of the concept of *nation* in Russia] in *Ponyatiya o Rossii: K istoricheskoi semantike imperskogo perioda*, [Concepts on Russia: On historical semantics of the imperial period] ed. Aleksei Miller et al (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2012), 7–49, 24; 40.

<sup>7</sup> Kurunmäki and Marjanen, “Isms, ideologies and setting the agenda for public debate”, 263–264; Aira Kemiläinen, *Nationalism. Problems concerning the word, the concept and classification* (Jyväskylä: Studia Historica Jyväskyläensia III, 1964), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Istoriya ponyatiya natsiya*,” 39.

<sup>9</sup> Kurunmäki and Marjanen, “Isms, ideologies and setting the agenda”, 264.

<sup>10</sup> Jussi Kurunmäki and Jani Marjanen, “A rhetorical view on isms: an introduction,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 241–255, 241–242, 244; see also Jani

appeal of *nationalism* stems from the same source, even though it is a rather peculiar example within the category of isms. Scholarly debates on whether *nationalism* should be understood as an ideology<sup>11</sup> have not reached a consensus, but the significance of the political idea itself can hardly be denied.

Reinhart Koselleck, drawing his examples mainly from the German political debates, explains that unlike many other isms in modern history, *nationalism* remains one that cannot be used as self-description (*Selbstbenennung*).<sup>12</sup> However, it seems that nationalist discourses are currently on the move—and perhaps not only in Russia. The President of the United States has also recently described himself as a nationalist, adding, according to the *New York Times*, that “it [the word nationalist] should be brought back.”<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Putin, in turn, repeated his statement in October 2018 when the chairman of the Valdai forum asked whether the president still considers himself a nationalist. Now, better prepared than four years earlier, the president explained his view of Russia as a historically tolerant, multi-ethnic state, where (ethnic) Russians remain “a state-forming nation.” He continued:

[b]ut if we huff out this caveman nationalism (*peshchernyi natsionalizm*) and throw mud at people of other ethnic groups, we will destroy this country. [...] I want Russia to survive, including in the interests of the Russian people (*russkogo naroda*). In this context, I have said that I am the most proper and true nationalist and a most effective one too.<sup>14</sup>

By adding epithets to the concept, the president suggested that two forms of *nationalism* actually exist: a negative, “archaic” form and a second constructive form, with the president representing and defending the latter. In this way, the rhetorical move resembles paradiastolic maneuvers in which speakers wish to explain the negative meanings connected to a certain concept as a virtue.<sup>15</sup>

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Marjanen, “Editorial: Ism Concepts in Science and Politics,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 13, no. 1 (2018), vi.

<sup>11</sup> Umut Özkırımlı, *Theories of Nationalism. A Critical Introduction* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan 2010); Michael Freeden, *Liberal Languages. Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 207.

<sup>12</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006), 218, 235–237.

<sup>13</sup> “‘Use That Word!’: Trump Embraces the ‘Nationalist’ Label”, *The New York Times*, 23 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/23/us/politics/nationalist-president-trump.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, kremlin.ru, 18 October 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848>.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Ainur Elmgren, “The double-edged sword: the political appropriation of the concept of populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 320–341.

In addition to the presidential statements, popular opinion regarding *nationalism* seems to be in flux. In a poll conducted by the independent Levada Center in August 2015, only 20% of the respondents stated that they view the term positively, whereas 64% of the respondents view it as a negative term (17% chose not to answer). Six years earlier, in October 2009, the shares had been 9% and 75%, respectively.<sup>16</sup> According to Kurunmäki and Marjanen, “the process in which certain groups have chosen to make particular isms self-descriptions of their intellectual or political position [...] should be regarded as key instances in which ideological formations are renegotiated.”<sup>17</sup> I suggest that it is worth studying whether this process regarding *nationalism* is currently taking place in Russia. Thus, this article aims to contribute to the rhetorical study of isms as well as to the study of nationalism(s) by asking, who uses the concept of nationalism as self-description in contemporary Russia, and how exactly is the concept employed in those contexts? Has that changed during the past decade, when nationalism as an instrument and as an argument has gained more importance in Russian domestic and foreign politics?

The material used in the article consists of newspaper media texts rather than just political language, even though presidential statements have motivated the research question. In the following analysis, the question of political power as well as distance from or opposition to it will be discussed. Several additional research questions can therefore be posed. Are the self-descriptive cases reported in the press a reaction to or a reflection of the presidential statements? Does the material support an interpretation that the president’s self-description as a nationalist could in fact broaden the “conditions of possibility” for self-descriptive usages more generally, and thus make nationalism as a concept more acceptable?

Conceptual history accepts that the meanings given to political concepts are never fixed in space and time. Rather, the change in political language reflects fluctuations in political thought. In order to trace that change in meaning, Skinner proposes to analyze three aspects of a given term in time.. First, the term has a meaning (what does the term refer to?); second, it is applied in a certain context (in what situations does the term appear?); and third, there are certain values attached to the term (is the term perceived positively, neutrally, or negatively?).<sup>18</sup> These three questions form the methodological basis of the article. In the self-descriptive cases to be analyzed, the speakers aim to give the term either a neutral or a positive

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<sup>16</sup> “Ksenofobiya i natsionalizm [Xenophobia and nationalism],” Levada Center press release, 28 August 2015, <http://www.levada.ru/2015/08/25/ksenofobiya-i-natsionalizm/>.

<sup>17</sup> Kurunmäki and Marjanen, “Isms, ideologies and setting the agenda,” 273.

<sup>18</sup> Skinner, “Language and Political Change,” 8–11.

value, and therefore the emphasis of this article is on the changing contexts and meanings instead.

Pauli Kettunen emphasizes the wide gap between the meanings of *nationalism* in everyday speech and in scholarly debate.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, analytical use of nationalism varies from one discipline to another; those studying theory of nationalism approach it as a (naturalized) understanding of nation-states as key components of the world and nations as the primary groups of belonging, whereas in political science or international relations nationalism has more limited meaning as a policy instrument. (These analytical understandings of *nationalism* are not necessarily that far from each other – the usefulness of nationalist instrument in politics is much due to the fact that it is widely, intuitively, and emotionally accepted as a basis of world-view.) Scholars of the post-Soviet nationalism(s) in Russia have applied the concept of nationalism mainly in the narrow sense of political science, but the broader perspective is gaining ground. Marlene Laruelle describes this ongoing change in the interpretations of *nationalism* as “‘exiting the political’ and ‘entering the social.’”<sup>20</sup> In this process, recognizing and explaining various gaps between different understandings of *nationalism* itself will be useful.

Accepting the complexity of isms in general and *nationalism* in particular means that clear-cut definitions are both difficult to produce and sometimes superfluous. When tracing conceptual change, definitions become one part of the research question. In this article, however, I have also found John Breuilly’s idea on nationalist argument useful in understanding *nationalism* as an analytical concept. Self-descriptive uses studied in this article take often times place in the sphere of political language, where various arguments are employed, countered and defended. Breuilly defines *nationalism* as “political movements seeking or exercising state power and justifying such actions with nationalist argument.” The nationalist argument consists of three assertions: that there exists a nation “with an explicit and peculiar character,” that the interests and values of this nation take priority over any other nation’s interests and values, and that the nation needs to be as independent as possible.<sup>21</sup> Breuilly’s definition stresses the role of political agency, which I welcome precisely because nationalism is often described as a phenomenon “rising” like a natural force. It is however important to note that in the material used for this article, not all those speaking about nationalism are political actors, but their utterances nevertheless contribute to the nationalist discourse. Vera Tolz explains that

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<sup>19</sup> Kettunen, “The Concept of nationalism,” 342.

<sup>20</sup> Marlène Laruelle, *Russian nationalism. Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlegrounds* (London and New York: Routledge 2019), 5.

<sup>21</sup> John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1–2.

Russia is “an example of peculiar interplay between state-framed (promoted by Russian elites) and counter-state (largely, but not exclusively, advocated by representatives of non-Russian minorities) variants of nationhood.”<sup>22</sup> Today, in addition to that employed by national minorities, the oppositional understanding of “Russianness” can also stress ethnic Russian nationhood.

### *Analysis of the material*

The primary source material used in this article consists of texts from Russian newspaper media, collected from the Integrum database<sup>23</sup> using various search commands, such as “I [am a] nationalist”; “I, as a nationalist”; “Considering myself a nationalist” (“*ja natsionalist*”; “*ja, kak natsionalist*”; “*schitaya sebya natsionalistom*”) between January 2008 and December 2018. Sources were limited to print media, including both central and regional press. Today, the significance of online media as a source of information, for younger Russians in particular, has exceeded the traditional press and even television in popularity. However, online outlets were not taken into account in this case because the background of a single online text, blog, or publication remains difficult to trace. Even though the field of central and regional print media is also diverse, all the texts in the collection have been exposed to editorial work, which can be assumed to have a certain “filtering” function. For a similar reason, social media was not included: language typical for social media such as comments intended for like-minded readers, provocations, or discussions in potentially smaller homogeneous groups, depicts the society in very different terms than the language of traditional media. When collecting the material, also texts that referred to actors other than those in Russia, for example in other post-Soviet or European countries or in the U.S., were excluded. After deleting duplicates, a sample of 54 texts in which actors self-described themselves as nationalists remained.

Clearly, these 54 texts are not thought to represent Russian media in general. Instead, the small but particular collection of self-descriptive uses of nationalist offers insights on the position of nationalism as a phenomenon in contemporary Russia. Because of the strong negative connotations of the term, the speakers are likely to elaborate on the understandings of the concept in their social reality.

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<sup>22</sup> Vera Tolz, “Russia. Empire or a Nation-State-in-the-Making?” in *What Is a Nation? Europe 1789-1914*, eds. Timothy Baycroft and Mark Hewitson (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006), 293–294.

<sup>23</sup> Integrum is a commercial collection of Russian-language full-text databases, owned by Integrum World Wide. The scope of the collection is around 500 000 000 digitized materials from 10 000 sources.

Despite the limited number of the texts, some notions of the studied period as a whole can be made. In the years 2012–2013, the texts addressed topics related to the nationality policy of the Russian Federation as well as the ethnic tensions in the country. Vladimir Putin’s essay on nationalities policies, published in January 2012 as part of his presidential election campaign,<sup>24</sup> directly sparked some commentaries in the press but also illustrates the significance of the topic in the domestic public discussion at the time. Interestingly, some radical oppositional nationalist figures were interviewed in the media, for example regarding their views on migration, throughout the period under study. After 2014, these topics moved to the background as texts in general started to reflect more speakers’ stances on the situation in Ukraine. At the same time, the political control over oppositional nationalist actors increased, and the field of radical nationalists became increasingly fragmented.<sup>25</sup>

Placing the findings of the article into a wider context of the nationalist discourses requires some observations on topics and actors *not* represented in the material. It seems that the political actors who labeled themselves as nationalists were often positioned in the margins of the socio-political sphere. There are some political actors both within the political establishment as well as in party politics who are habitually described as (Russian) nationalists in the media. For example, such politicians as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the long-time leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), or Dmitri Rogozin, the Deputy Prime Minister in 2011–2018 and one of the founding members of a “national-patriotic” political party Rodina, were active in politics and visible in the media during the frame of this study, but did not describe themselves as nationalists in the newspapers.

It is crucial to note that no unified nationalist discourse exists in Russia today, not within the political establishment nor among those who oppose or challenge it. As Marlène Laruelle puts it, “there is no birthplace of ‘Russian nationalism’ in contemporary Russia.”<sup>26</sup> In a similar manner, the relationship between the state and various nationalist actors and movements could best be described as a continuum instead of two opposing poles. Laruelle divides

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<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Rossiya. Natsional’nyi vopros [Russia – The national question],” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 23 January 2012, [http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1\\_national.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html).

<sup>25</sup> Emil Pain, “Sovremenniy russkii natsionalizm v zerkale runeta [Contemporary Russian nationalism in the mirror of RuNet],” in *Rossiya – ne Ukraina. Sovremennye aktsenty natsionalizma: sb. Statei [Russia is not Ukraine. Contemporary accents of nationalisms, edited volume]*, ed. Aleksandr Verkhovskiy (Moscow: Tsentr “Sova,” 2014); Vera Alperovich and Natalia Yudina, “Zatishche pered burey? Ksenofobiya i radikal’nyi natsionalizm i protivodeystvie im v 2014 godu v Rossii [Calm before the storm? Xenophobia and radical nationalism and the countermeasures to them in Russia in 2014],” Sova Center, 26 March 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Laruelle, *Russian nationalism*, 7–8.



Russian nationalist formations into four groups: “official” groups, who act inside the state apparatus; “co-opted statist nationalists,” who are seen as supporting the regime but might express mild criticism of it; “mid-opposition nationalists,” who might enjoy some support from the state but who cannot fully rely on it; and “full opposition nationalists,” who organize activities against the state.<sup>27</sup> Yet, none of these groups speaks with one voice or has a single understanding of the type of nationalism they promote. However, in the material of this article, only the “full opposition nationalists” were represented.

The voices in the material are predominantly male. After an additional search, I detected three cases where speakers describe themselves using the feminine form of nationalist, *natsionalistka*. Of all the 54 texts in the material, only four represented female voices. While the material was not limited to political discourse alone, I suspect that this finding mirrors the wide gender gap in Russian politics in general.

### ***“I’m a nationalist and not hiding it”—variations of ethnic Russian nationalism***

In the following section, I analyze passages where the speakers describe themselves as nationalists. Because of the concept’s strong social stigma, the speakers feel the need to explain their interpretation of *nationalism*. The cases are divided into two main categories. The first, considerably larger category encompasses cases primarily representing an understanding of *nationalism* that prioritizes ethnic Russianness, while the second category includes references to the minority nationalism of titular nations. Admittedly, ethnicity is a fluid concept in itself. Here, I refer to ethnic not only as the contrary for territorial or civic, but in cases where the speakers describe Russian nation as bound together by ethnicity in the narrow sense, not necessarily by culture or language.<sup>28</sup>

Most speakers who defined themselves as nationalists in the media are well-known radical nationalist politicians and activists in Russia. In the time frame of the study, the leaders of the right-wing radical nationalist movement Russian March, Dmitri Demushkin and Vladimir Tor, as well as nationalist publishers and bloggers Konstantin Krylov and Egor Prosvirnin, identified themselves as nationalists. For these nationalists, a key rhetorical move is either to stress their interpretation of *nationalism* as a moderate political idea

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>28</sup> For example, Oxana Shevel distinguishes three alternatives of ethnic “Russianness” – the nation as ethnic Russians, an Eastern-Slavic nation, and a Russian-speaking nation. Of these, the first is perhaps most ambiguous, but also most narrow interpretation. Oxana Shevel, “Russian Nation-building from Yel’tsin to Medvedev: Ethnic, Civic, or Purposefully Ambiguous?” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 2 (2011): 179–202, 185–189.

in comparison to some others, or to frame their approach as purely “theoretical” and contrast it to violent approaches. For example, Prosvirnin, the blogger behind the portal called “Sputnik i pogrom” employs such rhetoric:

I am a democrat, I am a liberal, I am a nationalist, because I think that someone needs to guarantee human rights and liberal democracy. And the only one who can guarantee them is the nation (*natsiya*), and the organic form for the existence of the nation is the nation-state. Definitely not only democratization and liberalization, but also returning capitalism to the country, one of the most necessary elements is implementing the nation-state and collecting the Russian people (*sbor russkogo naroda*) into this unified state.<sup>29</sup>

For Prosvirnin, being a nationalist means advocating an ethnic “Russian nation-state.” The discourse on ethnic Russians as an “oppressed majority” has been vivid among the oppositional nationalist movements for at least a decade. It suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, that the key problem for the development of democracy in Russia is overrepresentation of the ethnic minorities in the power structures of the Russian federation.<sup>30</sup> Connecting the idea of a Russian nation-state with the discourse on being an “oppressed majority” is in direct contradiction with the state rhetoric, which encourages the radical nationalist figures to justify their interpretation by invoking democracy and liberalism. Prosvirnin was not the only radical nationalist stressing (what he understands as) democratic goals; Konstantin Krylov has done so as well: “I am a nationalist, nationalist-democrat. I am a classical European democrat with my own conviction, that is, for me the rights of the majority are extremely important.” In the same interview, Krylov—who was at that moment charged with inciting ethnic hatred—lamented the fact that people do not know who the nationalists really are:

Many people are convinced that we are some sort of enemy of Russia, fascists, who are ready to kill someone, destroy the country. I, for example, do not think that killing some Tadjik caretaker or even someone from the Caucasus region would contribute to liberating Russia (*sposobstvet osvobozhdeniyu Rossii*).<sup>31</sup>

The radical oppositional nationalists do not hide their understanding of “Russianness” as consisting of an exclusively Russian (or Eastern-Slavic) ethnicity. The question remains, of course, who they consider as “proper” ethnic Russians in this narrow sense, but the conceptual choices seem consistent. They use the primarily ethnic terms for Russians (*russkii*) and

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<sup>29</sup> “Ideal’naya Rossiya ‘Sputnika i pogroma’ [The ideal Russia of the ‘Sputnik i pogrom’],” *The New Times (Новое Время)*, 19 October 2015 (the translations of the material further in the text are done by the author).

<sup>30</sup> Irina Orlova, “Bol’shinstvo pod ugrozoi! ... men’shinstva [Majority is under the threat! ... of minority],” *Russkii žurnal* 11 (2007): 86–91; see also Shevel, “Russian Nation-building,” 187–188.

<sup>31</sup> “Moe delo – eto pozorishche [My case – it’s a disgrace],” Lenta.ru, 05 October 2012.

nation (*natsiya*) instead of the more inclusive variants (*rossiiskii; narod*). For them, nationalism is an accepted ideology that one can be proud of, the only limitation of which is its assumed close relation to violent “hooliganism.”

Today’s nationalist actors recognize (and resist) the connection between nationalism and street violence, a link that was reinforced in the 1990s and early 2000s. The extra-parliamentary nationalist movements and the skinheads in particular gained much visibility in Russian society during those decades.<sup>32</sup> Also during the period under study, there were several occasions when radical nationalist movements created serious instability within Russian society, for example by mobilizing violent ethnic clashes in Moscow in 2010 and 2013.<sup>33</sup> The violent, radical nationalist conflicts inevitably affect the meanings and values attached to *nationalism* today. But, as Vera Tolz and Stephen Hutchings have shown, the political establishment has also fueled these sentiments by, for instance, encouraging the main TV channels to distribute a strong anti-immigrant message, especially in the years 2012–2013.<sup>34</sup> Presumably, this had an effect on the political discourse in those years, as it did on public opinion: in late 2013, the xenophobic attitudes towards migrants—particularly towards those peoples from the Caucasus region and Central Asian in origin—were at a record high.<sup>35</sup> In September of the same year, opposition politician Aleksei Navalnyi finished second in the Moscow mayoral elections. In his campaign, Navalnyi used strong anti-immigrant language. He advocated “normal nationalism” in his public speeches and labelled himself “a normal nationalist”<sup>36</sup> – rhetoric he has since abandoned. Thus, especially in the early 2010s, nationalism as a concept has been connected to violence, “extremism” and “hooliganism”. Simultaneously, it has been a theme widely reported in the media, at least until the “anti-immigrant campaign” on television began to ease up after the riots in late 2013. The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, and right thereafter the

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<sup>32</sup> Marlène Laruelle, *In the name of the nation. Nationalism and politics in contemporary Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 60–65.

<sup>33</sup> In December 2010, thousands of soccer fans and representatives of nationalist groups gathered in Manezh Square in the center of Moscow and began fighting with groups from the North Caucasus. In the latter half of 2013, the peak of such activities took place when violent rioting burst out in two Moscow suburbs. In both cases, the trigger for unrest was a fight between an ethnic Russian and an ethnic North Caucasian person. See, e.g., Vera Alperovich and Natalia Yudina, “The Ultra-right Shrugged. Xenophobia and Radical Nationalism in Russia, and Efforts to Counteract them in 2013,” in *Xenophobia, Freedom of Conscience and Anti-Extremism in Russia in 2013*, ed. Alexander Verkhovskiy (Moscow: Reports of the Sova Center for Information and Analysis, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz, *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television. Mediating post-Soviet difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 222.

<sup>35</sup> “Intolerantnost’ i ksenofobiya [Intolerance and xenophobia],” Levada Center press release, 11 October 2016, <https://www.levada.ru/2016/10/11/intolerantnost-i-ksenofobiya/>.

<sup>36</sup> “Liberal s natsionalisticheskim dushkom” [A liberal with propensity to nationalism], *Yakutiya*, 15 May 2017; see also Natalia Moen-Larsen, “‘Normal nationalism’: Alexei Navalny, LiveJournal and ‘the Other’,” *East European Politics* 30, no. 4 (2014), 548–567, 555.

annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, shifted people's attention from migration issues to foreign politics—but nationalism, nevertheless, remained a key topic.

The nationalist figures represented in the material of this article, however, do not denounce violence, even though many of them claim to reject it as a strategy they personally would choose. In an interview after the murder of oppositional politician Boris Nemtsov in 2015, Dmitri Demushkin stated that “nationalists may well be the ideological opponents of the liberals, but they definitely do not fight with them on the streets.”<sup>37</sup> However, it is emblematic that several newspaper articles with *nationalist* as self-description covered court cases. For example, in the court proceedings for the murder of the human rights lawyer Sergei Markelov in 2011, one of the suspects, Sergey Golubev, was asked if his partner in crime was a nationalist. He answered that he himself was a nationalist—“I love my country, my nation (*natsiya*)”—and he had thought that they both were nationalists. The other suspect, Nikita Tikhonov, had denied this attribute, which confused Golubev: “This I don't understand. One can deny the killing, but why deny the conviction (*ubezhdeniya*)?”<sup>38</sup> In another court case, Anton Mukhachev, accused of extremism, linked his interpretation of *nationalism* to that of the writer Fedor Dostoyevsky and the Prime Minister of the Russian Empire in 1906–1911 Petr Stolypin:

I am a nationalist and I never hid it, but I don't attach to nationalism the idea that the ordinary person (*obyvatel'*) does. For me, nationalism means family, home, nation (*natsiya*). My views differ very little from those of Dostoyevsky and Stolypin.<sup>39</sup>

When labelling himself as “the biggest nationalist of the country” in 2014, President Putin wanted to disarm the oppositional ethnonationalists by reclaiming their key concept of identification. His references to intolerance and “caveman nationalism” especially were directed at those groups. Despite becoming more fragmented and even in conflict with each other after 2014, the radical oppositional nationalists are still monitored, managed, and controlled by the state—even if the control is not always consistent.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly enough, the key figures of the nationalist movements did not disappear from the central and regional newspapers after 2012, when state

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<sup>37</sup> “Chto obchshhego mezhdru ubiistvom Nemtsova i deyatel'nost'yu gruppy BORN? [What do the murder of Nemtsov and activities of the group BORN have in common?],” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 6 March 2015.

<sup>38</sup> “Na sude po delu ob ubiistve Markelova dal pokazaniya lider rossiiskoi ul'trapravoi organizatsii [The leader of Russian ultraright organization gave his testimony in the court case of the murder of Markelov],” *Gazeta.ru*, 18 April 2011.

<sup>39</sup> “Prigovor Antonu Mukhachevu budet oglashen 24 sentyabrya [Anton Mukhachev's sentence will be publicized on 24 September],” *Agentsvo politicheskikh novostey*, 14 September 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Emil Pain, “Sovremennyi russkii natsionalizm”; Vera Alperovich and Natalia Yudina, “Zatishche pered burey?”

control over them increased significantly. Indeed, that they have never been a unified pool of actors, adds complexity to the challenge that the state leadership faces in the struggle. Hence, when labelling some nationalists as “bad” ones, the (hegemonic) state discourse might empower others that perceive themselves as “good nationalists” in their own terms.

In addition to the well-known oppositional nationalist figures, there are also other actors represented in the material who do not position themselves in the political field, even though they are fewer in number. Few journalists, actors, artists, or “ordinary people” describe themselves as nationalists. In 2009, a regional newspaper in Dmitrov interviewed youth on the street about their views on “neo-Nazism.” In their answers, many of the young people condemned neo-Nazis but also said that they should not be mistaken for “nationalist-patriots” either. The answers also reflected the popularity of a certain subculture at the time: soccer.<sup>41</sup> After the Moscow riots in 2010 especially, soccer fans across Russia have been connected to violent nationalist tendencies, which is why they duly feel the need to escape the stigma.<sup>42</sup> Aleksei Zinovev, who conducted an ethnographic study on nationalist sporting events called the “Russian run,” points out that the problems related to self-identification “along the patriot–nationalist–Nazi” continuum were discussed in all interviews. The participants wanted to separate themselves from Nazism and fascism, but not necessarily from *nationalism*, which they perceived mainly positively.<sup>43</sup> Sociologist Karina Pipiya from the Levada Center has suggested that there might be a generational gap in the understanding of nationalism as a concept, but the assumption remains to be confirmed.<sup>44</sup>

Because of the deep-rooted negative connotations related to *nationalism*, the positive meanings given to the concept in the cases examined appear as conceptual innovations wherein the speakers attach new meanings to the concept. Simultaneously, many of these cases represent claims of “ownership” as explained by Kurunmäki and Marjanen: the speaker wishes to present the correct meaning for an ism and thereby to “colonize” the discourse or end the discussion.<sup>45</sup> In practice, there were three distinctive ways to provide positive meanings for *nationalism*. First, the speakers could

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<sup>41</sup> “Skazhi svoje slovo [Say your word],” *Dmitrovskii vestnik*, 30 April 2009.

<sup>42</sup> “Oleg Pirozhkov: Utkin skhvatil ryumku vodki i plesnul mne v litso [Oleg Pirozhkov: Utkin took a glass of vodka and threw it in my face],” *Rusfootball.info*, 17 October 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Aleksei Zinovev, “Russian Run.” MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement) project, 31 January 2014, [http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/documents/D7\\_1/Cluster%201%20Right%20Wing%20and%20Patriotic%20movements/MYPLACE\\_WP7.1REPOR T\\_Region\\_Russian%20Run%20\(Russia\).pdf](http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/documents/D7_1/Cluster%201%20Right%20Wing%20and%20Patriotic%20movements/MYPLACE_WP7.1REPOR T_Region_Russian%20Run%20(Russia).pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Levada 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Kurunmäki and Marjanen, “A rhetorical view,” 243.

add epithets to the type of nationalism they claimed to represent in order to diminish the social stigma. Attributes like “normal,” “healthy,” and even “emotional”<sup>46</sup> were all used.

Second, the speakers may utilize the semantic network of parallel and opposite concepts. They could try to make the values attached to *nationalism* seem more neutral by comparing it to an even more stigmatizing concept, such as fascism or chauvinism.<sup>47</sup> The word chauvinist, less used today than in Soviet times, is an extremely negative concept, but fascist, in turn, serves as the ultimate evil, drawing on connections to national history and especially the cultivated memory of the Second World War. References to fascism make even *nationalism* seem politically appropriate. For example, one of the organizers of the Russian march, Nikolay Bondarik, defended himself against accusations of being a fascist as follows: “It is offensive. I have never been a fascist; that is not true. I am a nationalist, [and] a monarchist. They are not the same thing.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, *nationalist*, even though it carries negative connotations, can in principle be explained in positive terms, but *fascist* or *chauvinist* simply cannot.

Third, the speakers may liken *nationalism* to a more positive concept, such as patriotism. In some cases, they explained that the concepts actually have a similar meaning, or they mentioned that they themselves actually represent both political ideas.<sup>49</sup> Patriotism, its ambiguous meanings notwithstanding, is a positive concept, which makes it tempting for politicians to use as well. As Paul J. Goode puts it, “a crucial means by which the Kremlin controls ideational capital in today’s Russia is by claiming state policy as patriotic while labeling opposition and extremists, alike, as nationalists.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, in recent years Vladimir Putin has frequently referred to patriotism as the only unifying idea of the Russian nation.<sup>51</sup> Just as the political establishment wishes

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<sup>46</sup> “Tatarstan: ognennoe kreshchenie. Chast’ 2 [Tatarstan: flaming baptism. Part 2],” *Komsomol’skaya pravda*, 19 December 2013; “Rok-propoved’ Konstantina Kincheva [Konstantin Kinchev’s rock-testimony],” *TV-Panorama* 19 March 2013, “V Den’ narodnogo edinstva v stolitse snova proidet ‘Russkii marsh’. Gde gran’ mezhdru natsionalizmom i patriotizmom? [On the Day of National Unity, the Russian March takes place again in the capital. Where is the border between nationalism and patriotism?],” *Komsomol’skaya pravda*, 04 November 2011; “Aleksandr Samovarov. Natsionalist vo glave ‘Moskvy’ [Aleksandr Samovarov: Nationalist in the head of ‘Moskva’],” APN.ru 16 December 2008.

<sup>47</sup> “Moe delo,” “Il’ya Glazunov: ‘Vlast’ dolzhna byt’ sil’noi, inache eto ne vlast’!’ [Ilya Glazunov: The power needs to be strong, otherwise it is not power!],” *Argumenty i fakty*, 22 May 2013.

<sup>48</sup> “Deputat iz Peterburga ot ‘Yabloka’ predstanet pered sudom [‘Yabloko’ deputy from St Petersburg will appear in court],” *Izvestiya.ru*, 2 July 2013.

<sup>49</sup> “V Den’ narodnogo edinstva.”

<sup>50</sup> Paul J. Goode, “Love for the Motherland (or Why Cheese is More Patriotic than Crimea),” *Russian Politics* 1 (2016): 420–421.

<sup>51</sup> “U nas net i ne mozhet byt’ nikakoi drugoi obyedinyayushchei idei, krome patriotizma [We don’t have and there cannot be any other unifying idea except patriotism],” *Kommersant*, 3 February 2016, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2907316>; Presidential

to “colonize” the discourse on patriotism, the oppositional nationalists try to exploit the symbolic power of *patriotism* by blurring its distinction with *nationalism*.

***“This is a matter of national honor”—minority nationalism as a political challenge***

In recent years especially, the state leadership has highlighted the historically multinational nature of the Russian nation and state. The intensity of this rhetoric is –partially–a response in the contemporary political struggle with the radical ethnocentric nationalists. The expression “multinational nation of the Russian Federation” (*mnogonatsional’nyi narod Rossiiskoy Federatsii*) appears also in the Constitution, formulated in 1993.<sup>52</sup> The conceptual choices indicate the logic of the state discourse: the Russian people (*narod*) comprises of several nationalities (*natsional’nost, natsiya*). Within the multinational nationhood, a certain hierarchy exists: ethnic Russians are referred to as having a special, “state-forming” function within society.<sup>53</sup> The view connects to the imperial tradition, in which expression of Russians as a state-forming nation (*natsiya*) gained popularity by the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>54</sup> It is precisely this duality between civic (or imperial) and ethnic nation-building discourses that Putin reproduced in his campaign article in 2012<sup>55</sup>, following the ambiguity adopted already by Boris Yeltsin’s administration.<sup>56</sup> In other words, the state leadership maintains rhetoric of Russia as a multinational country where some nations are more important, “first among equals.”

Self-descriptive uses of the term reveal another form of *nationalism* in today’s Russia, namely minority nationalism of the titular nations of Russia. The texts analyzed reflect the various complexities of the issue. Whereas the presidential rhetoric celebrates multinationality as one of Russia’s historically defining characteristics, the state uses assimilationist devices towards the titular nations especially in education and language policies. While ethnic federalism remains formally the basis of the post-Soviet Russian state system, in recent years in particular the regime has shifted towards nation-building efforts with an increasingly strong ethnic

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Address to the Federal Assembly, kremlin.ru, 1 December 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379>.

<sup>52</sup> *Konstitutsiya Rossiiskoy Federatsii*, “Garant-Internet.” – in January 2020, the President proposed several changes to the Constitution of which some involve language and nationalities policies, but do not alter the definition of the nation as multinational one.

<sup>53</sup> Shevel, “Russian Nation-building,” 186–187; Laruelle, *In the name of the nation*.

<sup>54</sup> Miller, “Istoriya ponyatiya natsiia,” 48.

<sup>55</sup> Putin, “Rossiya. Natsional’nyi vopros.”

<sup>56</sup> Shevel, “Russian Nation-building,” 189–190.



dimension.<sup>57</sup> However, the state policies are far from consistent, and as Andrey Scherbak and Kristina Sych write, “[t]here are more questions than answers about the ‘nationalities policy’ in modern Russia.” But, they conclude, direct control over key figures of the nationalist movements is one of the features of the federal nationality policy.<sup>58</sup>

Especially in the discourses on minority nationalism, the separatist connotation of *nationalism* has become palpable. A possible interpretative lens is provided by Larissa Ryazanova-Clarke and Terence Wade who have shown how in the late Soviet era linguistic change actually preceded political change. With the policy of glasnost, often translated as openness, concepts that previously had had no equivalents in Soviet reality began to acquire new meanings, and vice versa. For example, *sovereignty* (of a republic) or *human rights* could now refer to political life, and the Soviet Union could be described as an *empire*.<sup>59</sup> With the changes to the language, political change also became possible. As it was indeed “the national question” (*natsional’nyi vopros*) that significantly contributed to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the meanings attached to the *nationalism* in Russia today are connected to that very process. Moreover, the fear of separatism has not disappeared, which oftentimes leads to repression of the rights of titular nations. Of the fifty-four self-descriptive cases of *nationalism* in this collection, seven represented titular nations, all of them before the year 2015.

The conceptual innovations in these cases follow the patterns introduced above: *nationalism* is compared to parallel concepts, with neutralizing or positive attributes being added. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, representatives of titular nations stress the significance of national culture, pride, and honor. For example, Fandas Safiullin, a former member of Tatarstan’s state council and a former Duma representative, responded in the following manner when a journalist asked about the negative connotations of *nationalism*:

[t]hat is a totalitarian relic of connecting nationalism with racism, if not even with fascism. But, in the way I see it, every representative of every nation (*kazhdyi predstavitel’ kazhdoy natsii*) should be a nationalist—this is a matter of national honor. To cheer for your nation, to be proud of its achievements, to be ashamed of its unworthy deeds, to take care of it, to contribute to its development and growth, but not at the expense of others, not opposing yourself

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<sup>57</sup> Konstantin Zamyatin, “Russian Political Regime Change and Strategies of Diversity Management: From a Multinational Federation towards a Nation-State,” *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 15, no. 1 (2016): 19-49, 44–45.

<sup>58</sup> Andrey Shcherbak and Kristina Sych, “Trends in Russian Nationalities Policy,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 64, no. 6 (2017): 311–328, DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2016.1225264, 311.

<sup>59</sup> Larissa Ryazanova-Clarke and Terence Wade, *Russian language today* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 66.

to others and not elevating others, not suppressing others—what's bad about that sort of nationalism? In this sense, I am a nationalist.<sup>60</sup>

Safiullin's account is a classic conceptual innovation, in which he gives the concept a new, explicitly positive meaning. A similar account is given by a Tatar activist, Danis Safargali, who described his political stance as “a normal nationalist,” interested in preserving his culture and history. In the same piece, the journalist explains that “nationalists of other nations” provoke hostility in Safargali, who considers existence of “normal Russian nationalists” impossible. In his words, Russian “nazist organizations” do not deal with Russian culture, but instead aim to prevent the teaching of the Tatar language in schools.<sup>61</sup> In 2017, Safargali was condemned to three years imprisonment for hooliganism, among other charges.<sup>62</sup>

The two examples of Tatar nationalism should not be generalized, but they do illustrate one perspective on minority nationalism in contemporary Russia. Whereas the self-proclaimed Russian nationalists in this material are positioned mainly in political opposition, those representing titular nations are not necessarily seen in the same light. The concept of nationalism may be more socially acceptable among the titular nations for at least two reasons. First, despite the rather incoherent nationality policies at the federal level, the idea of the multinationality of the Russian nation is protected in the Constitution and reproduced in presidential rhetoric. There is, then, a legal and logical “backbone” for those aiming to preserve the national cultures and languages of the titular nations.

Second, the past and present power relations between the ethnic majority and ethnic minorities inevitably affect the conceptual choices the actors in those groups make. For example, Russian artist Ilya Glazunov complained in 2013 that “when someone says that they are Polish, French, Jewish, Tatar, Georgian, no one blames them. But if you say: ‘I'm Russian!’—talk about chauvinism immediately begins. That is partial injustice (*tendentsioznaya nespravedlivost*).”<sup>63</sup> The experiences of injustice are deeply rooted in the discourses of minority nationalism in Russia, but as mentioned above there also exists a discourse on the “oppressed majority.”

### ***Reactions to and reflections on state nationalism: nationalism, multinationalism, internationalism?***

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<sup>60</sup> “Nam malo Tatarstana [Tatarstan is not enough for us],” *Zvezda Povolzhya* (Kazan'), 26 August 2010.

<sup>61</sup> “Tatarstan: ognennoe kreshchenie.”

<sup>62</sup> “Sud Kazani prigovoril tatarskogo aktivista Danisa Safargali k trem godam kolonii [Kazan court sentenced Tatar activist Danis Safargali to three years in prison],” *Idel.reeali* 31 August 2017, <https://www.idelreal.org/a/danis-safargali-prigovor/28707270.html>.

<sup>63</sup> “Il'ya Glazunov.”

There are only two clear cases where Putin's self-description as a nationalist is mentioned as an example, first in 2008 and again in 2014. In 2008, Oleg Pashchenko, then a deputy of the Legislative Assembly of Krasnoyarsk, described himself as a proud Russian nationalist "no less than Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, who recently in Germany said that 'Dmitry Medvedev is a similar Russian nationalist as I am'".<sup>64</sup> What changed in Putin's self-descriptions between 2008 and 2014 was that in 2014 he no longer explicitly referred to Russian nationalism. Yet this does not mean that Putin would have stopped using concepts emphasizing ethnic Russianness. His comments especially after and in relation to the annexation of Crimea have encouraged scholarly commentaries on "ethnicization" or "ethnic turn" in the official Russian discourse.<sup>65</sup> There is, however, no unified way of speaking about "Russianness" within the state leadership. According to Helge Blakkisrud, since Putin's third term in the presidential office (2012–) the Kremlin's response to the challenges of the post-Soviet nation-building has been "to deliberately blur the boundaries between the civic *rossiiskii* and the ethnic *ruskii* identities."<sup>66</sup>

"Blurring" the boundaries is reflected in the conceptual choices as well. For example, whereas President Boris Yeltsin consistently referred to *rossiyane*, or citizens of Russia, Putin mixes the terms *ruskii* and *rossiiskii*. The connotations and meanings of these concepts are not clear-cut, and they, too, have evolved over time. In general, *ruskii* has ethnic and cultural meaning, whereas *rossiiskii* is understood as a more inclusive concept, having civic and sometimes imperial character.<sup>67</sup> Marlene Laruelle suggests that in Putin's usage, the multi-faceted concept of *ruskii* "is not the opposite of *rossiiskii*" but functions as a "reminder of the shared past of all those who descend from Kievan Rus".<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Putin's inconsistency with the concepts of "Russianness" illuminates his understanding of nationalism as rhetorical instrument; he does not hesitate to use concepts with a clear ethnic connotation because of their assumed popular appeal, yet he defends more inclusive interpretations of these when they seem useful.

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<sup>64</sup> "Vremya znat' [Time to know]," *Krasnoyarskaya gazeta*, 20 June 2008.

<sup>65</sup> Yuri Teper, "Official Russian identity discourse in light of the annexation of Crimea: national or imperial?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2016), 378–396, 391.

<sup>66</sup> Helge Blakkisrud, "Blurring the boundary between civic and ethnic: The Kremlin's new approach to national identity under Putin's third term," in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, eds. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2016), 266–269.

<sup>67</sup> Teper, "Official Russian identity," 381.

<sup>68</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "Misinterpreting Nationalism: Why *Ruskii* is Not a Sign of Ethnonationalism," PONARS Eurasia, 13 April 2016, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/PONARS-Eurasia/Misinterpreting-Nationalism-Why-Ruskii-is-Not-a-Sign-of-Ethnonationalism-18105>.

The second instance where Putin is mentioned as an example is a slightly sarcastic letter from an anonymous Tuvian reader to a regional newspaper in Kyzyl, where she identifies herself as a nationalist:

I didn't hide it, and moreover, I will not hide it in the future: I'm a nationalist (*ja – natsionalistka*). In the entire Russian territory, perhaps, only two citizens of the country have admitted this—me and the President of the Russian Federation. And for us, with him, there is nothing to be afraid of, I am a Tuvian nationalist, and he ... to be honest, I didn't fully understand, but if the head of the state says so, so be it. Maybe Putin himself has not figured it out yet, because he did not say what his nationality is. Or maybe he is nationalist for the whole country, could it be?

The writer also notes that “[f]inally, this word [nationalist] has ceased to be abusive (*perestalo byt' rugatelny*).”<sup>69</sup> The letter reveals the challenges faced by President Putin's attempt to define “good” *nationalism* as *multinationality*. In fact, Putin's multinationality resembles in many ways Soviet *internationalism*; it is an ism constructed from above, the aim of which clearly is to “end the discussion”. As Helge Blakkisrud puts it, “[o]fficially, there were no ethnic conflicts [in the Soviet Union]; the multinational Soviet people lived peacefully together in the spirit of the slogan of ‘friendship of the peoples’ (*druzhba narodov*).”<sup>70</sup>

In the political rhetoric of the Soviet Union, *nationalism* served as a negative antonym to the key concept of the Communist doctrine, *internationalism*, which had a positive and strongly future-oriented connotation. Both concepts appeared often with their parallel isms: “the concepts of internationalism and patriotism came to represent ‘good’ modes of thought and action, which were opposed to ‘bad’ cosmopolitanism and nationalism.”<sup>71</sup> Especially in the late Soviet discourse, the official rhetoric connected *nationalism* closely with separatism, any manifestation of which was deemed as a threat to the Soviet system itself. The meanings of chauvinism were closely tied to *nationalism*, whereas cosmopolitanism was used to criticize Soviet Jews in particular, and had, thus, an anti-Semitic tone. Soviet discourses on nationalism changed over time, together with changes in nationality policies, but the ideological emphasis on internationalism remained until the very collapse of the political system. The third edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, published in 1969–1978, defines *nationalism* as a “bourgeois

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<sup>69</sup> “Pravil'nye natsionalisty [The right nationalists].” *Risk Inform* (Kyzyl), 25 November 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Blakkisrud, “Blurring the boundary,” 269.

<sup>71</sup> Kettunen, “The Concept of nationalism,” 349.

and petty-bourgeois ideology and policy as well as psychology with regards to the nationality question.”<sup>72</sup>

President Putin’s rhetoric is rich in references to Russian history. Whether a conscious strategy or not, his increasingly strong emphasis on the concept of multinationality most likely benefits from its proximity to the ideal of internationalism – despite the fact that *internationalism* can no longer be referred to because of its Soviet tone. However, connecting the meanings of multinationality with *nationalism* can expect less support from the past interpretations of political language.

In light of the material discussed in this article, with all its limitations, it can be said that presidential statements have not provoked others to use *nationalism* in self-descriptive contexts. Still, it seems that those who do describe themselves as nationalists, without exception interpret *nationalism* in narrow ethnic terms, unlike the president. Whether the speakers represent minority or majority nationalism, or whether they position themselves in opposition to or as neutral with respect to the current political establishment, their understanding of *nationalism* does not reflect the multinational interpretation of the nation provided by the president in his more recent self-descriptions.

### ***Concluding remarks***

In contemporary Russia, the concept of nationalism seems to be in flux. Even though it remains negatively loaded, there have been attempts to add positive meanings to it, also at the level of the high leadership of the country.

In the light of the newspaper material collected for analysis, it seems that anyone describing himself or herself as a nationalist in today’s Russia needs to take a stand to the deep-rooted negative connotations of the concept. Following the logic of three aspects of a term, presented by Quentin Skinner, the actors represented in the material of this article pursue conceptual change first and foremost by replacing the negative values of the concept with respected and even desired ones. The positive meanings given to the term in their use thus appear as conceptual innovations. Meaning of *nationalism*, then, is often explained with the help of a semantic network surrounding it. Either it is portrayed against even more stigmatizing parallel concepts, such as chauvinism or fascism, showing thus that it is more moderate or neutral, or then *nationalism* is coupled with a positive concept such as patriotism. Defining an ism with reference to other isms does not necessarily provide

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<sup>72</sup> “Значение слова ‘Национализм’ в Большой Советской Энциклопедии (1969–1978) [Meaning of the word ‘Nationalism’ in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia],” BSE, <http://bse.sci-lib.com/article080514.html> (accessed 10 June 2019).

information on the perceived meaning, but for many speakers the value aspect seemed more important. Those who claimed to be nationalists often wanted to emphasize that they do not “hate other nations,” or that their thinking is purely theoretical and has nothing to do with everyday prejudices. In those cases, however, it seems that distancing oneself from violence is more important for the speakers than denying racist undertones.

In the collection of self-descriptive cases studied for this article, *nationalism* continues to be defined in narrow ethnic terms by Russian nationalists as well as by minority nationalists and those opposing the current power structure as well as those who do not necessarily oppose it. In these texts, *nationalism* is discussed mainly in the context of ethnic relations and tensions within the country. Moreover, the presidential understanding of multinationality as a key feature of *nationalism* in Russia is not embraced by the speakers in this material. For the current political leadership, multinationality is a political keyword reflecting the connotations of Soviet *internationalism*, but with more restricted geographical and political scope. Thus, one of the aims of Putin’s rhetorical shift of self-description as nationalist was most likely to disarm the radical, oppositional nationalists by re-defining their key concept.

Yet, considering the limited scope of the material, it cannot be excluded that the president describing himself as a nationalist could have expanded the “conditions of possibility” for other self-descriptive uses of *nationalism*, or could do so hereafter. Even if the claim of ownership makes political isms rhetorically appealing, guarding the “correct” meanings of such complex concept as nationalism is not a one-way process. It remains to be seen whether the presidential statements on *nationalism* as a positive and desired characteristic will recur and whether they may actually contribute to wider acceptance of the concept in the future.

## **PUBLICATION III**



## CHAPTER 3

# Evolution of Russia's 'Others' in Presidential Discourse in 2000–2020

Veera Laine

### Abstract

This chapter analyses the Others of Russia reoccurring in presidential discourse in 2000–2020. The key speeches reveal three distinctive 'Others' of the Russian state and nation, evolving in space and time: first, an ineffective politician in the 1990s and, later, a corrupt bureaucrat, is framed as a historical and internal Other, whose figure legitimizes the current power. Second, the metaphor of constant competition in international relations describes the Other as an economically stronger, developed Western country, against which Russia's 'backwardness' is mirrored, especially in the early 2000s. As the economic competition becomes harder to win and the quest for national unity intensifies, the emphasis turns to the third Other, the one holding values that are fundamentally different from the Self's. Thus, it is argued that the metaphor of competition/conflict between Russia and its Others has undergone a qualitative transformation in presidential

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rhetoric, reflecting change in Russia's relative strength: instead of the previously admired economic performance, times of conflict show that Russia's true strength vis-à-vis its Others resides in the conservative, moral values and military might.

**Keywords:** Others, Putin

### **Introduction: Setting the Stage for State Nationalism**

In January 2020, President Vladimir Putin, speaking to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, proposed amendments to be made to the Constitution in order to ensure the sovereignty of the country (President of Russia, 2020). The changes came into force on 4 July – less than seven months after Putin first voiced the initiative. The new Constitution secured the possibility for Putin to continue as a president for two more terms, but it also included other, ideologically loaded statements such as faith in God as a historical heritage of the nation, and protection of traditional family values as the government's task (Gosudarstvennââ дума, 2020) – reinforcing, in this way, the conservative value basis that had been for years portrayed as distinguishing Russia from 'others'. Thus, the constitutional process demonstrated the swiftness of the president-centred decision-making within Russia's authoritarian system, as well as the full circle in the state administration's 20-year-long endeavour to define the characteristics of the Russian nation in the language of law.

When drafting the Constitution of the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in December 1993, the state authorities wanted to distance the new political circumstances from the Soviet ones by stating that 'no ideology may be established as state or obligatory one'. But the need to create a unified national narrative was acute. From the year 1996 onwards, in particular, President Boris Yeltsin's administration made attempts to engage the society in defining a national 'Russian idea' (Tolz, 1998, pp. 1010–1011). At the time, the presidential administration embraced the civic rhetoric of the nation, emphasizing the duties and rights of Russian citizens (*rossiâne*).

The attempts to enhance national unity this way brought, however, little success: they were criticized in public for not being the task of the presidential administration in the first place, but also their credibility was thin. It was simply not plausible to refer to the great Russian (*rossijskij*) nation that inhabits a strong state when that state was in such an evident state of weakness because of economic crisis, political instability, crime and the brutal war in Chechnya. Moreover, the memory of the Soviet Union as a great power that occupied a significant position in Cold War world politics was still vivid, and contrasted with the new Russian state (Laruelle, 2009, p. 18; Tolz, 1998, p. 1011).

When Vladimir Putin was elected as the president in 2000, his administration started decisively to build the national unity upon the strong state. Now the narrative also gained more credibility in the eyes of the Russian people, to a large extent thanks to the simultaneous processes of remarkable economic growth and centralization of the power structures. At the time, the state conducted policies that framed its vision of the national unity: federal-level programmes for patriotic education were introduced, the status of national symbols, which had remained vague throughout the 1990s, was confirmed with a new law, and measures were taken to enhance the public image of the Russian army. Presidential speeches in the early years of the 2000s stressed the key message: Russia had been weak but now it had to – and would – become strong (President of Russia, 2000).

In the pages that follow, I will analyse the contents of contemporary state nationalism in the presidential discourse from the perspective of othering. Constructing a nation is based on creating boundaries between 'us' and 'them', drawn first and foremost in language but having real political consequences. In this chapter, othering is seen as a dynamic, constantly ongoing process that has a strong temporal aspect: the past affects the representations in the present. The primary material consists of the 21 presidential addresses held at the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, which remain key speeches of Russian politics that have significance for both domestic and international audiences. The selected speeches are intended as top-down messages, but they

nevertheless attempt to tap into views and attitudes already existing in society (see e.g. Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2018, p. 7). Since 2014, the presidential address to the Federal Assembly has also had legal status as one of the key documents steering the strategic planning of the country (Prezident Rossii, 2014).

Methodologically, the chapter departs from the notion that figurative language plays a crucial role in conceptual and, thus, political change (Schäfer, 2012). In order to map Russia's Others in the material, a qualitative content analysis was applied in two close reading phases. In practice, the material was first read with sensitivity to reoccurring key metaphors and concepts applied in the context of the 'Other'. Analysing the passages where the national 'us' was contrasted to 'them', metaphors such as competition (as world order) and strength (of a nation/state) were detected and manually coded. Then, the temporality of those metaphors was analysed: what implicative elements did these metaphors emphasize in different years, and how did these change?

The chosen time frame covers the emergence of state nationalism in the early 2000s, the presidency of Dmitri Medvedev in 2008–2012, which was perceived more liberal but appeared to be so only in rhetoric, and the so-called 'conservative turn' in Russian politics that intensified after the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term in 2012. The political significance of each of the speeches is not identical but they are comparable: it is important to note that Medvedev acted as a 'role occupancy' leader whose political status depended on his prime minister, predecessor and successor – Putin (Baturu and Mikhaylov, 2014). In this chapter, the presidential addresses are treated as evidence of the thinking within state power.

In 2000–2020, the address to the Federal Assembly was held each year, except in 2017, when it was postponed until spring 2018 because of the presidential elections. During these years, the speeches followed somewhat similar conventional patterns. In general, domestic matters such as the evaluation of the national economy and socio-economic themes form the main content of the speech. Yet, in certain years, foreign policy message

has dominated the address and, since 2015 in particular, it has been the most important deliverable of the president. Speeches given in the years 2008 and 2014 are similar in tone, as they both reflect the mentality of a country in a war. Whereas the rhetoric in 2009 returned to a more conciliatory mode, since 2014 this has not happened.

### **State Nationalism and Theories of the Other**

This section draws from critical nationalism theory as well as previous studies of boundaries of belonging in international relations. Scholars of nationalism often approach the concept in a broad sense, as a view of the world as an entity of nation states (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2013, pp. 1–2; Özkırmı, 2010, pp. 1–3). Their interpretation differs from the analytical use of nationalism in political science, where it is often understood as a political instrument, connected to state legitimacy in particular (Feldmann and Mazepus, 2018; Özkırmı, 2010, p. 3). I would maintain that the various uses of the concept share the core idea: nationalism is a powerful 'ism' in politics precisely because it is based on a fundamental worldview, intuitively accepted by many.

In the literature discussing national identity in politics, the Other has been defined in many ways. In this chapter, the Other is interpreted as fundamentally different – but not necessarily worse. The image of the Other is understood primarily as means to construct Self: defining 'who we are' is often done by showing 'who we are not' (Harle, 2000, p. 11; Republic.ru, 2019). Sometimes the Other does carry a clear value judgement, but in these cases it should be understood as a certain type of the Other. For instance, the dehumanized Other, posing an existential threat to the Self, is an enemy. The view of Other as different but neutral vis-à-vis the Self is applied, for example, by Iver B. Neumann (1996). Having studied the idea of Europe in the Russian identity formation throughout its history, Neumann stresses the relationship between the Self and the Other instead of just their characteristics. 'Identity does not reside in essential and readily identifiable cultural traits, but in

relations, and the question of where and how borders towards “the Other” should be drawn become crucial’ (ibid., pp. 1–2).

Since the process of othering is dynamic, so is the nature of the Other. In her study on the changing representations on Chechnya in Russian public discourse between the first and second Chechnyan wars, Julie Wilhelmsen (2017, p. 206) has depicted how the Other gradually becomes an enemy. According to Wilhelmsen, the representations of Chechnya as an existential terrorist threat during and after the year 1999 in particular served to create an image of a strong and united Russia. Political language and politics are intertwined, and discourses of Others – especially those produced and distributed by state power and having a hegemonic status – frame the sphere of politics.

In the previous literature, Europe or, more generally, the West has been presented as Russia’s main or constituent Other (Neumann, 1996, p. 1; Tolz, 2001, p. 69; see also Kati Parpei, Chapter 2, this volume). The idea of Russia’s ‘Europeanness’ has been connected to the modernization of the country: from the 19th-century debates onwards, the key question has been whether Russia should follow the ‘West’ as a model or seek its own, ‘organic’ path. Thus, the rhetoric of European/Western Other influences the making of foreign politics, but it also has significance in the domestic policy sphere. The Other functions as a mirror when arguing for the desired direction of domestic developments: the Other might serve as an example as well as a warning.

Finally, it should be noted that, like the Self, the Other in the political discourse is also multilayered. As Ted Hopf (2002, pp. 9–10, 155) points out, there is ‘no empirical reason’ to believe that the only Other for a state would be another state. In his analysis of the Russian discourses on collective identity in 1999, Hopf maps external, internal and historical Others, the latter of which is represented by various aspects of the USSR (ibid.). Following this line of thought, I would suggest that Russia’s Others have both temporal and spatial aspect: they can be identified both inside the country and outside it, and in space but also in time. Moreover, it seems that the historical Other of Russia has become more complex since 1999 and deserves recognition in the analysis.

## The Multilayered Others in Presidential Discourse

In political discourse, speaking about a nation as 'us' is truly a widespread metaphor that Michael Billig (1995, pp. 1–2) interprets as a manifestation of banal nationalism. It is indeed an omnipresent strategy in the annual presidential address to the Federal Assembly. But, on these occasions, the president also refers to other in-groups as 'us': sometimes this means the policy-makers present at the event, his 'colleagues' in this sense. As John Wilson (1991, pp. 48–50) has pointed out, politicians may benefit from the 'exclusive usage' of the pronoun 'us', meaning that the speaker does not necessarily plan to personally take action he or she describes 'we' should take. It is a rhetorical tool intended to enhance the feeling of belonging and to blur the concrete responsibility of the subject. In the following, I will trace the various Others, portrayed against this national 'us', and their development over time.

### *'It was not we who built it': the Other from the past*

As was described at the beginning of this chapter, the difficulties of the 1990s framed the circumstances in which Putin's administration began their work to create the new national narrative. The experience of the 1990s among the people was an important factor in legitimizing Putin's power, especially during his first term in presidential office. As Olga Malinova (2020, p. 1) depicts, 'the opposition between the "turbulent 1990s" and the "stable 2000s" is an oft-used trope' in Russian public discourse.

The presidential rhetoric emphasized the contrast between the representations of those periods of time in Russian history (ibid.). It was beneficial for the state administration to maintain and even strengthen the narrative of the 'unstable' 1990s and the 2000s of 'restoring order', and, by unifying this narrative of the recent past, the positive or optimistic perceptions that the Russian people had in the 1990s – simultaneously with the negative and fearful ones – became forgotten in the hegemonic discourse. According to Malinova, Putin's critique of his predecessors was cautious at the



beginning of his presidency, and understandably so, as he himself was brought to power by them.

Particularly in his first two speeches to the Federal Assembly, Putin stresses the necessity to restore the trust of the state among the people (President of Russia, 2000, 2001, 2006). Serguei Oushakine (2009, pp. 34–35, 261) has described how the disillusionment of the Soviet reality had turned into a deep distrust among ‘us’, the people, towards ‘them’ – the politicians on the TV, for example. The state administration, most likely, recognized the origins of the ‘trauma’ Oushakine depicts. As a result, in Putin’s parlance, the Other is not the politician in the present but the politician in the past. Speaking in the passive voice, Putin suggests that ‘they’ had made promises but not kept them, and ‘they’ had made mistakes that ‘we’ would not repeat (President of Russia, 2000).

In the Soviet Union, in highly ritualistic political discourse the new leader would always mark the distinction between him and his predecessors by introducing new concepts or slogans, and sometimes condemning past policies, stressing in this way the beginning of the new era (Ruutu, 2010, pp. 62–71). Certainly, there is similar quest for legitimacy in the way Putin speaks about the past. Malinova explains that, when stressing the contrast between his policy and the previous one, Putin used populist rhetoric combining ‘a demonstration of “care” about the people with implicit criticism of “others” among the political elite’. Portraying the politicians of the 1990s as Others, however, remains in Putin’s rhetoric long after the beginning of his presidency. With time, these references become also more explicit:

The changes of the early 1990s were a time of great hopes for millions of people, but neither the authorities nor business fulfilled these hopes. Moreover, some members of these groups pursued their own personal enrichment in a way such as had never been seen before in our country’s history, at the expense of the majority of our citizens and in disregard for the norms of law and morality. (President of Russia, 2006)

In Putin’s rhetoric especially, the Other of the past develops from the dishonest and ineffective politician of the 1990s towards the

corrupt, selfish official of the present day. There are several examples in the 2000s and 2010s mentioning this type, especially with regard to the discussion on anti-corruption measures. The corrupt officials provide a logical continuation of the politicians of the 1990s in the presidential rhetoric: they are the Others that legitimate the presidential power, and thus provide material for the populist claims. In-between the honest people and the high leadership of the country, there are middle-level bureaucrats, civil servants and officials, not all of whom are honest (President of Russia, 2016). In a way, the rhetoric leans on an old Russian proverb of the 'good tsar and bad boyars', the idea of which is often reflected in the surveys of institutional trust among Russians: the president enjoys, quite consistently, wider approval among the citizens than the State Duma, government or regional policymakers do (Levada-Center, 2020). The conventions of the speech to the Federal Assembly assist the president in this rhetorical strategy as they provide possibilities to give advice, assignments and critique to local and regional authorities.

When President Dmitri Medvedev introduced his ideas for comprehensive modernization of the Russian state, economy and society in November 2009, he reminded the Federal Assembly that:

[t]he foundation of my vision for the future is the firm conviction that Russia can and must become a global power on a completely new basis. Our country's prestige and national prosperity cannot rest forever on past achievements. After all, the oil and gas production facilities that generate most of our budget revenue, the nuclear weapons that guarantee our security, and our industrial and utilities infrastructure – most of this was built by Soviet specialists. In other words, it was not we who built it. (President of Russia, 2009a)

In this way, Medvedev distanced the Soviet actors from 'us', Russians of the present, in order to enhance the legitimacy of his future policy initiatives. Medvedev's modernization speech is another example of 'new leader' rhetoric, distinguishing the past from the future he brings about. In the material of this chapter, Medvedev's speeches in 2009–2011 differ significantly from the addresses given before and after that in their clear future

orientation. Medvedev's essay describing the modernization project carried the title 'Russia, Forward' (President of Russia, 2009b).

As a part of his re-election campaign in early 2012, Putin published a series of newspaper articles setting his political agenda regarding, for example, nationality politics, economics and social policy of the country (Komsomol'skaâ pravda, 2012; Nezavisimaâ gazeta, 2012; Vedomosti, 2012), but in 2018 new political initiatives were not introduced. In 2018, before the presidential elections, Putin described his speech to the Federal Assembly as a landmark event, 'just as the times we are living in, when the choices we make and every step we take are set to shape the future of our country for decades to come' (President of Russia, 2018). Despite the rhetoric of a 'turning point', the speech did not contain significant policy initiatives. Since 2012 in particular, Putin's parlance has been rich in the (selective) references to history but much more limited in future visions. Coming closer to the present day, the legitimacy claims that rest on the internal, historical Others have partly lost their political currency as the current regime has exercised state power for two decades: with time, the experience of the 1990s becomes more distant. In addition, the persistent portrayal of a corrupt, inefficient middle-level official as an internal Other may lead to the interpretation that the highest leadership of the country is not able to solve the problem.

*'We are losing out in competition':  
the Other ahead of us*

Throughout the past two decades, creating a 'strong and rich' Russia has been a crucial goal in the presidential speeches. Russia's strength/might (*sila*) is expressed in relation to its Others, because the main condition in which it is needed is the political or economic competition against them. As Paul Chilton and George Lakoff (1995, pp. 39–41, 44–45) describe, portraying foreign relations primarily as competition – race, fight or game – in political language stems from the conceptual metaphor that the (nation) state is a person. According to Andreas Musolff (2018, pp. 251,

261), the metaphorical personification of a state in this way creates an image of 'a unified social collective that is able to speak with one voice and act as a singular, independent agent'. Chilton and Lakoff (1995, p. 43) explain that conceptualizing the nation as a person is connected to the metaphor of a 'body-politic': from this perspective, the state aspires to be healthy and strong. With the reference to a 'body', health translates into national wealth, and strength into military force. Rieke Schäfer (2012) reminds us that metaphors are temporal: like political key concepts, they, too, change over time. The metaphorical force of a certain utterance may increase or decrease, and the emphasis on simultaneous, implicative elements that a metaphor applies may vary.

From the very beginning of his presidential term, Putin was concerned with the global competition and Russia's position in it. In his perception, the military confrontation of the Cold War had ended, but the competition of global markets had replaced it. In 2002, he explained the logic explicitly:

Competition has indeed become global. In the period of weakness – of our weakness – we had to give up many niches on the international market. And they were immediately occupied by others. ... The conclusion is obvious: in the world today, no one intends to be hostile towards us – no one wants this or needs it. But no one is particularly waiting for us either. No one is going to help us especially. We need to fight for a place in the 'economic sun' ourselves. (President of Russia, 2002)

Putin's use of the competition metaphor highlights how the 'fight' had become qualitatively different. The Others in this competition were rarely named, but the context suggests that they were the Western market economy countries that were economically more developed and integrated. Despite those same countries being portrayed as exemplary models of modernization (Rutland, 2016, p. 337), in Putin's parlance Russia must always follow its own path. In this way, the presidential rhetoric reflects a centuries-old tradition of the Russian nationalist discourses. The views of the 'backwardness' of Russia in relation to Europe have been

countered with arguments of Russian ancient cultural heritage and a morally superior position already arising from it before the formation of Slavophiles' and Westernisers' currents of thought (Neumann, 1996, pp. 26, 30; Ryazanova-Clarke, 2012).

In the speech of 2002, the resentment towards the Other in this harsh competition arose from the idea that they had occupied Russia's 'natural' niches in the world economy, that Russia's expectations of the post-Cold War economic reality had not been met, and that Russia was not included in the organizations where global trade was regulated (President of Russia, 2002). Thus, the Other is also held responsible for the difficult situation in which Russia had found itself. Throughout the material of this study, there is little self-criticism regarding the policy decisions made by the current regime. When the president discusses inefficiencies, or cases where the goals set earlier were not met, their root causes are usually not detailed. An exception in this regard is Medvedev's 'modernization speech' in 2009, in which he explicitly states that '[w]e should not lay the blame [on Russia's economic downturn] on the outside world alone, however. We need to recognise that we have not done enough over these last years to resolve the problems we inherited from the past' (President of Russia, 2009a).

In the early 2000s, strength, needed in the competition with Others, would follow from restoring order and creating stable conditions for economic growth. One of the conceptual innovations during Putin's first term in presidential office was the concept of stability (*stabil'nost'*) that he started to use extensively from the year 2001 onwards. The slogan was not an end in itself but a means: stability was needed in order to become strong. Still, in 2000, Putin had explained that 'Russia needs an economic system which is competitive, effective and socially just, which ensures stable political development', and continued that 'a stable economy is the main guarantor of a democratic society, and the very foundation of a strong nation that is respected in the world' (President of Russia, 2000). Three years later, in 2003, Putin formulated the same idea more decisively:

Now we must take the next step and focus all our decisions and all our action on ensuring that in a not too far off future, Russia will take its recognised place among the ranks of the truly strong, economically advanced and influential nations. This is an entirely new challenge we must take up, and it represents an entirely new stage in our country's development. (President of Russia, 2003)

Further, he added that the 'ultimate goal should be to return Russia to its place among the prosperous, developed, strong and respected nations.' Whereas the references to Russia as a strong country had been rather pragmatic in 2000–2002, in 2003 the view was motivated differently: Russians should not forget their long history, the victims and sacrifice, the historic fate of their country and the way Russia had continuously emerged as a strong nation. Presenting Russia's distinct history as a justifying cause for restoring strength in the global competition underlines the interpretation that this is the position Russia deserves, which can be seen influencing the relationship between Russia and the Others ahead in the global economic competition.

During Putin's first presidential term, the competition metaphor had an economic character but after that it was not restricted to world markets anymore. Simultaneously, the rhetoric on how to achieve strength as well as its characteristics evolved. Putin's key slogan in the early 2000s, stability, had been abandoned by the year 2008. In his first speech to the Federal Assembly, President Dmitri Medvedev stated that Russia had become strong 'economically and politically' (President of Russia, 2008). The speech reflected in tone and content the war in Georgia that had taken place the previous month; Medvedev stressed the strength and unity of the country, which were not to be questioned.

Medvedev's examples illustrate how political, economic, military and 'moral' strength started to grow apart in presidential rhetoric. Russia's military strength was no longer depicted as a goal; instead, it had been achieved, tested and proven in the war (*ibid.*). However, a year later, Medvedev did not mince his words when he described Russia's economic backwardness, even weakness, but the rhetoric of this particular address was aimed at defending the

modernization project (President of Russia, 2009a). In the war rhetoric of Russian presidents, the Others in the global competition might have had the lead in an economic sense, but Russia's strengths lay elsewhere. In the spring of 2014, after the popular unrest in Ukraine had led to an open conflict between the people and President Yanukovych's regime, Russia invaded Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine started. The events shook the political, economic and social realities in Russia, Ukraine and the whole of Europe, and led to a further deterioration between the 'East' and the 'West' in international politics. In December 2014, Putin's rhetoric was that of a leader of a country at war:

No one will ever attain military superiority over Russia. We have a modern and combat ready army. As they now put it, a polite, but formidable army. We have the strength, will and courage to protect our freedom. ... We will never enter the path of self-isolation, xenophobia, suspicion and the search for enemies. All this is evidence of weakness, while we are strong and confident. (President of Russia, 2014)

The war rhetoric persisted after 2014. In Putin's parlance, the hard times in the recent years were trials that 'have made us even stronger, truly stronger' (President of Russia, 2016). In 2020, referring to nuclear weapons, Putin proclaimed that Russia was leading the competition:

[F]or the first time in the history of nuclear missile weapons, including the Soviet period and modern times, we are not catching up with anyone, but, on the contrary, other leading states have yet to create the weapons that Russia already possesses. (President of Russia, 2020)

Overall, the relationship with the Others ahead in the competition is complex: they mistreat Russia, but they are nevertheless valuable as partners. The ambiguous relationship with the American Other, especially, can be seen in Putin's parlance, where words expressing cooperation or good relations have often been used in a sarcastic manner, and increasingly so after 2014. 'Our partners'



imposing sanctions; 'our colleagues' who consider Russia an adversary; 'our American friends' who influence Russia's relations with its neighbours, 'either openly or behind the scenes' (President of Russia, 2014, 2016). Olga Malinova (2019, p. 232) has noted that, after 2014, Putin's statements of the American Other contained both criticism and admiration, and, being 'emotionally loaded' in such a way, she adds, the statements indicate the significance of the American Other to the Self. Interestingly, Malinova compares the complex American Other to the Chinese Other, the latter of which is described with respect but with no similar passion. In Malinova's material, China is mentioned a couple of times as 'an economic competitor' (ibid., p. 232.), but in the addresses to the Federal Assembly China is not seriously discussed, not even after 2014. The few references describe the partnership with China briefly as comprehensive, strategic or mutually beneficial (President of Russia, 2016, 2018, 2019). Thus, the main, constituent and significant Other ahead of Russia in the global, dynamic competition is either the loosely defined European or the American Other.

*'The wolf knows who to eat': the Other that threatens us*

According to Putin's perception, Russia in the early 2000s was witnessing not only competition in the economic sphere but also direct external aggression, even existential threat. Conflict and war in Chechnya were not described as separatism but as a branch of international terrorism – it was an external Other, not an internal one, even if the two were connected (President of Russia, 2000). Terrorism is the main enemy in presidential discourse throughout the study period, even if the forms it took changed over time. Clearly, it is the evil that cannot in any circumstances be part of 'us': it is the dehumanized enemy, posing an existential threat. However, there are Others that are not depicted as enemies but which also can be threatening and which definitely remain fundamentally different from the Self. The 'threatening Others' will be discussed next.

In his first speech to the Federal Assembly as president, Putin noted that Russia had found itself 'face to face with force that



strive towards a geopolitical reorganisation of the world'. Again, these forces are not explicitly named but the position is clear: external forces either threaten Russia's 'state sovereignty and territorial integrity' or assist those who do so (President of Russia, 2000). In Putin's rhetoric, the Others that pose a threat – without necessarily being enemies – either dismiss the terrorist threat and therefore do not take the needed action, or collude with the terrorists. After the short optimistic phase in US–Russian relations had passed and the Russian state leadership had become disillusioned with the future prospects of the common war against terrorism, Putin lamented that '[c]ertain countries sometimes use their strong and well-armed national armies to increase their zones of strategic influence rather than fighting these evils we all face' (President of Russia, 2003).

Since the beginning of Putin's third term in presidential office, he has connected the memory of Russia's past wars to the conflicts of present, which is reflected in the rhetoric of the Other as well. Most often the references to the past war concern the Second World War, but in 2006 Putin likened the memory of the veterans of the Great Patriotic War to the experiences of the Cold War arms race. He explained the importance of maintaining the readiness of the armed forces as the biggest lesson learned from the Second World War, and, after comparing military spending in other countries, noted:

But this means that we also need to build our home and make it strong and well protected. We see, after all, what is going on in the world. The wolf knows who to eat, as the saying goes. It knows who to eat and is not about to listen to anyone, it seems.  
(President of Russia, 2006)

Animal metaphors are often applied in the realm of international relations. In this context, the wolf represents the enemy. Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (2012, p. 12), analysing Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov's programmatic speech from the year 2006, highlights his use of a metaphor of the world as a spiderweb where Russia's sovereignty depends on its position – whether it is a spider

or a fly. Putin's metaphorical wolf that threatens to eat others portrays the world in a similar way: as a place of constant competition and rivalry, where only the winner survives.

In the speech that followed the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin called the Western sanctions a 'policy of containment', adding that they would have been implemented even without any conflict because 'whenever someone thinks that Russia has become too strong or independent, these tools are quickly put into use'. In what follows, Putin connects the sanctions to claims of former allies supporting separatism from abroad or, more precisely, 'from across the pond' (he does not name the United States in this passage). Both are intended to keep Russia weak and encourage her disintegration, which will not work, '[j]ust as it did not work for Hitler with his people-hating ideas, who set out to destroy Russia and push us back beyond the Urals. Everyone should remember how it ended' (President of Russia, 2014). The idea of foreign forces aiming at Russia's disintegration features strongly in the writings of Russian philosopher Ivan Il'in, as Katri Pynnöniemi's Chapter 4 in this volume shows.

In December 2015, after Turkish air forces had shot down a Russian aircraft near the Syrian border in November, Putin gave a furious speech to the Federal Assembly. He condemned the actions of the Turkish government and accused them of cooperating with terrorists, and drew, again, a parallel between the Second World War and the war against terrorism:

Unwillingness to join forces against Nazism in the 20th century cost us millions of lives in the bloodiest world war in human history. Today we have again come face to face with a destructive and barbarous ideology, and we must not allow these modern-day dark forces to attain their goals. We must stop our debates and forget our differences to build a common anti-terrorist front that will act in line with international law and under the UN aegis. (President of Russia, 2015)

This logic prevails in the speeches up to the present day. Even if the Other – the United States, backed by European countries –

would not directly threaten Russia, it aims to weaken Russia and, by doing so, assists the enemy. However, in 2018, Russia's new military capabilities were discussed in detail, and in 2019 Putin dedicated a long passage to condemn the withdrawal of the United States from the landmark arms control agreement, the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. In this speech, it was clearly stated that the weapons of the US pose a threat to Russia – even when the country itself is still referred to as a partner (President of Russia, 2019).

In Putin's discourse in the 2010s, Russia, unlike its Others, is willing to, capable of and morally fit for fighting the evil. In a similar vein, the wartime rhetoric – explicitly in 2008 and, perhaps, more ambiguously since 2014 – stresses that hard times have proven Russia's strength and unity. The evolving basis of the latter, national unity, will be discussed next.

*'The Amoral International':  
the Other with different values*

After the so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the project to enhance national unity gained new momentum. In early 2005, the need for a state-backed youth organization was voiced within the state administration, and some months later, the movement, called Naši, was created to fight the liberal tendencies among the youth (see Jussi Lassila, Chapter 5, this volume). The same year, a new public holiday, the Day of National Unity, was announced to commemorate the popular mobilization of Muscovites in 1612, led by Prince Dmitrij Požarskij and Merchant Kuzma Minin, to fight the foreign, Polish-Lithuanian invaders. The chosen date, 4 November, replaced the Day of Constitution as well as the Day of Accord and Reconciliation, by which name the former Day of Revolution had been known in the 1990s (Zuev, 2013, p. 108). The first groups to celebrate the new holiday were various nationalists organizing 'Russian marches.' Since then, the marches have focused mostly on anti-immigrant claims, but, as Denis Zuev (*ibid.*, p. 103) notes, the 'myth of national salvation from the West' inspired the early organizers of the event, such as

Aleksandr Dugin. The introduction of these symbolic measures reflects the trend of portraying the West as the constituent Other, as well as the increasing emphasis on the external threat.

Around the same time, the references to the shared values of the Russian nation became more commonplace in presidential rhetoric. A close reading of the addresses in 2000–2020 suggests that those values have undergone a significant change over the past two decades. In 2000, Putin was already mentioning that 'we have had and continue to have' common values, but did not explain what they actually were (President of Russia, 2000). In 2005, he described Russia as a major European power, and explained the values of Russian society accordingly: 'Achieved through much suffering by European culture, the ideals of freedom, human rights, justice and democracy have for many centuries been our society's determining values' (President of Russia, 2005). The following year, Vladislav Surkov, presidential advisor at the time, framed human rights and democracy as negatively loaded propaganda of the 'West' (Ryazanova-Clarke, 2012) – a revision that became visible at large in the Kremlin's discourse and paved way for Surkov's conceptual innovation, 'sovereign democracy', to be the distinctively Russian alternative for political modernization. The turn was swift: in 2007, the European origin of the Russian value basis was no longer mentioned. Instead, Putin elevated the significance of 'spiritual unity of the people and the moral values that unite us' to being as important for development as political and economic stability (President of Russia, 2007). In 2008, Medvedev listed Russia's values as consisting of justice and freedom, welfare, dignity of human life, interethnic peace, and patriotism. This set of values was still rather liberal, at least in the way Medvedev interpreted them, but he no longer emphasized their common European roots (Baturu and Mikhaylov, 2014, p. 973).

Thus, the revision from shared European values towards distinct Russian values as Russia's strength started gradually from the mid-2000s. Rhetorically, the biggest change took place in 2012, after the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third term in the presidential office. From then on, presidential discourse consistently stressed a national narrative that was based on a shared set of traditional,

conservative Russian values, portrayed against an external Other. The massive street protests against electoral fraud and Putin's regime in the big cities of Russia in 2011–2012 functioned as a significant driver for the change. During the spring and summer of 2012, several measures were taken in order to limit civic participation and political contention in society. At the same time, a state-supported media campaign against migrants took off on national, state-controlled television (Tolz, 2017). Until around late 2013, migrants were portrayed as Russia's internal Other in the media, but this aspect was not visible in presidential rhetoric. However, in one of the newspaper articles of Putin's presidential campaign in 2012, dealing with nationality policy, Putin very clearly condemned 'Western' migration policies. Additionally, he stated that Russian identity rested upon a shared 'cultural code', and that the basis of the Russian 'state-civilisation' (*gosudarstvo-civilizaciâ*) lay within its shared culture and values (Nezavisimâ gazeta, 2012). It is important to note that this change in discourses also took place on levels in the state discourse other than just the presidential one (Østbø, 2017). The traditional Russian 'spiritual-moral' values became intrinsically connected to national security: Jardar Østbø speaks about the 'securitization' of those values after 2013 especially. One implication of this development can be found in the Strategy on National Security, confirmed by the president on 31 December 2015, where 'preserving and enhancing (*sohranenie i priumnozhenie*)' the traditional values was mentioned as a 'strategic objective' of national security in the cultural sphere. In this document, the values were defined as including:

the priority of the spiritual over the material, protection of human life and of human rights and freedoms, the family, creative labor, service to the homeland, the norms of morals and morality, humanism, charity, fairness, mutual assistance, collectivism, the historical unity of the peoples of Russia, and the continuity of our motherland's history. (Rossijskaâ gazeta, 2015)

After 2013, the deteriorating relationship with the West added nuances to the understanding of the liberal, non-traditional or

even 'amoral' Other in both external and internal terms. In 2013, Putin called the people who are 'devoid of culture and respect for traditions, both their own and those of others,' an 'Amoral International'. The remark is connected to the discussion on ethnic tensions, which were at the time of that address extremely high. The internal Other here refers to radical ethnonationalists who were seriously challenging the narrative of the (multi)national unity of the Russian people, but the internal Other that does not share the common value basis can also be someone pursuing the interests of a foreign country or acting against Russia's interest (the 'fifth column').

The rhetorical change in 2012 extended to the representation of external Other. As was described above, in the early 2000s, the presidential discourse portrayed global economic competition as a certain type of continuum of the Cold War political competition. In 2012, Putin introduced a new transformation: the global competition is no longer purely economic. Instead, in the era of globalization and intensifying struggle for resources in particular, the selection of future leaders 'will depend not only on the economic potential, but primarily on the will of each nation, on its inner energy which Lev Gumilev termed "passionarity": the ability to move forward and to embrace change'. Putin added that in this 'new balance of economic, civilisational and military forces' Russia needed to preserve national and spiritual identity (President of Russia, 2012). Gumilev, a conservative philosopher of the Eurasianist current to whom Putin referred, developed his theory of ethnogenesis upon the notion that 'passionarity' (*passionarnost'*), 'the ability of single-minded super-efforts,' could characterize not only an individual but an entire ethnos (Titov, 2005, p. 52).

Marlene Laruelle (2016, p. 293) argues that the Kremlin has developed an 'anti-Western European civilisation' narrative, which presents Russia as definitely a European country but one that has chosen not to follow the Western path of development. This mirrors in a way the Russian discourses in the first third of the 19th century, when the French Revolution had turned the Russian debate on Europe around. During the reformist period of Peter

the Great, the modernizing debates insisted that Russia was European, and that Europe geographically extended to the Urals. As Neumann (1996, pp. 11–13) notes, the tsar managed to marginalize the resisting views, arising for example from within the Orthodox Church. After the Decembrist uprisings, the state interpreted the European movement away from enlightened despotism as a betrayal of the ideals once commonly held by all the monarchs of Europe and by their dependents (*ibid.*). In this way, the change in Putin's rhetoric – from the common European values towards the idea of Europe as Other that 'equates good with evil' (President of Russia, 2013) – reflects historical traits of understanding Europe as fundamentally different, even against the background of Russia's Europeanness. Thus, in the Russian perception after 2012, the European countries might still be the Others that are ahead of economic competition, but they have lost their 'original', Christian European identity and have now become Others possessing different values.

If for some European countries national pride is a long-forgotten concept and sovereignty is too much of a luxury, true sovereignty for Russia is absolutely necessary for survival. Primarily, we should realise this as a nation. I would like to emphasise this: either we remain a sovereign nation, or we dissolve without a trace and lose our identity. Of course, other countries need to understand this, too. (President of Russia, 2014)

Interestingly, the presidential rhetoric portrays the Other with different values always as a Western country. For example, the Russian–Chinese 'comprehensive strategic partnership' works for ensuring international stability, but any value-based mutual understanding between the two countries is not discussed in those contexts (President of Russia, 2016, 2018). All in all, references to any other continents or countries than Western ones are brief and superfluous. Olga Malinova (2019, pp. 237–238) concludes in her analysis on American and Chinese Others in Russian political discourse in 2012–2014 that 'the pivot to the East' in Russian politics has not translated into replacing the West as the most important Significant Other for Russia.



The value-based Other is both external and internal, and those are often entangled: the internal Other is accused of supporting causes 'foreign to Russia'. Alongside the change in rhetoric about values, the actual policies of excluding Others with 'non-traditional' values have strengthened. In his speech to the Federal Assembly in April 2005, Putin cited in length the words of conservative philosopher Ivan Il'in, stating that the state power should not 'intervene in moral, family and daily private life' (President of Russia, 2005). Less than a decade later, the state leadership had clearly abandoned this idea of 'not intervening' in the private life of the citizens. Maria Engström (2014, pp. 356–357) has explained the so-called 'conservative turn' in 2012 as the 're-ideologisation' of Russian domestic, foreign and security politics, in which the state authorities started to lean on already existing but marginal interpretations of Russian messianism. The rhetoric of the Russian Orthodox Church and the state became gradually more intertwined, and, after 2013 especially, the close relationship has been translated into legislative processes. In June 2013, offences against believers' feelings were made punishable by imprisonment, and in February 2017 the penalties for domestic violence were eased – both changes had been, at least partly, concessions to the Russian Orthodox Church (Laine and Saarelainen, 2017, pp. 16–17). Moreover, the repression of gender and sexual minorities in the country has increased, as they represent 'non-traditional' values, portrayed as 'foreign' to Russia. Among the constitutional amendments of 2020, there was a statement that marriage as 'a union of a man and a woman' needs to be protected (Gosudarstvennââ дума, 2020).

A key feature of the unifying national narrative, patriotism, has remained at the core of the presidential rhetoric, gaining gradually more importance. After 2014, Putin repeatedly declared that he saw patriotism as a unifying idea, or 'the national idea', for all Russians (RBK, 2016). Federal-level patriotic education programmes with their increasing funding, the emergence of various local, private or semi-official patriotic clubs and organizations, and the endeavours of the Russian Orthodox Church in the domestic and foreign policy sphere (Knorre, 2018), as well as the consistency



with which patriotic ideas have been circulated in the official discourse, have probably all contributed to the vision Putin shared with the Federal Assembly in 2016:

Our people have united around patriotic values. We see this unity and we should thank them for it. They have united around these values not because everyone is happy and they have no demands, on the contrary, there is no shortage of problems and difficulties. But people have an understanding of their causes and, most importantly, are confident that together we can overcome these problems. It is this readiness to work for our country's sake and this sincere and deep-seated concern for Russia that form the foundation of this unity we see. (President of Russia, 2016)

Interestingly, in Putin's parlance the much-needed unity of the people had been achieved by 2016. The rhetorical change in 2012 was inspired by the intensified concern, even fear, of revolutionary actions in the domestic arena. Often described as the moment of 'conservative turn' in Russia (Feldmann and Mazepus, 2018), the tone describing the value basis of the nation changed: first, references to the common European heritage of those values, commonplace until mid-2000s, was omitted, and, second, the traditional values that united the Russian nation were portrayed to be under threat, so they had to be defended. Since then, the references to the key values of the Russian nation have remained rather consistent. Rhetorically, however, the future challenges to national unity may be more difficult to address once that unity has been claimed to be achieved. Moreover, a turn away from these conservative values, a move that could have still been possible earlier in the 2000s, seems unthinkable now that they have been introduced in the legislative language of the state at the level of the Constitution.

### **Concluding Remarks: from Stability to Morality**

During the past two decades, the state leadership has portrayed Russia's Others in the context of internal political legitimacy on the one hand and global politics on the other. Since 2000, the

metaphor of international relations as constant competition has grown from purely economic in nature towards a distinctive form of economic, military and 'moral' competition. The Other, who was first ahead in the competition, later became the Other taking the side of the enemy. However, the Other is not pronounced to be the enemy: Russia's only explicit enemy is terrorism (both inside the country and outside it). Instead, Others are either those who are not willing to assist Russia or those who assist the terrorists. The rhetoric of competition is connected to the metaphors of weak and strong Russia, which are always relational. In the economic competition, Russia's Others were stronger than Russia, and 'stability' and 'modernization' were presented as conceptual innovations, indicating how to act against them. But, with time, it became clearly pronounced that Russia is stronger in a military and moral sense – and those are the characteristics that count when the competition transforms into a conflict, that is, after 2008 especially.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the past experience of the 1990s was often referred to as an internal, historical Other. Then, the critique of the politicians in the 1990s was a way to enhance the legitimacy of the new leader, but, with time, the same strategy was applied to the internal Other as a corrupt, dishonest and selfish 'middleman' of Russian politics. This rhetoric represents a certain type of populist continuum: there is someone other than the president himself to blame for the flaws of domestic politics. Yet, portraying the 1990s as a historical Other remains a central theme throughout the study period, even if the references to the past in general change: whereas Dmitri Medvedev spoke vividly about Russia's future still in 2009, Vladimir Putin, who followed him, leaned on the country's great past, and past wars in particular, omitting proposals for the bright future.

Finally, the perhaps most significant change in the Others of Russia during the study period is the emergence of the Other as possessing different values. In the early 2000s, the West was still depicted as Russia's Other, mainly in the context of the critically important economic competition. Gradually, from the mid-2000s onwards, the state administration introduced new symbolic

policies to stress external threat, and, around the same time, the addresses to the Federal Assembly started to reflect shared values as the key guarantee for it. Interestingly, however, those values were not explicitly portrayed as fundamentally different from the values of the Other until 2012. But then, and especially after 2013, the addresses repeatedly pointed out that the Other held a different set of values, and, more precisely, it abandoned the values that once were common to Russia and Europe.

The conservative emphasis of the presidential rhetoric arose from domestic drivers, but it has certainly been amplified by the difficulties in the foreign policy sphere. It is rather difficult to evaluate how persistent (or how widely embraced) the idea of the Other holding fundamentally different values actually is. It is noteworthy that the change from the rather liberal understanding of common values to traditional, conservative ones in the presidential discourse was relatively abrupt – for instance, references regarding the ‘Europeanness’ of the Russian values disappeared from presidential discourse between the years 2005 and 2007. So, theoretically, a change towards an opposite direction could be implemented in a similar manner. But recent years have shown that any possibility of reversing this rhetoric has become unlikely for at least two reasons. First, the president has stated that the shared values have, by now, united the Russian nation against the external threat, and that the ‘moral’ strength of the national Self against its Other has been achieved. Second, the ideological tones have been brought into the sphere of Russian legislation, including the Constitution, which may prove essential in the future development of the country.

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# PUBLICATION IV

# NEW GENERATION OF VICTORS: NARRATING THE NATION IN RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL DISCOURSE, 2012–2019

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**Abstract:** After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, many proposed that this state-generated, ethnically loaded “nationalist boost” enhanced the state’s legitimacy by replacing the previous social contract between the Russian state and the people. This article argues for a more nuanced understanding of nationalism in contemporary Russia by asking how exactly the state leadership has portrayed the Russian nation in 2012–2019. Analyzing presidential speeches in this period, the article traces three distinctive but closely interconnected narratives of “Russianness”: the narrative of the victorious nation; the narrative of the moral nation; and the narrative of the multinational but ethnically hierarchical nation.

After Vladimir Putin began his third term as Russian President in 2012, and in particular following the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in the spring of 2014, media and, to some extent, scholarly analyses have turned to nationalism to explain the seemingly abrupt change in Russian

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politics.<sup>1</sup> However, nationalism as a label does not sufficiently illuminate the self-presentation of the Russian state because it is a concept of several—even conflicting—meanings that often remain undefined. Moreover, the purely instrumentalist interpretation of the concept fails to cover the full complexity of nationalism as a source of legitimacy for a political actor. In order to add an original and empirically tested argument to the scholarly discussion, the current article sets out to analyze references made to the nation in presidential discourse over the past eight years, that is, after the “wave of nationalism” hit the shore. It explains how the Russian state leadership has formulated its nationalist argument in 2012–2019 by asking what constitutes “Russianness” in the narratives produced by the president, and who, on those accounts, belongs to the nation? With the help of the scholarly literature, I contextualize this argument by discussing key policy shifts and societal attitudes related to the narratives.

The past and present of Russian nationalism(s) remains a well-studied theme. Scholars have focused, among other topics, on ethnic Russian nationalism and radical nationalist movements in Russian history,<sup>2</sup> state nationalism as a consolidating policy,<sup>3</sup> and the role of memory politics and media in the nation-building process.<sup>4</sup> In many of these studies, an overarching theme has been the tension between state nationalism and “bottom-up” nationalism. Helge Blakkisrud and Pål Kolstø, leaders of the extensive research project NEORUSS, note that “a ‘nationalist turn’ in Russian state policy makes sense only if we can also assume that there exists a pool of nationalist sentiment in the Russian population the rulers believe they can tap into,”<sup>5</sup> a view endorsed in this article. According to

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Richard Arnold. “Surveys Show Russian Nationalism Is On the Rise.” *The Washington Post*. May 30, 2016. At <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/30/surveys-show-russian-nationalism-is-on-the-rise-this-explains-a-lot-about-the-countrys-foreign-and-domestic-politics/>, accessed September 17, 2019; Charles Clover. “The Return of Russian Nationalism.” *Financial Times*. October 13, 2017. At <https://www.ft.com/content/edb595d8-aeba-11e7-beba-5521c713abf4>, accessed September 17, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Horvath. 2005. *The Legacy of Soviet Dissent: Dissidents, Democratization and Radical Nationalism in Russia*. Oxon: Routledge; Thomas Parland. 2005. *The Extreme Nationalist Threat in Russia: The Growing Influence of Western Rightist Ideas*. Oxon: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Yitzhak M. Brudny. 1998. *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1991*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Marlène Laruelle. 2009. *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>4</sup> Olga Malinova. 2015. *Aktual'noe proshloe. Simvolicheskaia politika vlastvuiushchei elity i dilemmy rossiiskoi identichnosti*. [Current Past. The Symbolic Policy of the Ruling Elite and the Dilemmas of Russian Identity.] Moscow: ROSSPEN; Olga Malinova. 2017. “Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin.” In Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, eds., *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies; Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz. 2015. *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference*. Oxon: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud. 2018. “Introduction.” In Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkis-

Luke March, in order to study nationalism in Russia in a holistic manner, research considering both the “ideational influence of nationalism and policy contents of its proponents” is needed.<sup>6</sup> The “influence” of the narratives remains outside the scope of this article, but the way in which these narratives are constructed reflects the state actors’ reasoning as well as their assumptions about popular moods.

The term “social contract” has often been used when analyzing regime legitimacy in post-Soviet Russia.<sup>7</sup> The contract was seriously tested in 2011–2012, when tens of thousands of Russian citizens gathered to protest against Vladimir Putin’s plans to return to the presidency. As a result, after Putin’s third term as president began in 2012, the state authorities not only limited possibilities for political contention in the public space and in the media but also sought to appeal to the conservative part of the society by promoting traditional, “spiritual-moral” values as the core of Russian national identity. Simultaneously, efforts to connect these values to national security intensified.<sup>8</sup> This change in politics, often described as an “authoritarian” or “conservative turn,”<sup>9</sup> serves as the start of this study’s time frame: it focuses on state nationalism after that turn, which encompasses another watershed, the annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014. The annexation created a wave of patriotism that many interpreted as a new form of the social contract: on this view, instead of economic security, the people were given a “boost” of nationalist great-poweriness in exchange for loyalty to the state in a time of a crisis.<sup>10</sup> However, “increasing” nationalism in order to enhance the legitimacy of the incumbent is a risky strategy, the potential success of which does not necessarily endure.

Moreover, as Henry E. Hale et al. argue, Russia’s political system

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rud, eds., *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–17*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> Luke March. 2018. “Nationalism.” In Andrei P. Tsygankov, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*. London and New York: Routledge Handbooks, 95.

<sup>7</sup> Aleksey Makarkin. 2011. “The Russian Social Contract and Regime Legitimacy.” *International Affairs* 87: 6: 1459–74.

<sup>8</sup> Jardar Østbø. 2017. “Securitizing ‘Spiritual-Moral Values’ in Russia.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33: 3: 200–216, 202.

<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner. 2019. “Dilemmas and Paradoxes of Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Introduction.” In Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds., *Contemporary Russian Conservatism*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 3–35; Magnus Feldmann and Honorata Mazepus. 2018. “State-Society Relations and the Sources of Support for the Putin Regime: Bridging Political Culture and Social Contract Theory.” *East European Politics* 34:1: 57–76.

<sup>10</sup> Emil A. Pain and Lev D. Gudkov. 2014. “Beseda na temu: ‘V ozhidanii chuda: rossiiskoe obshchestvo posle krymskikh sobytii.’ [Discussion on the Topic: ‘Waiting for a Miracle: Russian Society after the Crimean Events’]. *Politicheskaiia kontseptologiya* 1; Eduard Ponarin and Mihail Komin. 2018. “The Russian Elite’s Imperial Nationalism and the Russian Society: The Emergence of a Grand Consensus.” *Sociology Compass* 12: 12; Yuri Teper. 2018. “Kremlin’s Post-2012 National Policies: Encountering the Merits and Perils of Identity-Based Social Contract.” In Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, eds., *Russia Before and After Crimea. Nationalism and Identity, 2010–17*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 68.

should be understood as inherently dynamic. The Kremlin employs both structural and ideational improvisation, and this process by no means reached its end after the “Crimean consensus.”<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Magnus Feldmann and Honorata Mazepus point out that the social contract can be re-negotiated.<sup>12</sup> As of the time of writing, it is clear that even if the majority of Russians still support the annexation of Crimea, the “patriotic boost” no longer serves as a significant source of legitimacy for the current leadership. Indeed, challenges related to state legitimacy have become even more acute in recent years, as socio-economic problems, corruption, and electoral fraud have triggered widespread protests. In the near future, the repercussions of the global Covid-19 pandemic will exacerbate these challenges. The process of “re-negotiating” the social contract between the state and the people is not over in contemporary Russia; by analyzing the narratives of the nation produced by the political leadership, we can gain some insight into the forms it may take in the future.

### **Political Narratives as a Way to Generate Meaning**

The article draws on critical nationalism studies that treat the nation as a result of a deliberate construction process. As Yitzhak M. Brudny points out, shared beliefs about a nation’s distinctive origins, culture, and history, among other things, are not immutable.<sup>13</sup> These beliefs are also subject to manipulation. To a large extent, the construction of a nation is innately political, which is why I have found John Breuilly’s concept of nationalism as an argument useful. The nationalist argument consists of three assumptions: that there exists a nation with an explicit character; that the interests of this nation take priority over those of other nations; and that the nation must be as independent as possible.<sup>14</sup> Thus, I approach state-produced narratives on “Russianness” as a means of formulating and defending the nationalist argument. It is important to study this process because it has real political implications: nationalist discourses create the conditions for domestic and foreign policy decisions and maintain boundaries that recognize those who belong and exclude the Others.<sup>15</sup>

Nationalist ideologies, like any ideologies, aim to become “common sense”—unnoticed, naturalized knowledge. This process takes place via language. Political actors often rely on the narrative form, since it is embraced by the public as a natural way of thinking.<sup>16</sup> This article adopts

<sup>11</sup> Henry E. Hale, Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov. 2019. “Russia’s Regime-on-the-Move.” *Russian Politics* 4, 168–95.

<sup>12</sup> Feldmann and Mazepus, “State-Society Relations,” 66.

<sup>13</sup> Brudny, *Reinventing Russia*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> John Breuilly. 1994. *Nationalism and the State*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2–3.

<sup>15</sup> Vera Tolz. 2001. *Russia: Inventing the Nation*. London: Arnold Publishers, 236.

<sup>16</sup> Shaul R. Shenav. 2006. “Political Narratives and Political Reality.” *International Political*

a minimal definition of narrative, understanding it as a socially produced account of events that contains aspects of temporality and causality.<sup>17</sup> Narratives are means to tell about experiences of the past and link them to the present in a meaningful way, so whether the narratives are “true” is less important than whether they are embraced by the people.<sup>18</sup> Public narratives of the nation, produced by the political leadership, are understood as stories told to the people about their shared characteristics that emphasize selected historical continua.

For the purposes of this article, a set of 35 presidential addresses from the years 2012–2019 was collected for close reading. The selection includes the president’s annual addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,<sup>19</sup> which have served, since 2014, as strategic planning documents for the country;<sup>20</sup> addresses to the annual Valdai discussion forum (from the year 2013 onwards, when forum discussions became public); greetings at the annual Victory Day Parade; the speech given on the day of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the brief commemorative remarks made on the anniversary of the annexation in each subsequent year; and speeches delivered at the festivities for the Day of National Unity. The material encompasses both speeches outlining Russian state policy and addresses of a more ceremonial character that were given on occasions emphasizing national unity. The criteria for selection were that the speeches were widely reported in the domestic media and served a slightly different function from any other speech in the sample. Political leaders shape their message to their audience, so the goal was to map the main contents of the narratives that emerge in various settings. Russia’s political system is highly president-centric both in legislative terms and in practice, and in this article, the president is understood as the embodiment of the highest political power in Russia.

In order to answer the main research question—how the Russian state leadership has formulated the nationalist argument in 2012–2019—the primary textual material was subjected to qualitative content analysis. The primary material was read in Russian, searching for specific references to the Russian nation (*russkii/rossiiskii narod/natsiia*), to “us” as a nation, or to “our” national character. Most often those were excerpts in which the president described “us” Russians in a certain way, portrayed the Russian *Science Review* 27: 3: 245–62, 250; Edwin Bacon. 2012. “Public Political Narratives: Developing a Neglected Source through the Exploratory Case of Russia in the Putin-Medvedev era.” *Political Studies* 60: 768–86, 768.

<sup>17</sup> Anna De Fina. 2017. “Narrative Analysis.” In Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Forchtner, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 234.

<sup>18</sup> Shenhav, “Political Narratives,” 246.

<sup>19</sup> In December 2017, the presidential administration postponed the address until March 2018.

<sup>20</sup> 2014. *Federal’nyi zakon No 172-FZ ‘O strategicheskoi planirovanii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Federal Law “On the Strategic planning of the Russian Federation”], At <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/38630>, accessed November 19, 2019, chapter 3: 11/3.

nation in general terms or in comparison to its Others, or depicted the history of the nation. In analyzing the references, words and expressions that appeared particularly frequently were taken into account. However, no statistics were produced, nor were the meaning units quantitatively grouped, because it was possible to process the material manually. The references were organized into thematic categories depending on the temporal and causal ways in which the nation was defined. This produced three distinct narratives. This is not to say that these are the only possible narratives, nor that they are consistent and univocal throughout time, but taken together, they portray the explicit character of the Russian nation as expressed by state leadership.

### *Narrative of the Multinational Nation*

In post-Soviet Russia, striking a balance between (broadly understood) ethnic and civic nation-building strategies has been a key challenge. From the authorities' viewpoint, Russia's ethno-federal structure has complicated civic nation-building, but ethnic variants cannot be openly endorsed because of their potential to encourage ethnic tensions, separatism, and disintegration.<sup>21</sup> Partly for this reason, Boris Yeltsin, despite his emphasis on the civic vocabulary and the interpretation of Russians as "a multinational nation" (*mnogonatsional'nyi narod*), took an imperial view of ethnic Russians as the most important, "state-forming" (*gosudarstvoo-brasuyushchey*) nation of the country.<sup>22</sup> These concepts feature in several key documents, such as the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation and the 1996 Concept on Nationalities policy.<sup>23</sup> As Oxana Shevel shows, the ambivalence between the concept of multinationality and the "special role" of ethnic Russians both in the Russian Federation and in the former Soviet Union persisted during Putin's and Dmitri Medvedev's presidential terms.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, Putin has emphasized "multinationality"—in the sense of ethnic and confessional diversity—as one of the most consistent characteristics of the Russian nation since the beginning of 2012, when he published a series of newspaper articles as part of his presidential campaign. In one

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Oxana Shevel. 2011. "Russian Nation-Building from Yel'tsin to Medvedev: Ethnic, Civic or Purposefully Ambiguous?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 63: 2: 179–202.

<sup>22</sup> The view of Russians as a state-forming nation gained popularity in the Russian Empire by the beginning of the twentieth century. Aleksei Miller. 2012. "Istoriia poniatia natsiia v Rossii." [History of the Concept of Nation in Russia]. In Aleksei Miller et al., eds., *Poniatia o Rossii: K istoricheskoi semantike imperskogo perioda* [Concepts on Russia: On Historical Semantics of the Imperial Period]. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 7–49, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Garant-Internet. n.d. *Constitution of the Russian Federation*, At <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm>, accessed November 11, 2019; J. Paul Goode. 2019. "Russia's Ministry of Ambivalence: The Failure of Civic Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Russia." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35: 2: 140–160, 149.

<sup>24</sup> Shevel, "Russian Nation-Building," 189–90.

of the texts, focusing explicitly on nationality politics, Putin explained his vision of multinationality as a crucial part of Russian statehood: “Historical Russia is not an ethnic state, nor is it an American ‘melting pot’ [...] Russia developed in the course of centuries as a multinational state.”<sup>25</sup>

In the same article, Putin stressed the view of ethnic Russians as a state-forming nation whose mission is to unite the civilization. Later in 2012, Putin again presented multinationality as an inherent characteristic both of the Russian state and its people—it is Russia’s “strength and beauty.”<sup>26</sup> At the Valdai forum in 2013, Putin explained that “polycultural” and multi-ethnic features (*polikul’turnost’, polietnichnost’*) live in “our historical consciousness” and that questioning “our multi-ethnic character [...] means that we are starting to destroy our genetic code.”<sup>27</sup>

With these references to multinationality, the temporal and causal aspects of a certain narrative begin to take shape. In an article written for the presidential campaign, Putin described the origins of the Day of the National Unity, a national holiday to commemorate the end of the “Time of Troubles”—or the Polish invasion of Moscow—in 1612, stating that it celebrates a moment when estates and nationalities realized themselves as one people. He added: “We can rightfully consider this holiday the birthday of our civic nation (*rozhdeniya nashey grazhdanskoy natsii*).”<sup>28</sup> Putin returned to this theme on the Day of National Unity in 2014:

Having formed a people’s militia, they [people of different nationalities and religions] liberated Moscow from invaders [...]. More than four centuries have passed since then, but the dramatic events of that time remain an eternal historical lesson for us, a warning for all generations, a rule for us.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the period under study, multinationality recurs as a “historical” characteristic of the Russian nation, often connected to loyalty to the Motherland and patriotism. The combination of these features, the

<sup>25</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2012. “Rossiia: natsional’nyi vopros” [Russia: The National Question]. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, January 23, 2012, At [http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1\\_national.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html), accessed September 4, 2019. Translations from Russian by the author.

<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2012. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 12, 2012, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>, accessed November 11, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2013. “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai.’” [The Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*. September 19, 2013, At <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>, accessed November 11, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Putin, “Rossiia: natsional’nyi vopros.”

<sup>29</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2014. “Priem po sluchaiu Dnia narodnogo edinstva” [Reception of the Day of the National Unity]. *Kremlin.ru*. November 4, 2014, At <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46916>, accessed November 11, 2019.



narrative suggests, has ensured Russia's survival in the times of conflict. As will be discussed further in this article, presidential discourse often deploys parallels between events in the past and those in the present. The Day of National Unity is a case in point. Edwin Bacon notes that when the new holiday was established in 2005, films and television documentaries likened the "Time of Troubles" in the seventeenth century to the 1990s in Russia: "The implication was that just as the Romanov dynasty brought long-term stability in 1612, so the Putin regime brought long-term stability after the chaos of the Yeltsin years."<sup>30</sup> Thus, one of the main narratives of "Russianness" reads as follows: the historical unity of the multinational Russian nation was born in 1612, when the people organized to fight the foreign enemy. Since then, the unity of the multinational nation has been tested in several conflicts in which there was an external threat, including the Second World War, but it has persisted and remains Russia's strength to this day. The inherent multinational character of the Russian nation guarantees the harmonious coexistence of various nationalities within the Russian state and makes it unique in relation to other nations, such as the Western European nations.

Edwin Bacon describes subplots as alternative interpretations told by the regime itself. They provide flexibility to the actual narrative, as they can be employed simultaneously, but also allow future developments in alternative directions.<sup>31</sup> Bacon's concept of a subplot helps to analyze the "unique role" of ethnic Russians within the narrative of the multinational nation, often explained in the presidential discourse as a feature uniting "the civilization":

We must treasure the unique experience passed on to us by our forefathers. For centuries—from the very beginning—Russia developed as a multi-ethnic nation, a state-civilisation held together by the Russian people (*skreplennoe russkim narodom*), the Russian language and Russian culture, which are native to all of us, which unite us and prevent us from dissolving in this diverse world.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the narrative is presented as ethnically inclusive, but it simultaneously embraces the idea of a certain type of ethnic hierarchy. In other words, all nationalities belong to the narrative of the multinational nation, but ethnic Russians have a special—that is, more important—role. The subplot within the narrative of the multinational nation stresses the decisive

<sup>30</sup> Bacon, "Public Political Narratives," 779.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 780–81.

<sup>32</sup> Putin, "Poslanie prezidenta."

role of ethnic Russians in the religious and cultural history of the country. In contemporary contexts, the view of Russian ethnicity as “first among equals” has been reinforced both by representatives of the establishment and by the country’s highest-level leadership.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the emphasis on multinationality, the state apparatus has tested alternative approaches as well. In May 2012, as Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz have shown, an anti-migrant campaign began on federal TV: state-aligned broadcasters portrayed immigration, particularly Islamic immigration, as a threat to Russia’s sovereignty, security, and identity.<sup>34</sup> By the end of 2013, the Kremlin-endorsed campaign had contributed to outbreaks of violent radical nationalism on the streets of Moscow suburbs, and the people expressed distrust in the state authorities’ ability to handle the situation. Xenophobic attitudes toward migrants were at a record high.<sup>35</sup> During the campaign, Putin did not stress migration-related questions, but in October 2013, following an outbreak of violence, he addressed the issue in a speech to the Federal Assembly:

It [interethnic tension] is not provoked by representatives of particular nationalities, but by people devoid of culture and respect for traditions, both their own and those of others. [...] Together we must rise to the challenge; we must protect interethnic peace and thus the unity of our society, the unity and integrity of the Russian state.<sup>36</sup>

By the end of 2013, the anti-migration campaign on TV had been toned down, while control of radical nationalist groups had increased. The Sochi Winter Olympics, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in Ukraine shifted the media’s attention elsewhere, affecting public opinion: xenophobic attitudes began to decrease after spring 2014.<sup>37</sup>

The most significant shift in this narrative took place in 2014. Until then, the emphasis on historical multinationality had outweighed the

<sup>33</sup> Helge Blakkisrud. 2016. “Blurring the Boundary between Civic and Ethnic: The Kremlin’s New Approach to National Identity under Putin’s Third Term.” In Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, eds., *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 254–55; Hutchings and Tolz, *Nation, Ethnicity and Race*, 223.

<sup>34</sup> Hutchings and Tolz, *Nation, Ethnicity and Race*, 239–40.

<sup>35</sup> Karina Pipiya. 2016. *Intolerantnost’ i ksenofobiia* [Intolerance and Xenophobia.], At <http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/11/intolerantnost-i-ksenofobiya>, accessed June 4, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2013. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu.” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 12, 2013, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>, accessed November 11, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Levada Center. 2016. *Soiuzniki i ‘vragi’ Rossii. Evropeiskaia integratsiia* [Allies and ‘Enemies’ of Russia. European Integration], At <http://www.levada.ru/2016/06/02/13400/>, accessed June 4, 2019.

references to ethnic Russianness in the presidential discourse. But in his speeches dealing with Crimea, Putin highlighted the ethnic connotation instead. In his March 2014 address, held after the referendum, he stressed “Russianness” as the decisive characteristic of the peninsula, saying, for example, that the residents of Crimea have always regarded it as “originally Russian land (*iskonno russkaya zemlya*).”<sup>38</sup> In his speech to the Federal Assembly later that year, Putin reiterated that “our people” (*nashi lyudi*) are living in Crimea—and stated that the main motivation for the annexation was to defend their rights. Putin also referred to the Grand Prince of Kiev, Vladimir the Great, who was baptized there, and described Sevastopol as a holy place for “all of us.”<sup>39</sup>

By linking the nation to the Orthodox tradition and constantly referring to it using a term with an ethnic connotation, Putin emphasized ethnic Russianness as the key frame for the annexation. Yuri Teper interpreted this as “a remarkable ethno-national shift” in the official identity discourse: after a long and rather stable emphasis on statist nation-building, the annexation of Crimea marked the moment that the nation became the primary reference point for constructing Russianness.<sup>40</sup> But in the years that followed, the “ethno-national” tone no longer dominated Putin’s speeches. Instead, the historical multinationality of the Russian nation figured prominently in presidential discourse until the very end of the period under study.<sup>41</sup> Sofia Tipaldou and Philipp Casula note that “the people” to whom state actors appealed in 2014 was “a much more unstable, slippery, and problematic construct” than, for example, during the Chechen war, because Ukrainians are considered a brotherly nation. They posit that for this reason, the official discourse utilized “the populist and inclusionary elements” of nationalism.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, I would suggest that the emphasis on ethnic Russianness as a historically “unifying” feature of the nation has served as a co-existing plot within the narrative of the multinational nation, both during and after the annexation of Crimea.

In this regard, the conceptual choices are telling. For example,

<sup>38</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2014(b). “Obrashchenie prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii.” [Address by the President of Russian Federation]. *Kremlin.ru*. March 18, 2014, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>, accessed November 11, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2014(c). “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu.” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 4, 2014, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>, accessed November 11, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Yuri Teper. 2016. “Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32:4: 378–96, 392–393.

<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Priem po sluchayu Dnia narodnogo edinstva” [Reception of the Day of the National Unity]. *Kremlin.ru*. November 4, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59043>, accessed November 4, 2019; Vladimir Putin. 2019. “Priem po sluchayu Dnia narodnogo edinstva” [Reception of the Day of the National Unity]. *Kremlin.ru*. November 4, 2019, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61963>, accessed November 4, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Sofia Tipaldou and Philipp Casula. 2019. “Russian Nationalism Shifting: The Role of Populism Since the Annexation of Crimea.” *Demokratizatsiya*, 27:3 (Summer 2019): 351.

throughout his Crimea speech, Putin deployed the term *russkii*.<sup>43</sup> Marlène Laruelle has noted that the widespread interpretation that *russkii* refers to linguistic and ethnic Russians, whereas *rossiiskii* encompasses citizens of the Russian Federation regardless of their ethnicity, is actually too narrow of a view on the matter. She posits that the term *russkii* reinforces the historical unity of the Eastern Slavs and emphasizes the “messianic” destiny of Russia.<sup>44</sup> Kolstø and Blakkisrud suggest that by using the two concepts interchangeably, the Kremlin wishes to eradicate the difference between *russkii* and *rossiiskii*, and thus make Russia into a more “normal” nation-state.<sup>45</sup> In the material of this study, Putin does not show sensitivity to these concepts in the sense of using them systematically. The motivation for the inconsistency (and the extent to which it is a deliberate choice) can be debated, but it is clear that *russkii* in the presidential discourse is a cultural-linguistic term rather than a narrow ethno-national one:

I recall one of my meetings with veterans. There were people of different nationalities: Tatars, Ukrainians, Georgians, and Russians, of course. One of the veterans, not a Russian by nationality, said, “For the whole world, we are one people, we are Russians (*my odin narod, my russkie*).” That’s how it was during the war, and that’s how it has always been.<sup>46</sup>

The identity discourses concerning the annexation of Crimea mostly targeted domestic audiences.<sup>47</sup> Yet the narrative of the multinational nation also has a strong foreign policy aspect. In the presidential discourse, *multinationality* is a sustainable policy, whereas the Western alternative, *multiculturalism*, is condemned. As early as January 2012, Putin stated that multiculturalism leads to a situation where people risk losing their national identity, and thus portends a crisis for European nation-states. He went on to say that Russia’s situation is “principally different.”<sup>48</sup> Five years later, he stated that “on a global scale, the creation of mono-ethnic states (*mononatsional’noe gosudarstvo*) is not a panacea against possible conflicts, but just the opposite.”<sup>49</sup> Putin portrayed the mono-national state, which is prone to

<sup>43</sup> Putin, “Obrashchenie prezidenta.”

<sup>44</sup> Marlène Laruelle. 2016. “Misinterpreting Nationalism: Why *Russkii* is Not a Sign of Ethnonationalism.” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 416, At <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/node/8218>, accessed November 19, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Kolstø and Blakkisrud, “Introduction,” 9.

<sup>46</sup> Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2012).

<sup>47</sup> Teper, “Official Russian Identity,” 393.

<sup>48</sup> Putin, “Rossiia: natsional’nyi vopros.”

<sup>49</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2017. “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’.” [The Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*. October 19, 2017, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55882>, accessed November 11, 2019.

conflicts, as an antithesis to the multinational state, which today's Russia represents. In short, the multiculturalism adopted by the Western countries is perceived in the presidential discourse as a failure, whereas the multinationality of the Russian state results from a centuries-old tradition of "ensuring diversity in unity" and is, therefore, more durable and balanced.

During the period under study, a political attempt to "clarify" the key concept of the narrative of the multinational nation surfaced. In a meeting of the Council for Ethnic Relations in 2016, the president endorsed the idea of drafting a law on the Russian nation (*zakon o rossiiskoi natsii*).<sup>50</sup> One of the initiators of the idea, Vyacheslav Mikhailov, explained that a clear definition would reduce confusion stemming from two possible interpretations of the concept of nation (*natsiia*): a civic entity and an ethnicity.<sup>51</sup> Both Mikhailov and another key figure behind the initiative, Valeri Tishkov, served as nationalities minister in the 1990s.<sup>52</sup> An amendment they pursued was adopted in December 2018. Today, the Strategy of Nationalities Policy defines "the multinational people of the Russian Federation (the Russian nation)" as "a community of free equal citizens of the Russian Federation of various ethnic, religious, social and other affiliations, with civic consciousness (*obladayushchih grazhdanskim samosoznaniem*)."<sup>53</sup> It remains to be seen whether this distinctively civic but still rather vague definition will affect the actual nationalities policy, especially since the state authorities have simultaneously adopted increasingly assimilative measures regarding, for instance, minority languages.<sup>54</sup>

The popularity of the narrative of the multinational nation remains difficult to assess, partly because the fear of separatism has constrained the public discussion on ethnic minorities' rights or inter-ethnic tensions within society. Nor have those topics been covered in presidential addresses since the end of 2013. Recent opinion polls demonstrate a rise in xenophobic attitudes among Russians after 2017,<sup>55</sup> which portends future challenges

<sup>50</sup> 2016. "Zasedanie Soveta po mezhnatsional'nym otnosheniiam" [Meeting of the Council for Ethnic Relations]. *Kremlin.ru*. October 31, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53173>, accessed May 5, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Georgii Neyaskin. 2018. "'Ni odna strana ne mozhet bez ideologii.' Interv'iu s avtorom idei uzakonit' rossiiskuiu natsiiu." ['No Country Can Be without an Ideology.' An Interview with an Author of the Idea to Legalize the Russian Nation]. *Republic.ru*, November 2, 2018, At <https://republic.ru/posts/75657>, accessed May 5, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Goode, "Russia's Ministry of Ambivalence," 150–52.

<sup>53</sup> 2018. "Podpisan Ukaz o vnesenii izmenenii v Strategiiu gosudarstvennoi natsional'noi politiki na period do 2025 goda" [A Decree to Amend the Strategy of Nationalities Policy until 2025 was Signed]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 7, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/59348>, accessed May 5, 2020, chapter 6.

<sup>54</sup> Konstantin Zamyatin. 2016. "Russian Political Regime Change and Strategies of Diversity Management: From a Multinational Federation towards a Nation-State." *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 15: 1: 19–49, 44–45.

<sup>55</sup> Levada Center. 2019. *Monitoring ksenofobskikh nastroyenii* [Monitoring of the xenophobic attitudes] At <https://www.levada.ru/2019/09/18/monitoring-ksenofobskikh-nastroenij-2/>, ac-

to the narrative of the multinational nation. Stressing the primacy of ethnic Russianness may have unwanted effects because of the lack of agreement regarding to whom it actually refers. The simultaneous process of redefining key concepts in official policy documents according to distinctively civic language suggests that the existing conceptual and strategic ambiguity will prevail.

### *Narrative of the Victorious Nation*

As the narrative of the multinational nation shows, the idea of a shared past helps to define the explicit character of the Russian nation. Referring to common history is a universal way to enhance feelings of belonging within a nation, hence why history is universally used—and abused—by politicians for nation-building purposes. In post-Soviet Russia, all state leaders have had to overcome the country's complex role as the successor of the USSR, on one hand, and the absence of any widely-accepted “grand narrative,” on the other. In the early 1990s, narratives of the past were harnessed to legitimate reforms, and the contrast between the totalitarian past and the democratic present was thus stressed. However, in early 2000s, the official narratives adopted the idea of a “thousand-year-long” Russian history to replace the perception of “old” and “new” Russia. At this stage, as Olga Malinova puts it, “the critical attitude to the Soviet past was replaced by its selective appropriation.”<sup>56</sup>

The year 2012, dubbed the “Year of History,” marked an intensification of political uses of the past in presidential discourse. According to Malinova, the number of historical references in the Russian presidential discourse began to grow significantly after 2012, when allusions to pre-Soviet Russian history also became more commonplace. The role of history in society gained considerable attention: new museums, projects, and policies were introduced. In December, Putin signed a decree to found Russia's War History Society, headed by Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii.<sup>57</sup> In February of the following year, Putin presented the idea of a single history textbook to canonize history education, an idea that eventually evolved into a Unified History Concept to guide history teaching in the country.<sup>58</sup> Today, history features strongly in Russian political discourse; the ruling elite considers the construction of the past to be one of its political tasks.<sup>59</sup>

In his speech to the Federal Assembly in December 2012, Putin reminded the audience of “the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917, or even in 1991, but rather, [...] we have a common, continuous cessed November 19, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Malinova, “Political Uses,” 45–46.

<sup>57</sup> Order #1710, At <https://rvio.histrf.ru/officially/ukaz-1710>, accessed April 28, 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Nikolai Gorodetskii. “Kontseptsia odna, uchebnikov mnogo.” August 27, 2014, At [https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2014/08/27\\_a\\_6191721.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2014/08/27_a_6191721.shtml), accessed September 15, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Malinova, *Aktual'noe proshloe*, 130–36; Malinova, “Political Uses,” 47, 50–53.

history spanning over one thousand years, and we must rely on it to find inner strength and purpose in our national development.”<sup>60</sup> At the Valdai forum in 2013, Putin stated that “we must be proud of our history, and we have things to be proud of. Our entire, uncensored history must be a part of Russian identity.”<sup>61</sup> Despite these words, the state leadership remains extremely selective in its use of the shared past.

Undoubtedly the most important event in the shared past of the Russian nation is the victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War, which in Russia is known as the Great Patriotic War. The victory has become the formative event in the history of the nation: it made “us” what “we” are today. This view was expressed as early as 2010, when president Dmitri Medvedev stated on the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Victory that “that war made us a strong nation.”<sup>62</sup> The political myth of the war connects sacrifice and heroism, for without one, there cannot be the other. On Victory Day (May 9), celebrations take place across the country, and a military parade is held on Red Square in Moscow. In 2015, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory, the parade was the largest ever in terms of participants and military equipment. No significant scaling-down has taken place in subsequent years. In the summer of 2019, the presidential administration announced that the year 2020 would be a “Year of Memory and Glory” to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory.<sup>63</sup> Referring to this, Putin reminded listeners in November 2019 that “we prepare to celebrate our sacred date (*svyashchennuiu dlia nas datu*).”<sup>64</sup> Public celebrations of the victory, as well as the vast resources channeled to state-associated historical organizations, museums, and events in recent years, keep the shared past vividly present in society.

Since 2012, Putin has ended his Victory Day speech with the greeting “Glory to the victorious nation!” every year except 2016 and 2018. Joseph Stalin coined the term “victorious nation” (*narod-pobeditel'*), or “the nation that wins/has won,” on the very first Victory Day in 1945. In the contemporary context, it stresses the victory as an eternal characteristic of the nation. For example, in May 2013, Putin described the victory as “the sound of a great bell that celebrates life without war, a sacred symbol of loyalty to our Motherland which lives in each of us.”<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2012).

<sup>61</sup> Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

<sup>62</sup> Dmitri Medvedev. “Dorogie veterany!” [Dear Veterans!]. *Kremlin.ru*, May 9, 2010, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/7685>, accessed May 5, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> “V Rossii 2020 god stanet Godom pamyati i slavy” [In Russia, the Year 2020 Will Become a Year of Memory and Glory]. *RIA Novosti*. July 8, 2019, At <https://ria.ru/20190708/1556323142.html>, accessed November 20, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Putin, “Priem po sluchaiu” (2019).

<sup>65</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2013. “Voennyi parad na Krasnoi ploschadi” [Military Parade on the Red Square]. *Kremlin.ru*. May 9, 2013, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18089>, accessed November 11, 2019.



One of the key shifts in the discourse of the shared past takes place after 2014, when the “victorious nation” started to function as a parallel between the past and present. Olga Malinova has noted that in the context of international conflict, “the triumphalist narrative of the Great Patriotic War acquired a new dimension: it came to be used as a marker of post-Soviet imperialist identity and became closely associated with pro-Putin ‘patriotic’ attitudes.”<sup>66</sup> My findings suggest that this shift was reinforced in the presidential discourse by stressing the similarities between “Russianness” past and present. For instance, in 2018, Putin described those marching on the Red Square parade as the “new generation of victors”<sup>67</sup> (*novoe pokolenie pobeditelei*). In this way, the presidential discourse suggests that the memory of the war is “alive” and that the concept of the victorious nation also describes the nation living today.

Another way to mark this connection was the adoption of a minute of silence at the Victory Day ceremony in 2015. The gesture is primarily dedicated to the veterans of the Great Patriotic War, but Putin’s formulation connects them with contemporary war veterans by mentioning “those who did not return from the war.”<sup>68</sup> According to Andrei Kolesnikov, the Kremlin pursues a “myth of permanent war” and borrows the Soviet discourse of a “fair, defensive, victorious, and preventive” war to frame Russia’s current wars.<sup>69</sup> This becomes evident in Putin’s speeches after 2014. In the official foreign policy narrative, Russia’s military actions have always been and still are of a defensive nature.<sup>70</sup> For example, when explaining the dynamics of the new world order at the Valdai meeting in 2014, Putin reminded the audience that “we did not start this.”<sup>71</sup> In September 2015, Russia embarked on military intervention in Syria, dubbed first and foremost a “preventive” action in the war against terrorism. Likewise, on Victory Day in 2016, prefacing his comments on terrorism, Putin said that “history lessons teach us that peace on this planet is not established by itself.” In the speech, the linkage between the soldiers of today and the soldiers of the past is clear (although Putin does not explicitly mention Syria): “Our soldiers and commanders have proven that they are worthy successors of

<sup>66</sup> Malinova, “Political Uses,” 46.

<sup>67</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Voennyi parad na Krasnoi ploshchadi” [Military Parade on the Red Square]. *Kremlin.ru*, May 9, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57436>, accessed September 10, 2019.

<sup>68</sup> This part of the speech has been similar in 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Andrei Kolesnikov. 2016. *Do Russians Want War?*, At <http://carnegie.ru/2016/06/14/do-russians-want-war/j1u8>, accessed May 3, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*, March 1, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/56957>, accessed November 20, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2014. “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’.” [The Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*, October 24, 2014, At <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>, accessed November 11, 2019.



the Great Patriotic War heroes and that they protect the interests of Russia honorably.”<sup>72</sup>

Thus, according to the narrative of the victorious nation, the Russian nation has, throughout its thousand-year-long history, had to defend itself against an external enemy, and has, since the triumph over the Polish invasion in the seventeenth century, always succeeded. The Great Patriotic War made the nation what it is today by unifying all Russians, regardless of their ethnicity, against the evil. But as international terrorism shows, the evil did not disappear, and peace is not self-preserving. This is why today’s generation needs to remember, respect, and defend the memory of the Great Victory. The generations of the past and the present share the same explicit character: they represent the “victorious nation” in a world that is constantly in a state of war between good and evil.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 remains to be portrayed as correcting a mistake of the past.<sup>73</sup> The majority of Russians perceive the annexation as a success, and after 2014, pride in the Russian military as well as the country’s influence in the world increased.<sup>74</sup> The state authorities have made extensive use of the Crimea motif. The first anniversary of the annexation was marked by a large, festive event called “We are together” (*My vmeste*) in Moscow,<sup>75</sup> and celebrations to mark the event have been organized annually since then. In 2019, Putin paid a visit to Simferopol’, where he stated that “the behavior of the Sevastopol’ and Crimean residents reminds me of the behavior of the Red Army soldiers in the tragic months of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War.”<sup>76</sup> In the president’s speech, honorable actions in the present day can best be emphasized by drawing parallels with the most heroic actions of all time: the wartime deeds of the Soviet army and the Soviet people. In this regard, it is also interesting that Putin uses the terms “Soviet army” and “our army” interchangeably.

In 2017, Russia celebrated the centenary of the October Revolution,

<sup>72</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2016. “Voennyi parad na Krasnoi ploschadi” [Military Parade on the Red Square]. *Kremlin.ru*. May 9, 2016, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51888>, accessed November 20, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Vladimir Putin posetil Sevastopol’” [Vladimir Putin Visited Sevastopol’]. *Kremlin.ru*. March 14, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57063>, accessed November 20, 2019; see also Teper, “Official Russian Identity,” 383.

<sup>74</sup> Marharyta Fabrykant and Vladimir Magun. 2019. “Dynamics of National Pride Attitudes in Post-Soviet Russia, 1996–2015.” *Nationalities Papers*, 47:1: 20–37, 23–24.

<sup>75</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2015. “Kontsert, posvyashchennyi vossoedineniiu Kryma i Sevastopolia s Rossiei” [Concert Dedicated to the Unification of Crimea and Sevastopol with Russia]. *Kremlin.ru*. May 18, 2015, At <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/regions/CR/events/47878>, accessed September 16, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2019. “Kontsert po sluchaiu pyatiletiia vossoedineniia Kryma s Rossiei” [Concert for the Fifth Anniversary of the Unification of Crimea with Russia]. *Kremlin.ru*. March 18, 2019, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60096>, accessed September 16, 2019.

the memory of which, even if by no means “censored” (numerous exhibitions, books, and cultural events were dedicated to the revolution), proved difficult for the state leadership. Olga Malinova has explained that the Russian state cannot successfully build a new, consistent frame for the revolution because it completely rejects a “working through” of the traumas of the past.<sup>77</sup> In the material collected for this paper, the president mentioned the revolution<sup>78</sup> twice. The first mention came in 2016, when he declared that “Russian society in general needs an objective, honest and deep-reaching analysis of these events.”<sup>79</sup> The following year, Putin reminded the audience at the Valdai forum that the revolution had had both negative and positive consequences, calling for “gradual and consistent” evolution instead of “the destruction of statehood.”<sup>80</sup> A year later, on the same occasion, Putin was asked about growing demands for change within Russian society. In the spring of 2017, a video by oppositional politician Aleksey Navalnyi on Prime Minister Medvedev’s properties had triggered widespread protest against corruption, and in the summer of 2018, there had been significant demonstrations nationwide against the planned pension reform. Simultaneously, sociological surveys reported on growing discontent and hopes for change in domestic politics. Putin’s answer was blunt: people everywhere, including in Russia, want change, but not “revolutionary changes”: “We are fed up with the revolutions of the twentieth century, and we’ve had enough of revolutionary changes even in recent history.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, the state discourse perceives revolution *per se* as undesired and politicizes its memory by connecting it to present reforms.

During the years 2012–2019, several policy decisions were taken to guard the “correct” interpretations of the past, demonstrating the increased significance of the narrative of the victorious nation. For example, the state authorities defined the limits of the accepted forms of remembering the Great Patriotic War. In May 2014, Putin signed a law penalizing the rehabilitation of Nazism, the public desecration of symbols of Russian military glory, or the spreading of disrespectful information about the country’s

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<sup>77</sup> Olga Malinova. 2018. “The Embarrassing Centenary: Reinterpretation of the 1917 Revolution in the Official Historical Narrative of Post-Soviet Russia (1991–2017).” *Nationalities Papers* 46: 2: 272–89.

<sup>78</sup> One of the conceptual innovations regarding the event was the name “Great Russian Revolution 1917,” which encompasses both the Menshevik revolution in February and the socialist revolution in October.

<sup>79</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2016. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu.” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*. December 1, 2016, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379>, accessed November 11, 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2017).

<sup>81</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2018. “Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’” [The Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*. October 18, 2018, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848>, accessed November 20, 2019.

defense.<sup>82</sup> The adoption of the law follows a logic that is pronounced in all state narratives:

This is our common history and we need to treat it with respect. [...] It is unacceptable to drag schisms, anger, resentment and bitterness of the past into our life today, and in pursuit of one's own political and other interests to speculate on tragedies that concerned practically every family in Russia, no matter what side of the barricades our forebears were on. Let's remember that we are a united people, one people, and we have one Russia (*my edinyi narod, my odin narod, i Rossiia u nas odna*).<sup>83</sup>

Belonging to the nation, in this sense, means remembering and respecting the experiences of the shared past. In May 2018, Putin noted that there have been attempts to falsify history, but “we will not allow this [to happen].”<sup>84</sup> In the presidential discourse, remembering the past has a morally binding aspect: it is the duty and the moral obligation of today's people to recognize their position in the chain of generations before them. Thus does the narrative of the victorious nation connect to the idea of patriotic loyalty.

Russian history is one of the most significant and persistent sources of national pride.<sup>85</sup> For example, the Immortal Regiment event, which invites ordinary Russians to march on Victory Day with portraits of their relatives who took part in or were killed during the Great Patriotic War, has a positive public image. The narrative of the victorious nation seems to be intuitively accepted by the people, but the tendency of the state leadership to connect the narrative to the conflicts of today may complicate its reception in the future. If military actions cannot credibly be framed as “defensive and victorious,” popular support for them may decrease. Growing expenditures abroad may start to look bad if domestic socio-economic upgrades cannot be funded.

### *Narrative of the Moral Nation*

Throughout his presidential career, Vladimir Putin has occasionally referred to the shared values of the Russian nation. As early as 2007, Putin considered “the spiritual unity of the people and the moral values that unite us” to be just as important as the country's political and economic

<sup>82</sup> Ivan Kurilla. 2014. “The Implications of Russia's Law against the ‘Rehabilitation of Nazism.’” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 331 (August 2014), At [http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/201408\\_Kurilla](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/201408_Kurilla), accessed September 16, 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2016).

<sup>84</sup> Putin, “Voennyi parad” (2018).

<sup>85</sup> Fabrykant and Magun, “Dynamics of National Pride,” 33.

stability.<sup>86</sup> However, the content of those “moral values” has been in flux in post-Soviet Russia. At the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s third presidential term in 2012, the state had to answer to the fundamental challenge that the democracy demonstrations had posed. In the president’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2012, Putin announced a quest for “spiritual bonds” that would strengthen the country from within:

Today, Russian society experiences a clear deficit of spiritual bonds: mercy, compassion, support and mutual assistance—a deficit of things that have always, at all times, made us stronger and more powerful, things that we have always been proud of.<sup>87</sup>

In Putin’s parlance at the time, spiritual bonds were needed to increase societal stability. The following year, Putin began to emphasize the “traditional” features of the “national code.”<sup>88</sup> This new emphasis in the presidential discourse signaled the state leadership’s desire to speak to the more conservative part of Russian society. The president’s belief that there was a “deficit” of spiritual bonds among Russians has, since 2013, transformed into a claim that Russians as a nation embrace traditional spiritual-moral values (*dukhovno-nravstvennye tsennosti*).<sup>89</sup> In 2014, traditional values began to be cemented in key policy documents. The Strategy on National Security, confirmed by the president on December 31, 2015, explains that:

Traditional Russian spiritual and moral values include the priority of the spiritual over the material, protection of human life and of human rights and freedoms, the family, creative labor, service to the homeland, the norms of morals and morality, humanism, charity, fairness, mutual assistance, collectivism, the historical unity of the peoples of Russia, and the continuity of our motherland’s history.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2007. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu” [Annual Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*, April 26, 2007, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24203>, accessed May 5, 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2012).

<sup>88</sup> Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013); Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2013).

<sup>89</sup> Putin, “Obrashchenie prezidenta” (2014); Putin, “Priem po sluchaiu” (2019); Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2018).

<sup>90</sup> 2015. *Strategiia natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation], At <http://www.rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>, accessed November 11, 2019, Article 78.

The presidential discourse portrays shared conservative values as the natural basis of the Russian nation and, in so doing, stresses the rights of the majority over the minority.<sup>91</sup> In this way, a narrative supposed to enhance national unity simultaneously draws lines within the country by identifying the Others of the nation. In addition to the Strategy on National Security, the Foundations of State Cultural Policy applies the concept by stating that civil society is held together by shared values,<sup>92</sup> suggesting that those who do not accept traditional values are not included in society.

In the president's discourse, the shared traditional values of the nation—in particular “spirituality” and patriotism—have a strong backward-looking orientation. They enabled Russia's survival after the Time of Troubles, in the Great Patriotic War, and in the face of the very real threat of civil war in the early 1990s.<sup>93</sup> Thus, the narrative of moral nation is mutually reinforcing with the idea of victorious nation: it portrays the ideals for which the Russian people have struggled over the course of centuries. In the present day, patriotism has acquired yet another aspect in the presidential speech: it serves as a precondition for criticism in the political debate<sup>94</sup> and as a consolidating basis for national politics.<sup>95</sup> Putin has also called patriotism the only possible “uniting idea” of the Russian nation.<sup>96</sup> In 2016, he described patriotism in this sense as a success, stating that “our people have united around patriotic values.”<sup>97</sup> In the state discourse, patriotism means loyalty to the state and readiness to act for its benefit. But an expectation of patriotism from all Russians creates unity at the expense of those who remain critical of the state. Framing political opposition as non-patriotic serves to rhetorically exclude political opponents from the nation.

Another group excluded from “Russianness” on the basis of shared values are sexual and gender minorities. In presidential speeches, direct references to the topic have been rare, even though traditional family values are often stressed. In September 2013, Putin lamented that the West

<sup>91</sup> Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013); Vladimir Putin. 2015. “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’” [The Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*, October 22, 2015, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50548>, accessed September 16, 2019.

<sup>92</sup> 2014. *Osnovy gosudarstvennoi kul'turnoi politiki* [The Foundations of State Cultural Policy], At <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d526a877638a8730eb.pdf>, accessed November 20, 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Putin, “Priem po sluchaiu” (2019); Vladimir Putin. 2019. “Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’” [The Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club]. *Kremlin.ru*, October 3, 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719>, accessed November 11, 2019.

<sup>94</sup> Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

<sup>95</sup> Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2012).

<sup>96</sup> “U nas net i ne mozhet byt' nikakoi drugoi obediniaushchei idei, krome patriotizma” [We Don't Have and There Cannot Be Any Uniting Idea Except Patriotism]. *Kommersant*. February 3, 2016, At <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2907316>, accessed November 20, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2016).

denies traditional “national, cultural, religious and even gender (*polovoi*)” identities when conducting policies that put big families and same-sex relations, as well as “faith in God and faith in Satan,” on the same level. On the same occasion, however, Putin denied that Russia would disrespect any rights of sexual minorities,<sup>98</sup> even though he had recently signed a federal law that prohibited the dissemination of “gay propaganda” to minors, effectively making it impossible for sexual minorities to put forward any positive public message.<sup>99</sup> Today, the question has taken on an international aspect: conservative circles in Russia use the imagery of gay pride and same-sex marriages as evidence of the moral decay of the West, while gay activists plead their cases to the European Court of Human Rights.

Since 2013 in particular, the presidential discourse has emphasized traditional values not only as the consolidating basis of Russian society, but as a global dividing-line. That year, Putin lamented in front of the Valdai forum that Euro-Atlantic countries reject their roots, “including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization.” This “abandonment of moral principles” has led to a situation in which many people in the West “are embarrassed or afraid to talk about their religious affiliations.”<sup>100</sup> Putin suggests that the spiritual-moral values pursued by Russia are widely supported abroad,<sup>101</sup> but he stresses that Russia does not impose its values on others. This interpretation leans on a key concept in Putin’s foreign policy, national sovereignty: Putin has explained pursuing sovereignty as “an intrinsic part of national character.”<sup>102</sup> In 2018, Putin stated that Russians value their sovereignty and independence, and added: “It has always been this way, at all times in the history of our state. It runs in the blood of our people.”<sup>103</sup> The narratives of the moral and victorious nation share common ground in the idea of the world being in a state of “disorder.” In 2014 and 2015, the narrative of Russians as a moral nation developed into a more ideological one, as the political tension between Russia and the West grew. For example, the anti-terrorist operation in Syria was portrayed as a moral responsibility that Russia was prepared to take on when other countries were not.<sup>104</sup>

In 2015, Putin explained the internal dynamism between the traditional religions in Russia by saying that Russia’s strength lies in “mutual respect and dialogue between the Orthodox, Muslims, and followers of

<sup>98</sup> Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

<sup>99</sup> “Putin podpisal zakon o zaprete gei-propagandy sredi detei” [Putin Signed the Law Banning Gay Propaganda among Children]. *RIA Novosti*. June 30, 2013, At <https://ria.ru/20130630/946660179.html>, accessed November 20, 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

<sup>101</sup> Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2013).

<sup>102</sup> Putin, “Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo” (2013).

<sup>103</sup> Putin, “Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba” (2018).

<sup>104</sup> Putin, “Poslanie prezidenta” (2015).

Judaism and Buddhism,” but the Orthodox faith has a special role due to its importance in Russian history.<sup>105</sup> After the “conservative turn” in particular, the political influence of the Russian Orthodox Church has increased, which adds weight to the emphasis on spirituality (*dukhovnost*) as an explicit characteristic of the nation. Because the Church enjoys relatively high popular support, the state benefits from the support it gets from Church representatives and makes political concessions to them in return.

Until around 2014, the president preferred “spirituality” to concepts like “religion” or “Orthodoxy,” in order not to contradict the narrative of the multinational (and multiconfessional) nation on the rhetorical level. However, as mentioned above, Putin broke this pattern in his speeches concerning the annexation of Crimea, making clear references to Orthodoxy as a uniting feature of the nation.<sup>106</sup> Using Bacon’s terminology, I suggest that the emphasis on Orthodox faith serves as a subplot within the narrative of the spiritual nation: it enables the President to stress “holy” and “sacred” meanings that speak strongly to those who identify themselves as (culturally) Orthodox. Thus, the narrative of the moral nation rests on a hierarchy where Orthodoxy is the primary form of spirituality. Representatives of other traditional religions are included as long as they themselves commit to traditional values, but the “spirituality” of non-traditional religious communities does not belong to the “Russianness” of the presidential discourse.<sup>107</sup> On a conceptual level, reinforcing traditional values has politicized the term “non-traditional,” which has become a negative attribute in itself.

Labelling specific societal activities, politics, and identities as “non-traditional” in the presidential discourse marginalizes parts of the society and excludes them from the definition of “Russianness.” In other words, embracing traditional values has become a prerequisite of belonging to the Russian nation. Yet the state discourse on traditional values reveals little about state leadership’s commitment to those values, limiting them as a source of state legitimacy. For example, the state leadership stresses “spiritual values over material ones” but cannot provide a credible answer to accusations of corruption. The emphasis on “spirituality” in this officially secular country, as well as the concessions made to the Russian Orthodox Church in the legislative sphere, have also sparked criticism. Moreover, the narrative of the moral nation complicates public discussion of problems related to sexuality and family life: Russian schools do not provide sexual education, public campaigns against HIV have an

<sup>105</sup> Vladimir Putin. 2015. “Poslanie prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniuu.” [Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly]. *Kremlin.ru*, December 3, 2015, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50864>, accessed September 16, 2019.

<sup>106</sup> Putin, “Obrashchenie prezidenta” (2014).

<sup>107</sup> An example of repressive policies toward non-traditional religious communities was the disbanding of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia in 2017.



over-sensitive tone, and domestic violence is not taken seriously by the legislative authorities.

*Concluding Remarks: Main Narratives of the Nation and Their Future*

The Russian state leadership formulates its nationalistic argument with three overlapping and interconnected narratives, which together describe a Russian nation that is and always has been multinational and that embraces “spiritual-moral” values. These characteristics have been tested in conflicts throughout the course of Russian history, but the nation has remained unified and defended its traditional values, and is therefore a victorious nation.

The narrative of the multinational nation functioned first to manage inter-ethnic tensions within Russian society. But especially after 2013, it came to mark Russia’s historical difference from Western multiculturalism. In the light of the material presented in this article, I argue that the discursive shift following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was not as permanent as some scholars have suggested; rather, it can be seen as having revitalized an pre-existing ethnically motivated subplot within the narrative of Russians as a multinational nation. After 2016, the ambiguity acquired yet another aspect: the president stresses multinationality as a historical characteristic of the nation, on the one hand, and primacy of ethnic Russianness on the other hand, while encouraging the distinctively civic language of legislative amendments on the Russian nation.

The narrative of the moral nation recognizes both internal and external Others: it perceives traditional, “spiritual-moral” values as the core of national unity, and these values divide not only Russia, but the entire world, into “us” and “them.” In this view, Russia acts globally as the guardian of traditional values, whereas the Other dwells in moral decay. Since 2015, in particular, the parallels between past generations and the nation today have been reinforced. The President’s discourse likened the Soviet military to the one fighting against terrorism in Syria or parading on Red Square. Moreover, he emphasized that the memory of the past is “alive” and needs to be defended against “falsifications”—a concern to which the Kremlin is increasingly attentive. The narrative of the victorious nation argues that the generations of today have a moral obligation to follow the example of generations of the past, most importantly the heroes of the Great Patriotic War. All the narratives have a strong historical orientation: conflicts in the past have consolidated the Russian nation against an external enemy.

As has been presented above, none of these narratives of “Russianness” is novel as such; in fact, many of the explicit characteristics of the nation have been re-employed from Russian and Soviet history.



Yet their intensity in the state discourse and the way in which they were consolidated in 2012–2013 make them significant now. After 2014, as international tensions grew into a direct conflict, the narratives helped to explain the fundamental differences between Russia and “the West,” and all of them were used to justify of the annexation of Crimea.

In 2017–2019, the patriotic “boost” among the population began to wear off and domestic challenges to state legitimacy became more pronounced in various protests across Russia. Going forward, the political leadership will face increasing pressure to adjust the nationalist argument once again. First, the view of the traditional values as the uniting force of the nation has already been challenged. Second, by aiming to unite people through the narrative of moral and traditional nation, the state leadership simultaneously creates and preserves division lines *within* Russian society. Certain societal problems have also become difficult to address in the official discourse, as according to the main narratives these problems should not even exist. Third, some parts of the narratives contradict the legislative basis of the Russian Federation. Elevating “spirituality” as an explicit characteristic of the nation calls into question the secularity of the state, while the view that patriotism is a “unifying idea” for the people challenges the provision of the 1993 Constitution stating that Russia cannot have a state ideology. In January 2020, it became clear that the state leadership seeks to settle these contradictions by revising the Constitution instead of molding these narratives of the nation: the constitutional amendments announced by Putin reinforce, for instance, faith in God as a unifying factor for the nation, as well as Russia’s role in protecting the historical truth.<sup>108</sup>

Having portrayed the Russian nation with these interlinked narratives for several years, the political leadership may find it difficult to turn away from them. In recent years, the state authorities have reinforced the morally binding aspects of the narratives and even adjusted some state policies accordingly. But even with the new, ideologically reinforced Constitution, challenges to the state’s legitimacy remain.

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<sup>108</sup> 2020. *Polnyi tekst popravok v Konstitutsiiu: za chto my golosuem?* [Full Text of the Constitutional Amendments: On What Are We Voting?], At <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48045/>, accessed May 10, 2020.

This dissertation analyses the uses of the concept of nationalism in Russia from a historical perspective. It is based on four empirical studies examining textual material produced between the years 2000 and 2020. During this time, the state leadership in Russia adopted increasingly authoritarian policies vis-à-vis society, and started to portray Russia as being under an external threat. The annexation of Crimea and the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2014 solidified the way in which recent political changes in Russia were characterised as “growing nationalism”.

In this temporal context, the study suggests that nationalist discourses are currently shifting, and traces these shifts in scholarly and everyday language. The aspects of nationalism as an analytical concept, as well as the complex relationship between the concept and the term itself, are expounded in the study.

Following the tradition of critical nationalism studies, the dissertation approaches the ‘nation’ as a political claim that results from a constructive process in language. The dissertation draws on the rhetorical tradition of conceptual history in analysing specific concepts, metaphors and narratives within nationalist discourses as a means of framing politics. The rhetorical choices of politicians map the conditions of belonging to a nation, duly having real implications for people’s lives.

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